THE ZONE 10 • DEATH MARCH • JAMES ROUCH

THE ZONE
Cover illustration: Carrying case for the Mk-54 SADM 3AD "Suitcase Bomb". The Mk-54 Special Atomic Demolition Munition (SADM) had a yield from .01 to 1.0 kiloton. The entire unit weighed less than 163 pounds. This weapon was in 3AD inventory with the US Army 23rd Engineers from 1964 into (apparently) the 1980’s.

THE ZONE Series by James Rouch:

HARD TARGET
BLIND FIRE
HUNTER KILLER
SKY STRIKE
OVERKILL
KILLING GROUND
PLAGUE BOMB
CIVILIAN SLAUGHTER
From Reuters. International News Agency.
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NATO Command has today announced that it has stalled the Warsaw Pact advance in the area of Nurnberg, Bavaria. American and British troops are stabilising a defence line based on the River Main. Heavy fighting continues in the eastern suburbs of the city.

Russia has accused the NATO forces of employing five atomic demolition charges, resulting in the destruction of road and rail junctions. NATO High Command has responded by counter claiming that it is Soviet forces that have
employed sub-kiloton weapons in attempting to clear a path through NATO roadblocks and rearguard positions.

If the latest reports are correct then that would indicate that the total of nuclear weapons employed within the Zone to date, including sub-kiloton neutron devices, has now reached one hundred Kilotons.

* * *

Positioning the device hardly called for precision. Its detonation was going to bring down the over-pass for at least a hundred yards. That combined with the cratering of the lower levels would block all main road approaches to the city from the east and southeast. It was likely the twin track rail line would also be severed, passing as it did close to the convoluted autobahn intersection.

The man worked fast, releasing the parachute straps first, and then those securing the bulky pack. It had been a clean drop, the light breeze enabling him to fall within his target circle. Grabbing up the bundle of material and the trailing cords he stuffed it beneath a nearby truck. Among the derelict vehicles of the salvage yard he worked fast, feeling the sweat pouring down inside his jump suit.

In the distance he could hear the fuel tanks of his transport exploding. The night sky reflected a fierce glow. The Soviet missile had struck the aircraft only moments after he had jumped; so close that one red-hot fragment had passed through his canopy. Luckily its heat had sealed the edges of the tear and it had not developed in to a threatening gash across the fabric. There had been no other canopies; his escort team had not made it out.

It was likely that enemy on the ground, their attention grabbed by the exploding aircraft, had seen him falling and would already be pushing patrols into the area. By the light of a small torch he quickly unfastened a panel set in to the top of the device within the pack and started to check some settings. Even as he did he heard a heavy vehicle approaching. The rough engine note and grinding of gears were evidence it was a Soviet wheeled armoured vehicle. A prowling scout car most likely. It stopped on the road outside the compound and a bright beam of light passed over the assembled civilian wrecks.

It swept back and though he hunched low over the pack he knew from the shouts he had been seen. There was no chance of running and certainly not of abandoning the pack and hiding. He knew he could not out run the enemy patrol and his training drove him to first finish his work on the packs contents. All he needed was another thirty seconds to activate the device. Then he would make a break for it. He’d have to cover half a kilometre and find hard cover. And that while doing his best to avoid capture. The odds were heavily against him. His hands moved across controls with long rehearsed skill. He was used to doing it in the dark, had done so before, many times.

A rifle shot echoed across the industrial area and a bullet kicked up a spurt of dust and tarmac at his side. Jumping to his feet he drew his Browning Hi-power automatic and went to snap off a shot towards the source of light. Before he could a long burst of automatic fire slashed from a silhouetted squat turret and hurling him backwards with its multiple impacts. The pack too was hit, toppling over and rolling on to its side in the oil saturated dirt. An inspection panel fell open. A dial hand rotated for a moment longer, then its clockwork mechanism jammed. A short row of glowing numbers blinked and went out.

The first thought of the Russian troops who approached the body and the pack was looting. Finding nothing on the blood soaked corpse, not so much as a scrap of paper, they spat and kicked at it, then turned their attention eagerly to the canvas wrapped object trailing strong straps. Roughly they hauled the heavy pack upright and ripped open its covering. Again they registered crude and noisy disgust that it was nothing of value.

The officer who sauntered to join them looked first in puzzlement at the solitary paratrooper, and then at the object he must have been carrying. Cautiously he lifted an inspection panel and took a long look in at it. The first few moments were just curiosity, those that followed, and in his mind seemed to stretch into forever, were not so casual. Fear rooted him momentarily, froze his voice, and took his breath. He saw the two close spaced bullet holes, saw the panel with the faint ghost of the figures barely visible in the darkness. He was turning, running, screaming all in the same instant as wild fear energised him.

Looking at their officer as though he was suddenly insane his troops watched him run to their transport, shouting orders to the driver even as he threw himself aboard. As the eight-wheeler began to move his panic communicated
itself to them and they too started to run. Two of the men were crushed as the APC swept through a tyre scrubbing turn, riding over them without hesitation. Others clung to projections on the hull, their boots scrabbling to clear the thrashing deep treded rubber.

In a moment the compound was empty, save for three bodies and the pack.

* * *

There were at least twenty Russian bodies in the field. Some had fallen facing forward, most had been hit as they turned and ran. Only a handful of wounded gave any sign of movement, flopping about in pain they could not cope with, or trying to crawl back to the drainage ditch.

“You think they’ll be coming a third time?” Sergeant Hyde nestled deeper in to the shallow scrape beneath the thick hedgerow.

“I was amazed they came a second, not after most turned and ran the first time.” Major Revell handed two magazines to the NCO. “That’s the last.”

Hyde laid the replenishment neatly at his side, tapping each to ensure the spring hadn’t jammed and the rounds would feed smoothly. He blew on the open end of the cold metal to remove any dust.

He looked back over his shoulder to the autobahn service centre where they had so successfully carried out their demolition task. The steel frame walkway across the multiple carriageways had collapsed and now completely blocked the route with tangles of twisted girders and shattered concrete beams. A fire was starting to sweep through a section of the wreckage. A fitful breeze was dispersing most of the smoke but constantly lifted clouds of ash and dust from the ruins.

In the distance a Soviet T72 recovery tank was trying to tow into the cover of a cutting a T80 battle tank that Revell had knocked out with their only anti-tank rocket. Dragging a broken track the disabled vehicle was crabbing across the road and enmeshing itself with the central crash barrier, resisting the forces being employed to move it.

“How did the Major know to move forward just before that artillery barrage?” Simmons worked while he spoke, deepening the hole in which he lay, tossing aside the earth, chopping through the tangled roots of the hawthorn. He worked automatically, speaking to Corporal Thorne while watching the officer and NCO conferring.

The rest of the squad were working just as frantically hard but still being careful not to throw the spoil beyond the vegetation’s shadow and being cautious not to do any obvious damage to the plants when they pulled tangles of branches down over their excavations.

“Experience. “ Clarence was slowly panning the lens of his Barrett sniper rifle across the distant landscape. “We’ve been fighting the Ruskies so long that at times we think like them, but I will admit that the weight of that barrage came as a surprise. They’re firing off shells like they’ve got to get rid of them. Usually if a Ruskie company gets in trouble, gets held up, the best they get in the way of support is a couple of medium sized shells or two minutes of half hearted mortar fire. This time they must have put down fifty rounds at least.”

“There’s something going on down by the ditch.” Wiping dirt from the sights of his M16, Dooley waited for a signal from the Major. “Heck, they’re coming again.”

Three hundred metres away, barely showing above the curve of the ground, brown clad figures began to rise into view.

“They’re no keener now that they were before.” Dooley watched as the distant men milled about, many turning around to offer help to others following them from the irrigation channel, hauling them out and up in to the open. They were doing all they could to delay their own start across the open ground.

Again shells screamed overhead. Most fell on the Fir trees bordering the far side of the service centre car-park but a couple missed the position Revells’ men had just vacated, smashing in to the buildings of the autobahn café and motel complex. The pounding high explosive completed the work of destruction begun earlier and tore up the white-
lined surface of the car park, tossing long abandoned civilian vehicles about.

“They can’t see this hedge. I don’t reckon they will until they’re over half way here.” Revell slid to the earth, not bothering to look back at the cascade of shells. “We’re concealed by the slight rise between us and them. They think we’re still in the area of the buildings.”

More high explosive dropped and this time several rounds fell short of their intended target and red-hot slivers of shell casing slashed through the light overhead cover. A nearby pylon was hit, vibrating wildly, the strain bringing down one of the power lines. It fell, inert, into the long grass of the meadow.

Once again the Warsaw Pact infantry shook itself out in to an extended line and finally after much urging from officers began to step out. Here and there a man would stop and be grabbed, threatened and hustled forward by an NCO.

Revell watched through binoculars. He knew that to be the likely limit of the corporals and junior sergeants responsibilities. If the officers went down they would display no initiative and the attack would crumble. He just wished it were easier to select those targets. The officers must have been experienced even if the troops were clearly not. Kalashnikovs were being carried by all and that way the officers were not making themselves obvious.

At an unseen signal the Russians levelled their weapons and opened a wild automatic fire. In the gloom of the overcast early morning the multi-coloured tracer flashed wildly across the field, gouging furrows in the fresh green barley shoots where they impacted. Even more flew over-head, hopelessly wide of their target. “I think I have an officer lined up…” Clarence had to raise his voice to make himself heard.

“I have a group around a man with a radio. They are using him as a shield.” Andrea levelled her grenade launcher and tracked her selected targets as they steadily, reluctantly, approached.

Still Revell held back. The Russians slowed even more as they began to pass between the bodies of the men chopped down during the earlier assaults. “Not yet.”

Very carefully Burke moved his finger to flick away a red ant making an erratic path down the barrel of his rifle. He longed to brush away all the others that swarmed on his arm, but remained still.

Behind them the barrage seemed to increase in intensity with more rounds falling short and sending slabs of red-hot steel through the top of the hedge. From behind the advancing enemy a single wheeled armoured personal carrier drove in to sight. It moved out to a flank and added long bursts from its turret heavy machine gun to the storm of light automatic fire. The tracer passed over the hedge, hosed towards the ground about the shattered remnants of the autobahn buildings.

The deluge of shells ceased abruptly.

“They must think that has finished us.” With a fractional adjustment of his telescopic sight Clarence turned his attention towards the camouflage painted vehicle. Still no order came and the enemy infantry had covered more than half the distance towards the hedge. Seeing it ahead of them, and having passed safely through the zone where their compatriots had been mown down they gathered confidence and speed. Those in front almost tripped over as they shuffled quickly over the ploughed ground, hurrying to seek the imagined shelter of the hedge.

“Now!” The range was about one hundred metres when Revell shouted the order.

With short sharp burst the NATO men chopped down the leading rank of advancing Russian infantry. A smudge of dirty smoke marked the impact of a high explosive grenade on the chest of a radioman. He seemed to dissolve and it was just his pack that fell, several of his cowering escort going down with it.

Ignoring the nearer targets Clarence took his time aiming on the distant APC. His first shot went in to the turret a fraction of a centimetre below the opening through which the machine gun barrel protruded. The penetration was marked only by a brief pinprick flash of light and then a wisp of white smoke. A slight adjustment to allow for the breeze and as the vehicle began a clumsy turn Clarence put his second armour piercing round in through the centre of the drivers closed steel visor, immediately below the vision slit. Momentarily the APC surged forward and then
the wheels shuddered at an impact. It side-slipped on a moss-covered mound over the stump of a tree. A dying crewman was convulsing, thrusting unthinkingly hard on the foot pedals. The vehicle slowly fell sideways into the ditch, sending up a spray of stagnant water. Just visible, the wheels continued to rotate, sending out a fan of earth where they brushed against the sides of the water channel.

Hyde’s weapon pecked with neat precision at the advancing line of infantry. Several times rounds passed through two or even three men as they bunched behind one another. The enemy broke under the accurate fire, turned and ran again. Many who fell were hit in the back as they threw down their weapons to enable them to frantically shrug off their backpacks, to lighten their loads in the cloying soil. They made the best speed they could for the cover of the ditch.

Clarence continued chasing them with single shots as they reached and began to throw themselves in to the excavation. This time they didn’t stop, clambering up the far side and racing for distant woodland. The snipers last bullet cut down an officer waving a pistol as he threatened the men hurling themselves in among the timber, at eight hundred metres range.

He was not alone in the vengeful selection of targets, firing until the last possible moment. Beside him Andrea sent air burst grenades after the fleeing men. Several times she seemed to catch small groups of Russians as, zigzagging across the ridged earth, they were only a step or two from safety. She was the last of the squad to stop firing, not ceasing until she had exploded a grenade between two soldiers who were limping, far behind the others. They went down and didn’t move.

“Time to get out.” Major Revell gathered up two fragmentation grenades he had laid beside his scrape and snaked backwards from their cover. “They’ll know about the hedge, and were we really are, now.”

As he led the squad, all running bent double, the first retaliatory 105mm rounds fell just short of the hedge. Before they were clear of the field that first smattering of explosions had transformed in to a deluge that hid and swiftly obliterated their recent position.

The sign-written panel van was still parked in the service station access road beneath the trees. A civilian who had climbed in to the cab and was searching for a means of starting the Volvo jumped out and ran when he saw the squad approaching, others leapt from the back, empty handed, having found nothing to loot.

A single shot from Andrea hastened their departure, the bullet grazing the would-be drivers arm and eliciting a yelp of pain and panic.

“That’s enough.” Revell grabbed the barrel of her Colt pistol and prevented her taking a second, more carefully aimed shot. “The civvies are not our problem.”

* * *

The drive back in to the city was a nightmare. Nurnberg’s roads were clogged with refugees from the Russians sudden onslaught. Frequent craters were rimmed with torn flesh and the dead and dying. Twice they passed through roadblocks manned by nervous conscript West German infantry who looked unlikely to stand their ground when the Russians reached them. The barricades were hastily erected and composed mostly of civilian commercial vehicles loosely linked together with assorted debris taken from nearby out-houses and stores. They looked no more likely to withstand the first Russian attack than their guards. At the second a Leopard tank, its engine running, covering a tangle of poorly positioned barbed wire in the road. The motor was constantly revved, as if the driver just waited for the command to reverse out and make his way back.

No attempt was being made to check the flood of people coursing through the defensive positions. As Burke nosed the panel van forward there was a constant thumping on the sides as some implored a ride, and from others being squeezed to the edge of the road. At the open rear doors Andrea and Dooley kept weapons levelled at the crowds, pointing them menacingly at any who came too close, using the barrels to rap the knuckles of those who tried too board. There was a bang from beneath the rear of the vehicle, and then a second as another of the offside twin wheels deflated.
“They’ve punctured our tyres, spiteful lot. We’re going no where further in this wagon”. Wrenching the wheel over, Burke parked the Volvo across a picket fence bordering a garden.

Assembling the squad, Major Revell saw there was no progress to be made on the road and struck out through the rear of the properties towards the city centre. Behind them a mortar shell impacted on the roadblock and smoke rose over the buildings. Screams and wailing followed them as more bombs fell on the road. The sounds were swiftly smothered as a torrent of rounds impacted.

“This is a mess.” Sergeant Hyde listened to salvoes of heavy calibre rockets flying overhead. The flame tails of the big missiles were briefly visible as they sped towards their targets in the suburbs, leaving white vapour trails. They came in successive waves.

“We knew that when they sent us forward with no orders except to try and create that road block.” Revell set a fast pace, trying to anticipate a safe path between the areas being saturated by artillery fire. He was succeeding more by luck than judgement. The Russian gunners appeared more interested in expending the contents of their ammunition dumps rather than indulging in precision bombardment.

Rounds of every description and calibre were impacting across the housing estates through which they passed. Blocks of apartments burst open as shells plunged through the rooftops and detonated on lower floors. Cascades of phosphorous seared parks and open areas, turning trees in to giant torches and children’s playgrounds in to bizarre flaming tableaux.

Revell and his squad were jogging through hell.

* * *

General Zucharnin hammered on his desk, hard enough to make the lamp, some pencils and several drab coloured files jump off. A plump-faced junior officer scurried forward, bent double to retrieve them. The tight material covering her expansive rump drew sideways glances from several of the officers present.

“They have created bottlenecks at every opportunity and consequently have slowed my supply columns to a trickle. A handful of NATO infantry even tricked our gunners in to over-turning a service centre across another of our replenishment routes, completely blocking an autobahn. On top of that NATO have used atomic demolitions to blast major road intersections and rail links on the approaches to the city. Army Command has only given me a handful of helicopters and I can’t switch them from attack missions to scurrying about airlifting ammunition. They can’t be in two places at once. Not that a handful could make any difference. Army Command gave me ammunition supplies of which every Warsaw Pact General has always dreamed. Granted they gave me the sweepings of the stockade to fire it off but the ammunition should have been sufficient to shoot us in to the city and clean through to the other side.”

Again his fist pounded the desk and he scowled fiercely at the young woman when she had the temerity to lean forward and put her dimpled hand on a pile of papers to prevent them falling. “And now that advantage is being lost to me because you pitiful fools can’t keep my convoy routes open.”

“Where possible General we are using the contents of over-run enemy ammunition dumps. And the fuel situation is being eased by utilising the contents of civilian gas stations. We are doing everything and anything possible to ease the supply problem Considerable numbers of enemy soft skin vehicles have been captured and we are also impressing civilian vehicles in huge numbers…”

The colonel who spoke mopped his fat Slavic features with a heavy silk maroon handkerchief that came close to matching the mottled colour of his complexion.

“It is ammunition I need. I don’t want those scum in the punishment battalions farting around taking driving lesson. Half of them would drive straight out of the Zone on the far side and surrender to the first NATO road sweeper they see.”

His fist sore from the continual thundering on the wood, the General resorted to furiously shaking the bunch of fat hairy knuckles at his staff officers. “I want my convoys to get through. My assault formations are using their reserve stocks already.”
“The General has been continuously advised of the potential replenishment problems. The original plan always held
the risk of the advance slowing if we could not maintain the ammunition supply situation. Had we not been forced to
resort to such lavish fire plans…”

Zucharnin bellowed, shouting down the interruption. “The troops I have been given are the dregs. Third-rate infantry
with no supporting armour worth mentioning. To replace fighting skills I am having to pour in torrents of artillery
fire to support every infantry engagement. That’s when we can get the bastards to fight. I have already issued orders
for several battalion commanders to be arrested and shot. The plan will work, I will make it work if I have to put
every officer up against a wall, staff officers as well.” He glared. “The plan though will count for nothing if my
ammunition convoys are held up at every blocked crossroad.”

He snarled at an open file on his desk, knowing the figures without having to scan them again. The Army Command
had allotted to him infantry who were of the lowest calibre. And what little armour he had been given was all drawn
from reserve stocks, obsolete, worn out with crews to match. The lavish quantities of ammunition and several
regiments of artillery from Corps reserve were the only real help he had been given.

“I do not want to know about risks, I want to know about results. Elements of our advance troops are within a
kilometre of the river. There are military police units virtually whipping them forward. Momentum, that is what is
needed. I want my troops jumping that river without pause. I don’t care if they have to strip off and swim it. I want
the whole of the city, not half of it. We have to keep moving forward, you understand? If we cannot keep shells
raining down on the enemy then they will turn about and form a series of defensive positions that will slow us down,
giving them time to blow the bridges. If they establish a solid river defence line it will take weeks or even months to
crack He whirled around to confront an officer who held a rolled map. “You, show me where our convoys are right
now.”

“Here Comrade General, at Sulzbach and on the road between there and Nurnberg. Until they can move I have
ordered most of them dispersed and concealed. I understand we have lost two of our allotted Ilyushin transports to
enemy action but the air force is still managing to fly in sufficient ammunition to meet requirements, to an
improvised air-strip.”

“Yes, and from there the convoys crawl like snails through country lanes because motorway bridges are down,
cuttings are filled with landslips and embankments have been collapsed.” He snapped at a Colonel of Engineers.
“What about repairs, how soon can we get back on to the main routes?”

“Another twenty-four hours Comrade General. We have had to use all the bridging sections and pontoons in the
Divisional reserves. I shall have to request components from Army reserve. The men have been without sleep for
two days already.”

Even as he said it the Colonel knew he had made a mistake, shown a weakness by appearing to be more concerned
for his troops than their task, but the anticipated blast did not come.

Instead the General ground his forefinger into a map location on the edge of the city. “At least here is one potential
bottleneck the fools at NATO Headquarters have not thought to do anything about. If they were to bring down this
complex of flyovers and block their underpasses we will be faced with a mountain of giant rubble, then it will be
back to threading our way through side roads. If I can see it I don’t understand why they have not. Is action being
taken to prevent sabotage of the bridges? As I ordered.”

“We are pushing in to that sector as fast as we can, mounting guards along the route as we go.” Almost smug in his
anticipation of praise, a Staff Captain made his first contribution to the one sided conference.

“A couple of elderly reserve unit sentries every five hundred metres is no deterrent. It’s damned pathetic. I will give
you two battalions of half reasonable infantry and some anti-tank units. Use them to cover every approach to the
area. I don’t want to hear that NATO have launched a counter attack and retaken that junction. The road must stay
open. Now get out, the lot of you.”

Alone, the General carefully studied the map. The sites where the NATO forces had employed nuclear devices were
ringed in red. He would not have worried about pushing his troops through contaminated territory but the devices
had inflicted physical damage on the supply lines. A dusting of radioactive material was of no consequence, it was the destruction of autobahns and railway lines, where they passed through difficult country, that was of real consequence.

He looked again at the location he had drawn attention to so harshly. Even when the other sites were repaired, this was still a danger point, lose it and his long lines of impressed civilian trucks would be slowed to a crawl once again.

They had NATO forces on the run. He was almost surprised at the results himself, considering what a hopeless lot of over-age, unfit, ill-disciplined infantry he had been given to work with. And the punishment battalions were the worst of all, only fighting and going forward out of a greater fear of the military police behind them.

His sledgehammer tactics were pushing the scanty NATO forces back relentlessly. They had never anticipated an assault in this sector. They had been allowed to correctly identify the inferior quality of the units facing the city. That knowledge had lulled them into complacency.

Storming in to the city, blasting at everything without finesse, his men were preventing the NATO forces from building a coherent defence line, but the river was across their line of advance. If the NATO forces could hold there, if a shortage of ammunition meant his own men could not keep up the pressure...He could shout at, even terrify his officers but there were men above him who would be as ready to bellow at him. And there were other men, of his own rank, who would do the dirty on him, move heaven and earth to take his command from him. Like his second in command, that rat and political commissar General Lieutenant Gregori.

It was his baleful influence that Zucharnin detected behind the scenes to engineer the reduction in the scales of armour and helicopter gun-ships allotted to him for the attack. He had the influence to do that, and he'd hope to profit by it, take over the sector when the assault failed.

From his rank of General there was a long way to fall for Zucharnin. He still had some tricks left as yet though. As soon as the convoys were moving again he would reverse the flow of the refugees. So far he had employed the panicking masses to hamper the NATO preparations for defence. Soon he would find a new use for them.

His thoughts reverted to those convoy vehicles now scattered under improvised and probably inadequate camouflage across the countryside, so as not to provide a big target for the NATO air force. He thought of the pitiful reserves of ammunition remaining for his leading assault groups. It was some consolation to know from intelligence reports that the NATO defence was composed almost entirely of scratch units. Cooks, clerks and dismounted armoured troops waiting for their vehicles to be repaired or replaced comprised much of the NATO opposition. All of them had been hastily assembled in to platoons and rushed forward. Just as swiftly they had been forced back by the weight of fire unleashed against them. Another twenty-four hours and the roads would be repaired; the huge craters on the motorways filled, bridged or by-passed and then his convoys would be racing in to the city.

Just so long as that remaining bottleneck was not turned into a roadblock.

* * *

Flame, dust, smoke and screams filled the street. All were blotted out by a shrieking stream of liquid fire that soared across the road and with a sight-searing glare smacked in to the wall of the warehouse.

Gobs of blazing fuel bounced off the already scorched brickwork and rivulets of the same made bright fingers down the wall. Another spurt, another ear-splitting wail and a third discharge from the flame-thrower found an open window.

The massive structure seemed to swallow the screeching jet of fire and instantly converted it to roiling black fumes that belched from every opening, every shell hole and roof vent.

“Where are you going?” Sergeant Hyde’s dirt ingrained hand smacked down on the Simmons’ shoulder and arrested the second pace of his charge for the doorway.

“We can get in there while their heads are down.”
“No need.”

Even as he said it the NCO saw three blazing forms stagger out high on a buckled steel fire escape. Another toppled from the rooftop, cart-wheeling, a short-lived arc of white fire that thumping on to the debris littered road.

A brief crackle from a machine gun lanced towards the structure and made sparks and scabs of smouldering paint fly from the escape ladder. It reduced to a crumpled and indistinguishable heap the Russians who had sought to outpace the flame that chased after and enveloped them.

From within the warehouse came more loud cries, a smattering of single shots and then longer erratic ripples of detonations as small arms ammunition exploded.

“See, the job’s done for us, one way or the other.” A single shot snapped and a smouldering form slumped against a window ledge. A sub-machine gun fell out and down into the road. Sergeant Hyde, feeling the livid scar tissue of his face tighten, watched the weapon fall then turned away from the scene.

Behind him, barely visible in the gloom of the unlit wholesale warehouse the rest of the squad were already sliding down against the high stacked piles of boxes to sit exhausted on the floor. Water bottles appeared and heads tipped back to guzzle the last of the chlorine-tainted liquid.

“This place will go up just the same, the whole district will.” Major Revell looked out past Hyde, still stood at the edge of the doorway.

The building across the way appeared to be in the grip of a growing conflagration, fire gouted from every opening. Glass was exploding in unbroken windows and rolling molten from the heaped crystal fragments on windowsills. “I wonder what’s in that one, it’s certainly going up fast.”

Taking a half pace back into the interior, Sergeant Hyde took off his helmet and wiped the blotched scar tissue of his forehead with a scrap of filthy rag he pulled from his belt. He used the dampened material to casually wipe his assault rifle and its under-slung grenade launcher.

“I saw tyres and drums of electric cable before they forced our evacuation. The quantity of automatic fire they sent at us I still don’t know how the hell we got out. They were dozens of them, hosing the stuff like maniacs.” Even across the width of the road and sidewalks Hyde could feel pulsing waves of furnace heat. “By the time that finishes burning even the steel and brick would have melted. There won’t be anything left in a day or two.”

“Same goes for the whole of Nurnberg. The Russians are pursuing a scorched earth policy even while they’re in the middle of it.” Revell ducked and took a shower of tile and glass fragments across the front of his flak jacket as a NATO six-wheel Saracen ambulance dashed past, its chunky treaded tyres throwing up fans of jagged debris as it was chased from sight by streams of tracer from Russians holding a building further down the road.

A loud hollow clanging sound announced Thorne’s arrival and as he made it to the bottom stair he let the fuel and gas cylinders of the flame-projector fall with an echoing crash. He didn’t bother to pick them up, pushing them from his path with the steel shod toe of his boot. Where the leather had been scorched away by dribsbles of fire the soot stained metal was exposed.

“That’s it, out of fuel.” Joining the officer near the door Thorne looked out at the result of his handiwork. Much of the façade of the building was hidden by columns of flame spurting from individual doorways and windows. A fire was flaring about a small heap in the road and was enveloping a bigger one high on the fire escape.

“I’ll hang on to the projector group, the harness and valves. We might be able to pick up something adaptable as an alternative to the real stuff, even a few gallons of diesel would do.”

Revell tapped the single grenade on his webbing. “As likely as getting fresh ammo supplies. We’re being forced to use a hell of a lot of it. I can’t see the Reds keeping up their frantic expenditure of ammunition for long, but while they do, we have problems.”

“Hey, we still have half a city to fall back through.” Ripper had allowed some beads of water to dribble down his
chin and now he scrubbed his hand across it, turning the irregular lines in the dirt into a bizarre pattern of mud. “Maybe we’re getting short of ammunition, but.” He waved his arms at the racks of plastic wrapped women’s clothing. “But I suppose we can always dress to kill.”

Wrenching around to reach a pouch, Ripper extracted a nougat bar and began using his teeth to remove the embedded foil wrapper.

“Very good, whimsical.” Taking a flower print maternity dress from a hanger, Dooley held it against himself and made a clumsy half pirouette. “At last they do things in my size.”

“If you’re expecting triplets.” Spitting out shreds of bright wrapping, Ripper began to chew on the candy.

Clarence, cradling his heavy sniper rifle, looked at the empty cylinders. Somewhere upstairs the waves of heat were beginning to shatter windows. “Where to next Major? It will be rather a touch too warm in here soon.”

“We’ll work along to the end of the street and take up a position over-looking the square. Then we’ll have to wait for re-supply. Tell Burke to slap a charge against the west wall; we’ll mole our way through a couple of buildings. We haven’t got the firepower to slug it out with any Ruskies angry at our frying their friends, not the way they’re blasting off ammo’.”

In succession they used explosives to punch through another clothing warehouse, a small cash and carry establishment filled with bubble wrapped fancy goods and finally a wholesale butchers. The concussion of the exploding charge that tore a hole in the wall also burst open the thick double doors of a walk-in cold store. But it was no longer cold. The power must have been cut days before. From hooks hung sides of beef. On the floor beneath each was the grease that was falling from them as they started the process of putrefaction. A powerful stench wafted out and drove the squad to push for the next building. Smouldering bullet riddled automobiles provided cover and no shots came their way as they sprinted along the sidewalk and kicked open the entrance to an office block.

Using the heavy reception area furniture they built a nest for the squad machine gun. A double-door cupboard near the lifts revealed two large water bottles. Revell punctured them with a bayonet, laid them across a desk so that each man in turn was able to sluice the cool liquid over his face and refill his flask. It worked wonders in reinvigorating them, but the effect was short lived.

Reams of paper towels from the rest rooms mopped them dry, and then they passed around camouflage cream to replace the natural effect the layers of dirt and grease had added to their previous efforts.

Searches of the first and second floor offices revealed nothing of value or use. All of the rooms were glass faced and over-looked the open space between the buildings. For a while drifting smoke from the fires provided fitful concealment, then the wind changed direction and they had to return to the ground floor.

“This place is no good. It’s like being in a fish tank” Revell looked out across the square. Waves of tiredness swept over him and he had to blink hard to keep his eyes open, his head nodding forward when a moment’s inattention lulled him towards sleep. “It will be dark in a couple of hours, sooner if the clouds cover increases and that smoke keeps building. We’ll move out then, and make for that banking hall on the next corner.”

“It’s more substantial than here, but we’ll have to put a hefty H.E. round into the door though.” Sergeant Hyde had already made a swift survey of the area. “It’s massive, looks like it has bronze panels on it, we won’t get through it with a shoulder charge.”

“We’ll figure it out nearer the time. Put two men on guard and get yourself an hour’s sleep, then if we are still being left alone we’ll swap over.” Revell knew an hour’s sleep was only a fraction of what they needed to replace that lost, but it was better than nothing.

However they felt though, in a short time they would be racing across the open ground, running for their lives.

* * *
The 40mm grenade wasn’t needed but they didn’t know that until after it had been employed. Unresisting, with the
locks already broken, the heavy metal clad oak doors swung back and one tore away from its hinges to fall in to the
banking hall. It bounced aside as it landed on thickly strewn corpses.

Covering each other in turn Revells’ unit rushed from the death trap glass fronted office block and into the bank.
Each section reacted the same, skidded to a halt immediately inside the entrance, before cautiously picking their way
in to the interior.

In many places the bodies overlapped two or three deep. Hyde’s boot slipped on congealing blood and he began to
wipe the sole on a shawl until he saw that it shrouded a child’s partially dismembered body.

Looking around, Major Revell noted the pockmarked polished marble pillars, the many gouge marks in the gilt
embellished mahogany cashiers desks. “This was done with grenades. The civvies were herded in and then a handful
of fragmentation bombs were hurled in among them.”

“The Russians have not reached this side of the square.” Andrea bent down to pull away an arm that shielded a face.
Attached only by some stringy tendons it flopped aside.

“So who?” In a corner Burke saw two Warsaw Pact uniforms. He recognised the stained insignia on their collars,
telegraphists. Both were buxom middle-aged women, but the wire wound tight about their necks had made their
faces bulge, eliminating any wrinkles. Their arms were bound tightly and the blood had drained from their hands
“Looks like these were done first. But why the civvies as well?”

“Perhaps who ever did it had orders to take them along, and didn’t want to be hampered.” Andrea had to take the
longest strides she could to step among the corpses, on the majors’ orders, counting them.

“Still leaves the question, who?” Revell ducked as a stray bullet came in through the open doors and shattered a
large clock face on the back wall. “But no time for guessing games. Try and raise HQ on the radio or a cell phone.
What ever works. We need ammunition before we move on from here.”

“You want to be found among this lot?” Hyde swept his hand to indicate the atrocity. The press are having a field
day with us as it is.”

Revell knew his sergeant was right. “ OK, as soon as we’re sure that supplies are on the way we’ll let this place have
some thermite and arrange to link up with the trucks elsewhere.”

Burke had been examining the bodies, trying to make it look as though he was checking for survivors, but the hand
he slipped inside jackets, felt more for wallets than heart beats. Drawing attention, and a deep scowl from their
sergeant he made to casually stroll behind the desks, to where massive vault doors stood open.

The boxes on the plain metal shelves were empty of all but a few scraps of paper. Further within a wall of safe-
deposit boxes gaped and a sledgehammer and broken steel chisels on the floor indicated how they had been opened.

“Hell, always the same. How come we are never the first to these places.” Burke kicked aside a carelessly tumbled
stack of long safe-deposit boxes. In the metal lined interior of the vault the noise rebounded and was magnified to a
deafening avalanche of sound.

“And how would you carry enough to do you any good, even if we did escape the Russian advance.” Andrea smiled
at the man’s frustration.

“Some of these” he gestured at the litter of battered metal, “must have contained jewellery. I can carry a lot of that
without it getting in my way. Give me a chance and I’ll show you.”

“We have a long war ahead of us. You’ll get your chances.”

“Bollocks.” Dooley stuck his head in to the vault and smiled at Burkes frustration. “We’ll be home by Christmas.”

“A prize for everyone who has said that at the start of a European war. People have been saying that every year since
the Commies advanced and the Zone was formed.” Hyde ordered them out. “The Russians are still being stalled, by us and by the unreliability of their so called Allies. We are hampered by inept generals and corrupt politicians. This could go on forever. Very likely will.”

* * *

“This is it? We expect a couple of trucks and instead we get one pick-up? Thorne led the chorus of complaint as the squad clustered about the vehicle and the few boxes of magazines and grenades were opened and their contents distributed.

“Don’t blame me.” The quartermaster sergeant who was trying to record who was taking what, was getting more and more frustrated as men just grabbed at the assault rifle magazines and ration boxes. Finally he waved his clipboard above his head in angry frustration. “Major I have to account for all this.”

Taking the board and wiping the dirt from it with his sleeve, Major Revell scrawled a signature and date across the page. “There, you’re covered.”

Looking suddenly more cheerful the clerk took back the board and returned to the vehicle. The driver accelerated away as the last box was hauled from the back.

From an open container Burke hauled out a short belt of machine gun ammunition. “Don’t know what the guy is worried about. War is a great way of making your inventory come out straight. Every US quartermaster in Europe squared his books the day the Russian came over and through the wall.”

At the end of the street the drab coloured vehicle slowed for a turn and as it did a rocket-propelled grenade arced from a side road. It impacted on the vehicles rear wheel. As the light truck flipped over on to its top the metal of the cargo deck was ripped apart and hidden within the ball of fire from the exploding gas tank. Two figures towing wisps of smoke jumped from the wreckage and sprinted away.

“The Russians are closing in on us. We’d best be moving.” Not even bestowing a last glance on the shattered vehicle, Revell led the unit away and into a warren of lanes.

“They infiltrating darned fast.” Glancing aside Libby saw a stream of tracer flick along a parallel route.

“With the weight of fire they’re putting down that’s hardly surprising.” Hyde kept up a fast jogging pace and fell back a few steps to get alongside the Major.

“They’re just destroying everything in their way.”

Several times they had to change direction, when rocket salvoes crashed down into the street or artillery shells ripped open the tops of buildings and sent torrents of masonry across their route.

“Who is on point?” Revell had unslung his assault shotgun and cradled it, as they had to move to the other side of the road when a mortar barrage ploughed across the small paved area of a tree line square up ahead. He glanced down at the bandolier across his chest. Only eight of the pouches were full and all of those held anti-personnel flechette rounds. He would have been happier to have more, a lot more. A mix of explosive and incendiary would have been better.

“Burke and the new kid. Simmons.”

“An ill matched pair if ever there was one.” Revell smiled to himself, the sergeant had teamed the fittest and the slowest of their squad together. One needed the exercise; the other needed the restraint of a slower partner. “Keep them in sight. Too easy to get out of touch and separated.”

More high explosive rounds were impacting on the rooftops, scattering fragments of slate, copper sheet and shreds of waterproofing felt almost to the middle of the road. A single shell impacted on the tarmac behind them and started a fire in an abandoned Volkswagen, collapsing it on to the ground as fragments punched away the jack holding up an axle without wheels.
“Getting closer. Some one knows we’re here.” Ducking into a doorway to avoid a deluge of tiles that shattered the glass entrance canopy of an adjoining building, Revell scanned their surroundings.

Most of the buildings were of several stories and precluded any useful view of what lay ahead. Just visible between two gable ends was a distant church spire. The officer had caught fleeting glimpses of the structure from time to time. If the Russians had managed to get an artillery observer up there then his view of them would be just as sporadic, and would explain the erratic nature of the occasional bombardment they were receiving.

Two closer explosions demonstrated that his theory was likely correct. “Time to move on, before they drop one in our laps.”

The next couple of hundred metres kept the spire out of view and the mortaring ceased.

From the far side of a small garden filled square arose a plume of exhaust smoke and the roar of a revving engine. The clutter of trees, benches, kiosks and a burnt out bus hid what ever it was from view.

“We don’t have the time or the firepower to engage in a scrap with Ruskie armour.” Revell knew it was time to make another detour.

Signalling for the scouts to return, Revell sent them into nearby buildings to find a way around the potential danger. The engine noise increased in tempo and a blast of exhaust fumes sent the concealing foliage into a thrashing dance. A powerful cannon unleashed a short burst, the punching crack of its firing marking the weapon as a Russian anti-aircraft cannon. It was followed by another longer salvo as twin barrels sent streams of tracer into a distant storefront. For some reason one barrel fired only three rounds before stopping. The other went on to completely exhaust its magazine.

“A museum piece, a ZSU-fifty seven.” Sergeant Hyde identified the vehicle. “It still packs a hell of a punch and we still don’t want to attract their attention.”

The lightly armoured flak tank might be out-dated; a very real surprise in a front line situation but it was still a most formidable machine at close range. In any engagement with armour in a street fight it would always have to be the first enemy vehicle engaged and if not knocked out quickly could unleash a weight of fire that would destroy all opposition.

Twice more the flak tank opened up, not bothering to fire a ranging round first at so short a distance from its targets. There was no pattern to or reason for the buildings it selected. Reduced to the one barrel it still blasted off a full magazine every time. It would pulverise a façade and then a fresh structure would be selected apparently at random.

Burke and Simmons returned, the older man puffing and panting from keeping up. Gathering his breath he let the Simmons do the talking.

“Locked fire doors everywhere at the back of these places. A grenade will get us through but from the windows we can see swarms of Warpac infantry using the service roads to break in to places. They’ll never be able to carry all they’re looting.”

“Then we go up and across. We’ll have to chance being seen by the guy in the church tower. Let’s hope others are attracting his attention for a change.”

Taking the lead, Revell selected an office block of old fashioned construction and led the squad across its small-carpeted reception area and up a wide staircase four floors to the roof.

Dooley’s brute force overcame the short lived resistance of a skylight and then they were up in the fresh air, away from the drifting dust and cordite stench of the canyon- like fire filled city roads.

In the cover of a cluster of ornate brick chimney stacks Revell tried to translate the simplified tourist map that was all they had, into a meaningful route. As he scanned the skyline he could see where columns of smoke and accompanying billows of brick dust from collapsing buildings marked the main line of the Soviet advance. They were sweeping through the city unleashing pile driver force against scant and scattered resistance. To either flank...
rose other indicators of the Warsaw Pact progress. Isolated fires displayed where racing advance groups of the enemy were blasting a route towards the river. Faintly there came the sound of squealing tank tracks and high revving scout car engines, blended with staccato ripples of wild machine gun and cannon fire.

“They’re throwing in everything they’ve got.” Though it cleared their rooftop by fifty feet, Hyde involuntarily ducked as a rocket swept overhead. It went on to impact on the ornate stonework topping another building, sending up a plume of flame and debris.

A lone helicopter was visible in the distance, skimming the chimneys, jinking between the tall buildings. Tracer silently streamed from a chin-mounted cannon and frequently the timber and plaster frontage of an elegant old house would dissolve under the impacts and bodies would tumble out of the ruined buildings. More massive destruction occurred when it occasionally launched heavier weaponry. Towing a pale vapour trail, rockets would lash out from their launch rails beneath the crafts stub wings and the top floors of another half timbered building would disintegrate.

“They may be lashing out at everything.” Andrea watched the destruction. “But I think the rate of fire has slackened in the last hour.”

“Doesn’t seem like it to me.” Burke saw the chopper soar in a circle to retrace its route, its launching rails empty. A lone orange ball of tracer chased it, missing by a long way.

“It’s academic, by the time it’s dark they’ll be all around us.” Clarence used the telescope of his sniper rifle to watch as a group of Russian infantry came out on to a distant rooftop and after looking around settled down for a smoke.

“It’s still the best part of a kilometre to the river. At this stop-start pace we’ll not make it. We’re having to tip-toe and pussy-foot to avoid civilian casualties while the Ruskies plough forward blasting everything and everyone in their path.”

“They’re not all gung–ho Major.” Taking careful aim Clarence put a single round through the neck of a Russian with a small group who appeared to be setting up a sniper post on a distant roof. None of his companions saw him gracefully topple over the edge.

Sergeant Hyde had watched Revells’ finger trace a grubby path across the tourist map. The lack of detail hid what must be a thousand opportunities for the Russians to set ambushes across their path. Except that they didn’t seem interested in such refinements, they were just moving forward, hosing the streets with machine gun and canon fire, being so careless of the supporting mortar and artillery fire that they were frequently suffering casualties from their own gunners.

Already he had seen two instances, in locations that only Warsaw Pact guns could have reached, where Russian infantry had been scythed down. Scattered groups of Warpac dead filled some avenues or were slump in the back of blazing trucks.

“We’ll use the rooftops to cover a bit of distance and then go down and see if we can grab transport for the dash to the bridge. There are abandoned vehicles all over the place. They can’t all be broken down or out of gas.”

“Great,” Libby had heard the exchange. “Then we’ll have both sides gunning for us. The Ruskies as we drive to the bridge and the Yanks when we try to cross it.” His muttered aside was to Dooley.

Burke had heard it also. “I prefer to be motoring along in a bullet magnet rather than being towed at speed, on foot, by Simmons.”

Only changes in roof level hampered their progress, with one alleyway being crossed by a bridge they hastily improvised from abandoned scaffolding poles and planks.

“We’ll go down here.” Over the edge of a parapet Revell looked into an empty street. Even as he did the doors of a building across the way burst open and civilians poured out, some clutching children, most staggering under loads of baggage.
As they hesitated, trying to orientate themselves, unsure which way to run, a column of armoured personnel carriers motored into the street.

Some among the crowd clearly recognised the NATO emblems on the tracked vehicles and rushed into the middle of the road, waving their arms, gesturing wildly to stop the APC’s, imploring their help.

Instead of slowing the lead vehicle accelerated and drove straight over two men leading the crowd. Before the others could scatter the thrashing tracks and broad hull fronts were moving down others. Revell was about to shout but it would have been useless. The vehicles crew had not even the excuse they were shut down and couldn’t see the people. Several men rode on the top of each and he saw some level their automatics at the crowd and open fire. On the last vehicle a gunner swivelled the dark bulk of a fifty calibre machine gun and hosed the throng, even aiming at those out of their way, and finally turning to send a last body-shattering burst into a knot they passed who were stood petrified, aghast at what they had witnessed.

As the three vehicles rattled from sight some of the troops, adorned with colourful scarves, tank crew goggles and other embellishments were waving clenched fists and weapons in evident celebration.

Not the only witness of the carnage, Revell turned to find Andrea was looking in to his face. She shrugged. “That was unnecessary. The ammunition is precious. Anyway, it could have been Russians in captured vehicles.”

“Definitely NATO troops.” Hyde turned back from the edge, “No doubt of that. Maybe the same ones who fragged the civvies in the bank?”

“Well I would hate to think we have two units who indulge in atrocity on that scale.” Revell watched the women below recoiling form the gruesome scene of crushed and mutilated bodies.

It was from the last building in the street that they descended, out of sight of the carnage. Before doing so they were able, unobserved, to carry out a surveillance of the surrounding roads. One held what they wanted. Two eight-wheeled armoured personnel carriers’ old BTR 60 models, adorned with whitewash daubed Russian slogans, were parked outside the shattered front of a small department store. The sole trooper who had been left on guard was anxiously bobbing about on the pavement, craning to see what the other men were looting, and hopefully awaiting their return and his chance.

He never knew what hit him. Dooley’s blade struck twice in the small of his back even as his hand clamped over the Russians mouth. Burke was inside the lead vehicle in an instant and had started the engine even as the others clambered into the cramped interior.

“Why do they always stink?” Through a still open side hatch that swung and clanged heavily against the steeply raked hull Dooley tossed out opened ration packs. Bundles of new clothing and masses of household goods followed. Their immediate route was littered with the household effects.

Creating their own route through the plants and fountains of a miniature park Burke sent the APC crashing and bucking. It canting right over as the four wheels on one side churned deeply in the turned soil of a flower bed and then rearing up as it drove across the top of a bullet riddled Mercedes taxi.

The pressure of the impact burst the vehicle’s trunk and luggage was thrown out to scatter its colourful contents across the road. The driver’s side doors were also thrown open and bodies flopped from the front and rear of the vehicle to be ground to a pulp by the APC’s huge tyres.

“Slow down, we don’t want to break this thing.” Through the tangle of its passengers flailing limbs and tumbling bodies, Revell moved forward to take the commanders seat behind their driver.

Both large front vision flaps were open and Revell saw the terrified face of a Soviet machine gunner who hurled himself aside just in time, leaving his weapon and two other men to disappear beneath the sharply raked front of the vehicle.

There were slight bumps as the deeply treaded tyres ran over them. A smattering of small arms fire chased the vehicle until it swerved through a sharp turn. Blasts rocked them as mortar rounds plastered their route. Burke knew
that they came by chance; there was no way coherent opposition to their appropriation of the APC could be organised so quickly. They had acted so fast it was highly likely it hadn’t even been missed as yet. He closed his front hatch but made no move to avoid the explosions. Several times they drove through the falling debris of a round that landed almost under their wheels.

One eighty-millimetre bomb struck the top of the armour plating just behind the small turret that Libby had occupied. The concussion pounded dust from every joint in the plating and made their ears ring. Another landed right beside the vehicle and flayed long strips of thick rubber from a retreaded tyre. Pieces flew off and the wire mesh that filled it and provided its run-flat ability protruded from the split casing. There was a severe rattling from the worn out compressor as it tried to keep the ruined tyre filled with air.

“One more turn, sharp left.”

On Revell’s’ shouted instruction Burke broad-sided the APC through a manoeuvre that rolled the damaged tyre from its buckled rim and flattened all the road furniture; bollards, traffic lights and pedestrian guardrails, on a refuge in the centre of the road.

The bridge was ahead of them, artillery rounds falling about it, sending geysers of water high above the broken parapet.

“Tuck us in among those civvies.”

It was that running, stumbling, crowd, mostly women and children that saved them from the anti-tank rocket batteries positioned on the far bank. As they skidded to a halt on the far side they were surrounded by gun waving, yelling, military police and Revell had to talk fast.

Identity established there was as much shouting and waving to get them to drive the APC clear. They were directed to park in a side street close by, at the tail end of a row of Soviet vehicles, mostly soft skins and several with hastily improvised NATO markings Clearly they were not the only ones who had borrowed enemy transport to get back to their own lines.

Artillery fire was falling regularly in the area of the bridge approaches. Revell knew it might have been simply to prevent NATO reinforcements crossing, but there were smoke shells among it and that suggested it was quite likely the Russians intended to rush the bridge without waiting for any preparation. It was a tactic the Soviet forces had often applied in their advance in to West Germany and was responsible, at a heavy cost in casualties, for much of their early success. Not that everything had always gone their way though.

Due to the wholesale desertions of Czech and Polish units in the early days of the war some Soviet attacks had not been pressed. In places the Zone had developed into a broad ribbon of land up to one seventy kilometres wide. In this region in many places it more closely resembled the battlefields of the First World War, with infantry filled trenches and blockhouses facing each other across a no-mans land less than a rifle shot wide in some places.

As they trudged away in search of their transport, abandoned earlier and hopefully left to receive attention from their light aid detachment, they passed a short line of heavily battle scarred armoured personnel carriers. They were three M113’s; much modified and rebuilt late versions. The insignia they should have carried had been obliterated by scraping and the thick daubings of camouflage paint. Their hulls sides were heavily splattered with fresh blood. Scraps of clothing were caught between the tracks shoes and in the suspension wheels. A child’s shoe was wedged beneath the side-hung towrope on one and hanks of bloody scalp and hair were caught around the suspension of the others.

The troops who lounged on top were all very young. They sported bright coloured scarves and various designs of goggles were pushed up on to the shaven heads of those who had removed their helmets. Several were openly smoking joints and there was no obvious insignia to identify officers or NCOs. Rock music blared from speakers fitted to the hull sides.

“I think we know this mob.”

Sergeant Hyde called up to a driver whose drooping eyelids suggested the joint he rolled between heavily stained
fingers was not his first. “What outfit?” He added sarcastically, “Had a good day?”

The reply came in French and carried insolence and disinterest, gabbled with a heavy provincial accent that made it impossible to comprehend. The driver leered down at Hyde’s scared features. From the end vehicle in line came the sound of a fifty calibre round being chambered ostentatiously.

“Leave it for now sergeant.” Revell indicated for the NCO to walk on. “I think we’ll come across them again.”

The driver turned away and ignoring them in a moment in a haze of cannabis smoke.

Behind them there came a loud rumble as charges were exploded beneath the bridge piers. One of them, less well packed than the others, sent a fast climbing gout of dark smoke and chunks of masonry high above the rooftops. As the thunder of the massive detonation died away and in a temporary lull in the shelling, there arose a spine chilling sound. Across the width of the river there came what started as a scream, and then turned in to a howl, a collective hoot of distress.

Refugees, temporarily herded from the far approaches were now rushing back, to look down in the torrent filled abyss that lay between them and safety, between them and the west. Between them and their escape from this newly forming area of the Zone.

So much masonry had been brought down that in a couple of places it was humped above the flood, forcing the river to detour around the broken stone. Already the surging water, propelled by the flood of the winter rain was crumbling those pathetic islands away.

A woman, lifting her arms in distress, then gathering a young child into each, flung herself over the jagged edge of the severed road. Another, mercifully without children, hurled imprecations that did not carry and then followed the first, her slim body making hardly a ripple in the fast moving water.

Tipping his helmet to the back of his head the French driver lolled against a raised hatch. He had watched the big pieces of stone rain down on to civilians crowding forward too soon on the distant road. He grinned and blew out a plume of white smoke as he witnessed the scene of the suicides. “Oui, it is a lovely day…a lovely day sergeant. Truly a lovely day.”

* * *

The Iron Cow looked terrible. The hover APC appeared to have received scant attention, just been abandoned in a corner of the garage. It had been crammed up against a wall, penned in by a heavy truck and two partially dismantled Hummers being stripped for spares.

The workshop seemed to have become no more than a dump for abandoned equipment. Various boxes and coils of wire were draped across the APCs hull. A large pot of semi-gloss brown paint had been upset on the hull top forward of the turret and now made a glistening series of rivulets down the camouflage decorated aluminium armour. Sergeant Hyde’s fist tightened in the loose material of a mechanics coveralls. “You said twelve hours. You’ve had fifteen.”

His toes barely making contact with the floor the man tried not to look at the NCO’s expressionless mask of a face, or what would have been a face before an anti-tank round had seared it away.

"What are you bitching about Hyde.” Sergeant Taylor, his coveralls saturated in grease and his many pockets bulging with tools and anonymous pieces of metal, intervened. “Put my bloody mechanic down. You’re never bloody satisfied. You want me to line the interior in a nice chintzy fabric, maybe put blinds over the gun ports?”

Hyde released the mechanic who initially tried to saunter away nonchalantly but instead scuttled to bury himself out of sight among the vehicles under repair.

“I don’t have time for smart valet parking. We can tug that pile of shit out when you want it. Its all done, the bits that matter anyway.” Taylor scrubbed at his hands with a cleaning fluid that left incongruous patches of pink skin showing.
“She’s done?” Sergeant Hyde found it hard to believe. “The blades, everything?”

“Appearances count for bugger all. Oi, Watts.”

At the mechanic NCOs’ summons, a skinny private with pens behind each ear stuck his head out of a glass walled office. Its windows were adorned with advertising stickers that revealed the establishments civilian origins.

"Yes? What is it now? I can’t ever get these returns finished. HQ wants them faxed in an hour”.

“Give me that list of spares for the Iron Cow.”

Relieved it was nothing more the harassed clerk dived in to the office, rummaged briefly and then scurried out to hand over a computer printed list.

“This is all the gear we rounded up, in fifteen hours.” There was a definite sneer in Taylor’s voice. “See it’s all listed here, spare ride skirts and fixing strips, new recoil mech’ for your cannon, two complete reconditioned banks of decoy dischargers…what the fuck do you do with them, you’re forever tearing them off along with a chunk of the hull…new hydraulic pipes and a servo for the front and rear doors, a complete new roof hatch and set of command cupola vision blocks plus a new rear fuel tank and miracle of miracles I even found replacement blades for the port Allison. Add in that we patched or filled better than twenty shell and splinter hits and we hate welding aluminium…”

“Ok, I believe you.” Despite himself and the state of constant antagonism between himself and their maintenance chief, Hyde was impressed with the volume of work carried out. “How soon can we have it?”

“What the hell is going on here?”

The officer who barged in to the scene had just sufficient bombast and haughty attitude to instantly alienate Sergeant Hyde. He waved a manicured hand towards the hover APC. “Is that damned thing yours?”

“It’s our vehicle, yes.” Revell sensed he might have returned to the workshop at just the right moment.

“I’ve had enough of you cowboy outfits dumping vehicles on us and expecting immediate results. When, if, your transport can be signed out then it will be.” From a tool littered workbench, Libby picked up a clipboard; he nudged Sergeant Hyde and handed it to him. He in turn passed it to Major Revell, who had entered through the back lot.

After glancing down the list on the clip board Revell looked out through the partially open sliding doors and took in the activity around some large Mercedes saloons and a couple of expensive looking sports cars. He scanned the page while the officer who stood before him, bristling at being kept waiting for a response, tried to take it away.

“Seems you’ve managed to put quite a few civilian cars back on the road.” His finger traced further down the list. “And a good number of top of the range Mercedes, Lexus and Audis have been trailered out.”

Uncomfortable, looking for a reply, the workshops commanders’ false bottom set of teeth protruded as he pursed his lips. His attitude had altered, but still he tried to project an air of authority. “I decide the priorities here…”

“And clearly who has the most clout and what will best serve your bank balance.” Revell noticed the man colour and saw him fighting to respond. He didn’t give him the opportunity. “I’ve had enough of self serving bum-kissing specimens like you. My APC is ready in ten minutes or we take our choice from the Merc’s and Lexus saloons you seem to be finding room for. You can then explain to their four and five star owners what happened to them.”

The officer turned about for support but saw only repressed smirks among his men, all of whom had edged closer to witness the confrontation but who now ducked aside and pretended occupation elsewhere. “It’s not possible.” His truculence was almost childlike, petty. His voice rose in pitch, in desperation. “It can’t be done.”

“It had better be. I shall leave two of my men.”

Even as Revell said it, Dooley strode forward and planted himself beside his officer.
Revell had seen the big man and Andrea eyeing up the beautiful cars packed into the workshops outside area and anticipated him volunteering.

Less expected was Andrea volunteering, though she had been running her eyes over the sleek lines of a Jaguar V12 saloon. “I shall be happy to stay and ensure our transport is pulled out in time. And if it is not…” As she looked at the metallic blue automobile her hand came to rest on the ugly outline of a thermite grenade clipped to her belt.

* * *

“The situation called for…special measures, but an operation went wrong and an important piece of equipment has been lost. It shouldn’t have happened, but it did. Something…something very important, has been lost behind enemy lines.”

Revell sensed that Colonel Lippincott was very uncomfortable. He had paced as he had mumbled through the introduction and preamble now he sat behind his desk and kept glancing at the sour faced Intelligence Officer who was also present. The Colonel was measuring his words, as if afraid he might say too much, as if the Intelligence Officer was monitoring his every word.

Saying nothing, Revell was enjoying the situation. More used to being on the receiving end of disciplinary blasts from his commanding officer, this was very different and he waited with interest to see what was coming. Getting the summons had not surprised him.

After the trouble at the repair shop he had anticipated problems originating from some pen pushing senior officer ready to castigate him. It might have been for any reason, perhaps for causing a delay in the repair of a favoured piece of luxury transport, maybe a sports car promised to a wife or mistress. Or perhaps the complex arrangements for shipping out such a trophy had been disrupted or delayed.

But it had been very quickly become abundantly clear it wasn’t that. No general was on the warpath, not this time. Colonel Lippincott’s manner strongly suggested he was deeply unhappy about something. Maybe there was some crap mission in the air and the Special Combat Force had drawn the short straw, but Revell couldn’t guess why that should bother his commanding officer. It never had before.

“I have a job for you.” The Colonel kept glancing to the stiff backed officer beside him, as if he suspected he was keeping secret notes. “The Soviet advance was faster than we expected. Intelligence…” Here again the Colonel half looked towards the ramrod officer who flanked him, “…had reported only the presence of second rate units opposite this sector. Their sudden advance, employing massive fire power…it wasn’t anticipated.”

Taking out a handkerchief, the Colonel looked as if he was about to mop his brow with it, but he appeared to decide against and instead wrung it between his hands, twisting the crisp white cotton into a creased, damp, mass. He took yet another sideways glance before going on.

“Circumstances forced us to employ exceptional measures…It was decided to take out an important road junction to the east of the city that the Warpac forces would need for their principle convoy route. You know what it has been like out there. Their assault units and artillery were expending ammunition at a prodigious rate. It’s a tactic they’ve used before, just pouring in fire indiscriminately, keeping the refugees moving, panicking, getting in our way. If they’d had any decent armour they’d have rolled right over us. As it was we cobbled together some scratch units, slowed them down and managed to blow the river bridges in their face.”

Colonel Lippincott was speaking slower than usual, exchanging his usual rapid-fire delivery for a more measured style. It was like he was allowing the Intelligence Officer to step in at any point if he wanted to, if he was saying too much.

The tactics outlined were ones the Russians had applied frequently, Revell was well aware of that, though usually it had relied heavily on a massive air assault component and tank division. Those had been conspicuously absent on this occasion.

Certainly they had been using the maximum weight of firepower to keep a situation fluid, unleashing torrents of automatic fire to stampede civilians trying to flee the zone as it expanded.
The refugees in turn would make it difficult for NATO to set up roadblocks and defensive positions before they were swept aside by the stampeding and terrified population.

“But it is a tactic that only works if they can be rapidly re-supplied and this time their expenditure of ammunition has been prodigious. “ Lippincott looked full at the man beside him as though hoping for some congratulation on saying the right thing, or for not saying too much. “Usually if the need is urgent then their helicopter fleet would be employed. In this case even their best efforts would not be sufficient to maintain the ammunition levels required and actually on this front the Commies seem particularly short on rotary wing aircraft. So they are relying on columns of trucks to rush ammunition forward. In fact they have commandeered every scrap of civilian transport they can lay their hands on. They’re turning the roads into one-way systems, loaded vehicles entering the city by one route, empty ones leaving by another. It’s the same system the Red Ball express employed in France during the Second World War. It’s highly effective if the roads can be kept open.”

Getting no assistance from the Intelligence officer, the Colonel turned to look at a large-scale map on the wall. “This is an old city, lots of winding roads, not many direct routes through it from east to west. We knew the way those convoys would be forced to come.”

At this point he wiped his face and his throat, pushing the edge of the material inside the collar of his shirt were the colour had darkened with the sweat that was soaking it.

“By demolishing a handful of junctions and bridges we have been slowing the Soviets, creating one hell of a logistics problem for them and reducing the flow of ammunition to a trickle. But this last time…something went wrong.”

This pause was longer, and it stretched out. Revell saw the Colonels’ hands were twitching. After a long pause the Intelligence Officer stepped in.

“A special unit was tasked with blocking a potential Warpac route on the edge of the city, where their traffic would be critically concentrated and vulnerable. A small commando unit parachuted in with a specialist who had a device that would do the job. His aircraft was downed but we know he jumped just before that. His ground beacon functioned for a few minutes then went off the air. We don’t know what happened to him or his…device. It’s reasonable to assume though that he and his three-man escort are KIA. They were a tough lot, the roughest, and would have gone down fighting rather than surrender. In fact its possible his escort were lost when the aircraft was hit, that they never got to jump.”

“You’ve lost an atomic demolition weapon! Right?”

At Revells’ interjection the Intelligence officer stiffened, his jaw setting tight and his lips compressing.

“IT will save time if you just tell me.” Revell could see why Colonel Lippincott was so uncomfortable. This was knowledge usually confined to the very highest levels and the men carrying out the mission.

The Colonel said nothing but nodded. Once, barely moving his head, and then twice more, vigorously, as though to say he knew the situation but was happy to let some one else explain it.

“We know the device was delivered to its intended detonation point, or close to it, and that the arming sequence had commenced. Automatic signals relayed via satellite confirmed that. But from just moments afterwards we don’t know what happened to the weapon.”

“You want me and my unit to go in and retrieve it? Or is it still the plan to set it off?” Revells’ first thought was to wonder just how much of what was obviously coming he would be allowed to tell his squad.

“I shall be straight with you major. The best-case scenario would be to retrieve it. And it’s a job we want you to do, with some specialist help.”

The Intelligence officer had a dry voice that somehow sounded like he was about to clear his throat any moment but was too polite to do so in company.
“I am sure you read the newspapers Major, you’re an intelligent man so you’ll know the NATO Council is debating the use of nuclear weapons in the Zone. There are votes coming up…Political considerations shouldn’t play any part in war, but of course they do, in every aspect of it, from budgets for weapons to the employment of certain…devices.”

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“With hindsight the decision to use another atomic device so close to the city was not the right one, but that is not down to us. As it didn’t detonate we have a second chance.”

The Colonel was looking more comfortable now the subject had been broached and it had not been himself who had done so. It even gave him the confidence to rejoin the exchange. “Apart from anything else, if the Soviets find it intact they will have a PR field day. Until now they haven’t been able to offer the world’s media any hard evidence that some weapons used have been…not theirs. That’s the beauty of these things when they work properly. No fingerprints or other evidence is left behind.”

The Intelligence officer stepped in again, taking over now that the heart of the matter had been reached. “We’ve muddied the waters in the past by insisting the earlier explosions have been from their bombs, detonated during careless handling. They do have an appalling safety record in their nuclear industry.”

“What if they have found it already. They’re not just going to give it back to us, no matter how nicely we ask.” Now that the subject was out in the open, Revell hoped he could ask some of the flood of questions that occurred to him.

“If we move fast, really fast, then most likely they won’t have moved it before you get there. The bomb has anti-handling devices, several levels of safety mechanisms. Our people reckon it will take the best part of twenty-four hours for the Russians to neutralise them, if they can.”

Smugness, a degree of self-satisfaction was creeping in to the Intelligence Officers tone.

“It would be longer if they have to ship in experts from the depths of the USSR. That is our main hope that we can get to the bomb before the Russians have had a chance to disarm it.”

“What if the Reds have found it but haven’t succeeded in neutralised it, can they still move it. I am guessing they don’t want to leave it hanging about near their convoy route.” Revell was surprised when the Intelligence Officer answered without hesitation.

“If it can’t be disarmed then moving it is fraught with difficulties. If it has been knocked about, if some of the six safety devices have been by-passed due to damage or ham fisted handling or inefficient attempts at disarming then carting it about the country is not a good idea.”

It was difficult to foresee their possible reactions but Revell had to wonder how his squad would feel about sharing their transport with an unstable nuclear device. “What are the odds the Reds will be able to fix it and prevent detonation.”

“If they can get the right people then it can be rendered safe, providing it’s not too badly damaged.”

Revell could see that the Intelligence officer was weighing just how much to reveal.

“You know the Commies. The well-being of a handful of transport troops would not be high on their list of priorities. But the first attempt to lift the brute might be the one that sets it off, then they would be doing our job for us. We know it is in the location we intended and if it goes bang then the autobahn flyovers will be down, their route will be buggered.”

The Intelligence Officer spoke with a brisk authority, in the manner of a man who knew his subject or who had been well briefed and remembered it all. Revell wondered if that was really his unit. There were virtually no insignia on what appeared to be a brand-new uniform. It looked like it had been drawn from stores just for this meeting. Perhaps it had.
“Realistically, if the weapon is still there, what are the options?” Already Revell was ticking off the obvious questions. The answers might not be nice. “I presume it has been considered but why not just call down a cruise missile or two.”

“If the bomb is badly damaged, or if the Russians have made it unstable by unsuccessfully trying to disarm it then yes, it will have to be destroyed on the spot. Calling down missiles or artillery fire is a non-starter, it is too small a target for artillery. Even a direct hit from a shell might leave evidence, as might a missile solution, no matter how accurate.”

The Intelligence Officer was running through the possibilities, discarding those which Revell would have been happiest to see employed and answering some of his questions even before he posed them. “If the Reds experts make it safe then the area will crawl with their troops. They’ll have their P.R. trophy and have blocked our efforts to hamstring their convoy system. A double whammy if ever there was one.”

The Intelligence Officer was watching for any reaction from Revell. Others might have been flippant or turned the whole scenario into a drama. He was relieved to see that the Major indulged in none of that, just quickly and quietly taking in what he was told.

“But before that, while they work on the device, it is reasonable to assume they will maintain a cordon sanitaire around the site with just a minimum of personnel in the immediate vicinity. If only a small detachment of troops and specialists are present then you may be able to get to the device and either destroy it or spirit it away.”

“You will be supplying some one who can make the judgement as to which course of action is called for, and supply demolition materials for if we need them?”

“Taken care of, you’ll be getting two good men and forty pounds of material for destroying the bomb. You’ll get a thorough briefing shortly, but any questions right now?”

It was with surprise and pleasure Revell heard him call the bomb by that name. The coyness had begun to irritate him.

“One, just one. The destruction of the bomb, if it turns out we can’t move it. Has this been done before in any way, shape or form?” This time Revell monitored a perceptible hesitation before he got an answer.

“The method of destruction we have in mind will probably work. There will be residual radiation but there is nothing we can do about that. It’s the price we have to pay.”

“Probably?” Revel knew that was the main question that would be asked by the members of his squad.

“It’s not something we have ever envisaged doing before. It has not been tried. But I am assured it should work” The Intelligence Officer tried to inject confidence in to his tone but knew the words alone would convey the doubts that existed.

Revell took a long moment to consider that. “How big is this thing, what’s the yield and if it goes critical…that’s the right word isn’t it? If it goes critical do we have time to make a run for it?”

“It’s a Mk 54, our smallest warhead, a good sized fifty kilo pack. The interior gizmo’s are a mix of electronic and clockwork. It is of variable power and the specialists can reset it quickly. But our man had no instructions to do that so it is set for point one of a kiloton. So the men you take with you will know what they’re handling.”

He paused again, much longer this time and didn’t look at Revell as he spoke. “If all the safety devices fail, if the weapon has been badly damaged then it can go at anything from instantaneous to one hour. At the setting it’s on you need to be a half kilometre from ground zero and behind armour. The ground shock and pressure waves will be bad but you’ll be OK at that distance, if you have the time to make it.”

Colonel Lippincott tried to move the conversation on. “Major Revell, considering you’ll have to carry two technicians and two large packs internally, how many men will you take?”
“Driver, communications board operator, turret gunner and myself plus a squad of eight including a medic and your two experts. That will leave room, at a squeeze, for your specialist and his escort if we can find them alive.” Revell waited until the orderly had returned to the outer room.

“One last thing Major Revell. The Intelligence officer lowed his voice to a conspiratorial whisper that wouldn’t be heard by Colonel Lippincott, who was busy on the telephone. “If for any reason, after finding the specialist alive, you cannot bring him out then make quite sure he is not in a position, or condition, to tell the Reds anything. The same goes for the ones you’re taking in, should there be the risk of their capture.”

Revell saw behind the coded words. He knew what was expected of him. The mission was getting dirtier and dirtier.

“I take it I get to choose my own men, apart from your specialists, for the mission.”

“You’ll be including the Russian deserter?”

Revell had wondered if the matter of Boris being included would be raised. “I trust him, he’s brilliant with our radar and radio and computer equipment so yes, he goes with us.”

“Who else? Any more surprises?”

There was no way Revell was going to let the Intelligence Officer influence his selection so the others he listed quickly, burying the girls name in the middle in the hope it would go unnoticed. “The crew are Burke and Libby our driver and turret gunner. Boris you know about. Sergeant Hyde, Samson our medic’ and then Corporal Thorne and rankers Simmons, Ripper, Andrea, Dooley and Clarence.”

“I’ve seen the files on the men, good mix of youth and experience and all with useful special skills. The girl is an ex-East German border guard I understand. What’s her speciality.”

“Killing Russians.”

As he left the room Revell noticed that the Intelligence Officer was looking thoughtfully at Colonel Lippincott. He couldn’t think of anything his commanding officer had said that he probably should not have, but then you could never tell with those spooks. He was glad it was not a world in which he moved. Retrieving damaged nuclear bombs was an easier option that perpetually having to watch your back when Intelligence Officers were prowling about.

* * *

“I’ve arranged a really neat series of decoy barrages for you.” The artilleryman kept breaking off his conversation with Revell to issue further instructions to a stream of signallers and Nco’s that were constantly rushing up and vying for his attention.

“We’re going to put down smoke. Lots and lots of lovely smoke, mostly incendiary phosphorus rounds. The Soviets hate that stuff; they’re terrified of it. It will be like a pea soup fog on the other side of the river so I hope your thermal imaging gear is up to scratch. There’s access to an old slipway, just down stream of the bridge they blew behind you. On the other side, a hundred metres further down is a shattered dock. The rubble will make a good exit ramp if you can take a bit of a run at it.”

“What about deception tactics, I was told that was being arranged.” The impact of mortar rounds on the top floor of the multi-storey car park was sending down regular trickles of dust from between the thick concrete slabs of the structure. Revell had constantly to brush the fine powder from his camouflage smock and shake it from his hair.

“Oh plenty of that. Just for once I am being allowed to use more than a couple of rounds per barrel. In fact I don’t know what they’re up to but they’ve allowed me unlimited access to the dump. I am going to make the most of it, have a bit of fun. The chance doesn’t come along that often.”

On the hood of his Landrover the artilleryman spread a city street plan. A broad slash of green, following the line of the river, marked the boundary between the two armies. In succession his finger stabbed down on a three locations. “All of these are getting the sort of treatment you’d expect if we were covering a river crossing. Another four are
just getting smoke or like yours, a light mix.”

“It is going to have the effect of putting them on the alert.” Revell saw that the artilleryman’s enthusiasm might just have the reverse effect to that he hoped for. With the chance to be profligate with ammunition his elaborate fire plan looked likely to prompt the Soviet defenders into maximum vigilance rather than lull them in to complacency.

“Ah yes, I knew you’d say that.” Ticking boxes and scribbling a note on the margin of a clipboard thrust at him, the artilleryman grinned broadly. “And that would be the case if we did it all at once. But you don’t kick off for another two hours and we’ve started already. By the time you go the Ruskies will be sick from rushing back and forth between one imagined danger spot and another. My men are switching targets all the time and we’ve started to run them ragged. Besides killing a few and wrecking their supper arrangements we will have made sure they have exhausted themselves. They will have settled down with their heads below their sandbags, waiting for us to either do something or stop playing silly buggers. Oh yes, and I’ve got some of the infantry and anti-aircraft batteries along the bank to join in. It’s an idea from the Second World War, called Pepper Pot. We lace the whole area with heavy machine gun, mortar and light cannon fire. That keeps them ducking and diving all the time, great fun. To top it all off my brother is in command of a tank troop close by and a couple of his big ones are going to join in with a spot of direct fire.”

Outside the Russian mortaring was definitely continuing to reduce in intensity. There were now perceptible pauses between each explosion. Just occasionally a fragment would zip across the interior and expend its energy in chipping a scab of concrete from a pillar or wall. A sliver that ricocheted from a stairwell handrail finally came to rest in a camouflage net secured to the rear of the turret on the Iron Cow.

In the subdued light the angular bulk of the hover APC looked more aggressive than ever. Extra equipment festooned the hull sides, even draped down on to the thick creases of the steel ribbon reinforced ride skirt. A large patch and runs of semi-gloss brown paint made an incongruous touch but added to the general disruption of the vehicles outline.

An M113 drove in, its tracks squealing as the driver executed a series of skid turns to bring it down to the lower floor from road level.

The wide rear door dropped to form a ramp and from its interior exited two colourfully attired infantrymen Brightly patterned bandanas were wound about their heads, loosely tied ends straggling down from beneath helmets that had been given a psychedelic treatment with paint and felt tip pens. Any hippy effect though was cancelled by festoons of thermite bombs and grenades. Their only personal weapons were heavy automatic pistols carried in what looked more like a western rig than regular issue holsters. Libby watched them coming out and found his attention instantly drawn to a large rectangular pack carried by the youngest of the pair. He staggered under the weight of the close packed blocks of thermite material. Peace signs were plastered all over it and red, lilac and sky blue ribbons had been affixed to every strap and buckle. The result was more festive than camouflaging in effect. “Oh heck. I always knew the guys who played with the little ‘A’ bombs about must be crazy. If ever I needed proof….”

“Hi Major. We’re the special unit guys you are expecting.”

It was the unencumbered man who spoke. “They recently made the error of making me up to Lieutenant but I prefer to dispense with rank and just be called Andy. Maybe it will be a help if the Ruskies get hold of me and I just sound kind of friendly like.”

The southern accent was accentuated, almost exaggerated and was accompanied by a gap toothed smile so broad it seemed to go half way around his head.

“We were told there was one man who had to have special do or die protection. Is that you?” Revell saw that his own men were gathering around to take a closer look at the newcomers.

“Oh that will be Carson. Come here young fella, say hello to the Major. He’s going to take real good care of you.”

The long limbed marine with the pack slothered forward. He looked at first glance like a boy but there were lines about his eyes and a look within them that suggested he was older than the first impression made him out to be.
Hi.

Andy made no further effort to draw him out. “Anyway, he’s kind of brainy and I reckon his kin must have money stashed somewhere, because he’s real popular with the girls. Or maybe its just because parts of him glow in the dark. I know his stripes indicate he’s only a sergeant but if it does come to a sticky situation then you haul him to safety and leave me to rot.”

Carson coloured. Some of his apparent innocence though was lost in the quietly muttered obscenity that the lieutenant did not hear.

“Never do anything to offend a guy who carries ‘A’ bombs for a living, first lesson my Daddy taught me.” Dooley grinned across at the lad and got a sheepish grin in return.

“Don’t you worry big fella. That’s not a nuclear device my buddy has now. It still ain’t nice, but it don’t glow in the dark.”

Stashing the bulky case of thermite took some arranging, and a lot more arguing. It was settled by Revell. “It goes in the middle, on the floor. Fix a safety harness on it, no, make that two. I don’t want it rolling about and igniting, not that it would make any difference a metre or two either way. It would cook us all before we could get out.”

“Oh it could matter major.” Carson looked up from stashing the decorated container. “I checked up on that. For legal purposes, say if it were family members involved, then a nano-seconds difference as to who fried and died first would matter for legal reasons in the event of execution of a will. It’s like when twins are born, only different.”

“Carson!” Lieutenant Andy shook his head. “Stop making with the explanations of niceties like that will you.

“OK Lieutenant.” Carson looked about the interior of the Iron Cow. “Hey, you have a serious amount of room in here. Kind of nice after being crammed into the hell seat on a Bradley.”

“This lot are not normal.” Clarence had entered to take up his usual position by the rear ramp. He settled the butt of his long barrelled Barret sniper rifle on the floor and closing his fingers around the long barrel closed his eyes to sleep.

Andrea took up position beside Carson. “Does your officer know what to do with the bomb if you are knocked out?”

“He’s got a rough idea.” From a pocket Carson took a sheet of ruled paper. Sketches on either side of it showed panels, dials and the wording, ‘stick key in here, or maybe here’. “See, dead easy.”

Libby had paused on his way to his turret seat and craned his neck to survey the drawings. He looked disappointed at their simplicity. “Well I hope it gives us a long count-down.”

“Can the bomb go off under circumstances other than your selecting the correct sequence? Can it go off by accident.” Andrea felt sick, hearing how casual the men were discussing the weapon they were due to retrieve. The thought of riding with the bomb was making her feel dreadful, jarring her nerves. The briefing from Major Revell had come as a shock to her. The others, after a moment’s surprise, had not really shown any emotion or worry.

Carson put his head close to Andrea, and hesitated for a moment as he smelt the rich aroma of a scented shampoo. “Oh for sure.” He inhaled again and closed his eyes in pleasure. “Yes it can, lots of ways. That’s why me and the lieutenant are here. We like to be useful.”

As she moved away Carson experienced a pang of regret at losing the pleasure at her nearness. And to himself added in an undertone, “And now I don’t regret having to leave my Playboy magazine behind.”

* * *

The pair of Challenger tanks had been positioned carefully, taking advantage of the tumbled steel and rubble of a collapsed office block. In several places the ruins still smoked, adding those faint wreaths to the cover of the rusting metal and broken sheets of cladding.
Their commanders conversed quietly with their crews and each other, taking their time to find their targets and zero in on the first of them. When they fired it was to raise a huge fountain of wet debris as their joint muzzle blasts tore at their concealing mounds.

Fired within a fraction of a second of each other the impact of the high explosive rounds had a devastating effect on a structure across the river. The ground floor, a restaurant, disappeared from sight inside a vast cloud of dust. As that rose it revealed the frontage had been utterly destroyed, along with the two floors immediately above it. The top floor of the building shuddered and then began a progressive collapse into the roadway. With them fell the Russian machine gun posts that had been positioned on the rooftop and in a dormer window immediately below it.

Reloading fast the huge tanks again fired almost in unison, this time sending high explosive plunging in to the steadily thickening cloud of the smoke screen. Their impacts out of sight, it was the collapse of a church tower that indicated the accuracy of their aim. Again smoke and dust soared high, adding substance to the dirty white pall the NATO mortars were rapidly achieving.

At thirty-second intervals the pair of British tanks continued to pound any intact building on the far side of the river. They had fired ten rounds each before the first retaliatory shell impacted on the lip of the wharf to their front. It was an armour piercing round and it plunged into the massive baulk of timber lining the edge, splintering its centre section and tearing it off to float away on the swirling waters.

It took only a moment for one of the tank commanders to identify the location of the enemy tank, a T72. Even as he did a second round flashed across the river and skimmed the top of his tanks turret, tearing away a bank of smoke dischargers and throwing them, burning, a hundred yards on to a distant over-turned Volkswagen Golf saloon.

He swore loudly and clapped his hand to his arm, dropping down in to the turret for a dressing to be applied.

Before the enemy125mm cannon could launch another shot, the other Challengers main armament belched flame and sent an armour piercing shot in retaliation. As it left the barrel, ruffling the tightly strapped thermal sleeve the shell cast aside the halves of the cradling sabot and left the tungsten core to lash out at colossal speed. The Russian tank was already starting to reverse to a new position when the impact came.

A fist-sized chunk of steel was gouged from its turret roof, ploughing between two reactive armour blocks and sending them spinning away without detonating. Every inch of the powerful machine vibrated and it rocked back under the massive blow. A towing hawsers draped around the turret side was torn away and the roof mounted spotlight and anti-aircraft machine gun reduced to mangled brackets.

It paused and then exhaust gasses plumed high as it continued its retreat. While it did a wild shot was unleashed from its high velocity gun but it was fired before the muzzle was brought to bear. The tracer in the tail of the shell briefly revealed its flight and it struck a pile of steel beams and glanced off, to an impact far away in the west of the city.

The exhaust from the straining engine enabled the NATO commanders to track the Warsaw Pact armoured vehicle even when piles of rubble concealed its progress. When it reappeared a hundred metres further along the bank it exposed barely sufficient of its turret to enable its gun to re-engage the British tanks, they were waiting for it.

An armour piercing and a squash head shell struck at the same instant. The HESH round impacted and deformed immediately beside the gun mount. A colossal concussion went through the armour causing great scabs of metal to detach on the inside and pound across the gun compartment, cutting the gunner and commander in two and severing many of the cable runs in a shower of sparks.

The armour piercing round struck the gun barrel itself, severing it and forcing the stump of the weapon back so far it defeated the recoil mechanism and smashed it into the doors of the ammunition storage, destroying the automatic loader mechanism as it did so.

A single spurt of flame soared from a top hatch and then the whole structure burst apart with the detonation of all its fuel and ammunition simultaneously. Above the top run of tracks the thick metal was actually rent, split apart. Track links and two road wheels were propelled far away by the blast.
From the Iron Cows cupola Revell had watched the destruction, having been ultra cautious in getting Burke to position the hovercraft so that only that and the turret showed above the piled bricks of a collapsed warehouse.

“Get ready to move. We’ll give the artillery a couple more minutes to stoke the screen and our two big friends to create a spot more havoc and then we’ll be off.”

With their driver the Major had reconnoitred their initial route. Burke had expressed no doubts about the APC’s ability to tackle the slopes but had wanted to see that no lances of steel projected from them, ready to rip the skirts and reduce their ride height and the power they could put on the ground.

Through the sights mounted on the turret cannon, Libby watched the bright pinpricks of light that were the smoke rounds bursting. They landed constantly, several at a time along the river frontage, blossoming into a fast expanding sheet of white light that obliterated everything else as the intense heat of phosphorous momentarily defeated the lens’ self-balancing optics.

“How is it looking.” Dooley tried to squeeze up beside the gunner but could do no more than attract his attention.

“It looks like that artillery officer is doing us proud. If the Ruskies here are only getting light stuff, just smoke, then the poor sods elsewhere must be getting a hell of a pasting.” Swivelling the turret slowly with the hand control, Libby watched fires being started amongst the shattered remains of buildings, as the smoke rounds caused flame to race up the plastic rain pipes and across the guttering. Where the vulnerable material caught it sagged and slowly rained droplets of squealing fire. The flame spread along the eaves of the apartment blocks and forced billowing smoke from beneath the tiles in great clouds.

“Still a few minutes to go yet.” Clarence changed position slightly, so that the deep indent in his hand made by the rifle barrel was eased. “I hope no one at HQ suddenly realises the volume of ammunition this enthusiastic artillery man is getting through.”

“If they do then we shall likely be going forward with less than ideal cover.” Revell listened to the grouses and countered each in turn with some comment that would crush the problem, or steer it towards humour or a new direction. It had always surprised him how often he did little more than play straight feed to the worries, the fears, of his men. But it always seemed to be like that before going into action. A brittle humour masked fear well.

When it was just five minutes to go he used the rear escape hatch to exit the Iron Cow and make a circuit of the vehicle to ensure that everything was still in order. From some unknown origin a fragment had scored the side of the hull, making a long graze in the still sticky spilt paint but doing no damage. He was surprised to hear the steps behind him and turned to see Sergeant Hyde joining him for the check-over.

The mortar rounds had switched to fresh targets several times but with their departure imminent the barrage had transferred back to the bank immediately opposite. Now, as the smoke drifted across the river it had become sufficiently thick to cover their moving about without fear they would come under observation from enemy snipers. Even so, several times, they heard the sharp cutting zip of rounds passing not far overhead and the clatter of machine guns firing blind on fixed lines.

“I wonder if one of those would set off the bomb?” Hyde listened to the distant rattle of the Russian machine guns and the heavier, slower crack of twenty and thirty millimetre cannon adding their contribution to the counter barrage. It was still pitifully weak though, indicating that so far, mercifully, the enemy was only just beginning to reach the river in any numbers.

“We’ll never know.” It amused Revell to realise that he was speaking the literal truth. If something, a bullet or a red-hot fragment from a mortar round, were to set off the ‘A’ bomb while they were close to it then truly they would never know. From now on every second might quite literally be their last, and they would have no knowledge of it. Suddenly he realised that it was not something to be frightened of…Carson knew all about the bomb, but was he frightened? The bags under his eyes suggested he might worry, or it could just be that he was worked too hard or at his age maybe played too hard.

Strange that it took the close proximity of a nuclear weapon to put these thoughts in to his head. A single round from
a sniper rifle might have ended it all for him anytime in the last year or two. He had gone in to action on the first day of the war and now against all odds he was still here. Did he deserve to be? But then did anyone…it just didn’t do to dwell on such things. He shook the uncomfortable thoughts away and returned to the Iron Cow, securing the hatch.

“Thirty seconds Major.” Burke, in the driver seat, had been quietly keeping count. Now Revell looked at his own watch and saw the hand sweeping to the moment…

Slapping the button that would elevate the Commanders chair, Revell felt the hydraulics lift him to the observation cupola. His eyes came level with it at the instant an incendiary round smacked in to the blank side-wall of a distant public building. It did not penetrate, its designers had never meant it to, instead the thin casing of the shell burst apart and spewed its contents down the brickwork, the short distance up to and under the eaves and out and across the road, forming a wall of white fire. He closed his eyes against the glare. They were going with the last light of the day and he did not want to go in to action with his vision blurred.

All of the crew were laced up to the internal communications network. Revell knew he did not have to raise his voice to be heard. “OK, start the engines.”

Burke nestled deeper into his drivers seat and gripped the controls. He watched the oil pressure come up and engaged the fuel boost pumps, moving the throttle forward to ground idle. At twenty percent of maximum revolutions per minute he watched the twin gauges monitoring the turbine temperatures. The indicators on the main screen spun upwards and he waited for the moment when the turbofans internal temperature would reach the optimum. Number one lit up and he gave it a moment to run and settle to steady readings before activating number two.

“OK Major, all good.”

“Right, let’s go. We’ve got a nuclear weapon to bring home.”

* * *

“Why wasn’t I told?” General Zucharnin screamed the words and the officer in front of him, flanked by two grim looking field police, visible shrank. “You think there is some virtue in keeping such things a secret from me?”

“Comrade General, I reported to General Lieutenant Gregori, your second in command. That is the proper procedure.”

Crossing to the door, wrenching it open, the general shouted to the staff in his outer office. “I want Gregori here, or on the ‘phone now.”

The glass cracked with a sharp whiplash of sound as it was slammed. It had hardly closed before the General ripped it open again. “Well, have you got him you blockhead.”

The field telephone on the desk gave a weak jangling ring. Snatching up the handset General Zucharin had no time for niceties. “Gregori. One of your staff officers has just informed me your men are working on a nuclear demolition device under the flyovers at the eastern end of the city.” “You didn’t think to advise me?”

“Stand up straight!” He glared at the escorted officer, who appeared to be on the verge of fainting.

The young officer sagged, lolled first to one side and then the other, colliding with the military police. They closed on him and without seeming to do anything, shrugged him back to an upright stance with the minimum of effort and contact, as though they feared contagion.

His fate in the balance, Pritkov began to slowly crumple at the knees and had to be supported by the escort who held him with distaste. Fear induced a delirious semi-conscious state. He babbling quietly, alternating that with suppressed sobbing and soft pleading.

Beyond the men forced to support him, no one in the room had the slightest interest in him and his fate. It did not do to have any involvement with anyone who was so deeply in disfavour, beyond wondering if the special protection he
enjoyed would save him from this latest severe error of judgement. Anyone else would most likely have been a corpse by now. It would just have been a case of precisely where the conversion from life to death was to take place. Judging from his colour, Pritkov looked like a dead man already.

Zucharnin was ignoring him as well, was still barking down the telephone. “Well I bloody well know now but why wasn’t I told earlier? Are you still running this war just for your own benefit? Were you thinking to gain some credit by keeping this to yourself? In a few hours I hope I shall be rolling vital ammunition convoys through that location. I don’t give a damn if a few of them get vapourised but I don’t want their bodies forming part of a bloody great tangle of wreckage those following will have to go pussy-footing around. In future, if you have some, don’t withhold information, don’t hug it to yourself.” For a moment he listened, his chin jutting and his lips tight closed.

The young staff officer was looking towards the door. How he would have loved to about turn and walk out through it. He edged a half pace backwards. The general noticed, slapped the telephone down and scowled.

“Where the hell do you think you might be off to?” With an abrupt gesture he indicated for the military police to leave. Zucharnin had brought himself under control but there remained an edge in his voice, a clipped and icy tone.

“ So, one of our patrols bumped into a parachutist. The oafs killed him. That was…” he consulted his watch, “…hours ago. And in all that time no one thought to inform me. And it was discovered he had a nuclear device, a demolition bomb, and still neither you nor Grigori thought to tell me.” Zucharnins eyes had locked on the young officer and they stayed on him as he waited for an explanation. None was forth coming.

Pritkov might be scared but he was not fool enough to try and stumble through any excuses or explanations. That could only make it worse.

“Very good. Gregori says he has a team working on the device. I am making you responsible for what happens…”

“Surely the General does not intend I should go out there and personally…”

“ A gutless wonder like you would not be of any use, so no. Simply inform me when my convoy route is safe. If they are unsuccessful there’s no need, I am near enough to see the mushroom for myself.”

The General indicated for the room to be cleared, but he signalled the young officer to remain.

The instant the door closed on the last of them, Pritkov collapsed in to a chair and dabbed at his face with a handkerchief. As the officers had filed out they had avoided looking at him. Some smirked when their backs were safely turned, others bit their lips thoughtfully. Sympathy did not feature in any of their expressions.

“It was you to whom the field officers reported and you who elected to pass the information to Gregori

“That is the correct procedure…”

Closing his eyes and rocking on his heels, the General took a moment to maintain his self-control. When he had almost succeeded he reached out with both hairy backed hands and thumped them down on to the captains shoulders. It was not a blow but the heavy impact was sufficient to make the slightly built staff officer buckle and cringe. Zucharnins fingers closed about the his epaulettes and lifted his jacket so that its collar rose to hide his neck. “There are times when one does not go by the book.” He pushed his blotchy face close to the young captains. “There are times when one thinks of the consequences for others first. Not many, they are rare and few and far between but there are times. Do you understand?” His voice had dropped, so that there was no chance of his words being heard in the outer office.

“Yes, I understand.”

“Good, because you are stretching to breaking point the special treatment I can offer you. I do not want to have to tell your mother and other relatives I have had you shot, though I would be merciful and of course tell her it was in the line of duty. Have you written to her this week?

“No.”
“Then write tonight without fail and do not forget this lesson. If you screw up again I can make life... uncomfortable... Now go.”

“Thank you…Stepfather.”

“And save that for when we are at home.”

* * *

For once Burke didn’t have to worry over much about conserving fuel. This wasn’t another of their long-range reconnaissance missions. It was a short distance smash and grab raid. He gunned the twin Alison’s to full power and they surged down the debris littered carriageway towards the bridge.

As usual the port engine produced more thrust and he had to over-ride the hovercraft’s own systems to balance the colossal surge of power. Within a hundred metres the thirteen tons of machine was moving at fifty kilometres an hour. Another two hundred metres, when they reached the approach to the bridge, they were hitting eighty-five.

The downdraft from the beneath the armoured skirts blasted huge volumes of the choppy water in to the air. Before reaching the far side of the river they twice swept across the remains of dead bodies and sent the scorched cadavers skimming across the surface of the river.

Then they were climbing the rubble slope where the dockside had been pulverised and showers of light debris flew into the air. It added to the dense fog already created by the deluge of smoke rounds. As they came up on to the riverside walkway twice they sideswiped the burnt-out shells of automobiles to send them spinning away, one of them to be left hanging over the river.

“We’re there. Hold on.” If the Russians had been sufficiently alert to monitor the approach of the hurtling APC Burkes next move would take them out of any weapon sights they might have been levelling.

A wrench of the steering column and he sent them through a wild skidding turn down broad steps and in to a pedestrian area running parallel to the river. Lampposts, phone kiosks and lottery booths were snapped off, crushed and hurled aside. They were still at full speed and approaching the limit of the shrouding smoke when Burke savagely threw the thrust into reverse and brought their speed to a crawl as he ploughed though a courtyard, under an archway and then across a compact area of garden.

“Find us that hole.”

Burke didn’t need the Majors order; he had already identified the shopping mall and sent the slab front of the hovercraft in through the wide glass doors. Swerving through turn after turn the iron Cow smashed and obliterated plate glass frontages and elaborate displays. At one turn, dead ahead, a group of Russian infantry were looting a store. They tried to run but in succession the five men disappeared beneath the craft and came rolling out at the back, bloody, broken bundles.

Exiting the Mall, towing a plume of glass fragments Burke sent the APC down an alleyway so narrow that the steel reinforcements on the bulging ride-skirt struck cascades of sparks from the stone and brickwork walls on both sides simultaneously.

Accelerating to near maximum speed again they raced out and across a wide boulevard and in to another Mall. This time, after penetrating the already derelict pedestrian area, Burke used reverse thrust to bring the hovercraft to a halt and set it down on the cream tiled floor.

“Oh man. That has got to be one of the wildest rides.” Carson had been unable to resist the temptation and had knelt on a bench to try and catch a glimpse of their progress through one of the gun ports. His face shone with excitement as he turned back to sit facing the centre of the interior.

Revell was looking at the map. The display on the control consol in front of their driver, and its flickered repeater on the command position he just ignored. Too often the electronic direction indicator had sent them the wrong way or failed altogether at a critical moment.
“Might be useful for a Sunday afternoon driver looking for a picnic site but what ever command says, it is not up to battlefield situations.” Burke snapped down a toggle switch and the sat-nav system closed down. Lolling back in his seat he rested his feet across the panel. He felt someone nudging up beside him in his cramped position.

“Oh man, you are one heck of a driver. They ever told you that? You reckon you’re appreciated?”

Lieutenant Andy was grinning fit to split his face and pressing behind him was Carson. “You just got to join us man. You don’t want to be with this gung-ho combat outfit, Join us. We have so much fun…we’ve got this go-cart track and the brass give us all we want…”

Carson pushed forward, his camouflage-adorned features just visible below Andy’s armpit. “We’re building this stock car based on one of those big Volvo command cars. We’re going to ship it back to Carolina and then we’ll blow every one else off the track…You’d be the perfect driver, we’d clean up.”

Burke basked in the adulation and then found himself lugged back down to earth.

“There’s a job to do.” Revell had seen the huddle about his driver. ”After that you can try for a transfer. Of course we might be spread across the landscape as radio active fragments first.” He could understand if Burke was tempted by the prospect dangled before him. The entire unit took their dour driver for granted. He was good, brilliant even, as the last two minute run had proved. Certainly he wasn’t used to being praised and fussed over, it would likely go to his head, but they had a mission to complete first.

In the dull red glow of the crafts’ interior, Hyde and Revell checked their route.

“We’re too far to the north” Revell gauged the distance from their present location to where they should have been. It was a tough route, a maze of city streets. Some places, particularly at intersections with long straight approach roads, they would be a sitting target. And any turn might drive them into the sights of a Warsaw Pact anti-tank gun or even those of a Soviet tank. Cities soaked up troops and armour like a giant sponge but the Warpac forces would be hurriedly setting up positions to cover main routes.

“This way looks the best.” Sergeant Hyde pulled the map towards his lap and let his dirt stained broken nail trace an erratic path across the city. “We should avoid any Ruskie supply routes that way, assuming they’ll be using the uncluttered boulevards. Should take us around any positions they’re establishing.”

“Life sure is getting complicated.” Dooley had put his feet up on the thermite container and was now crowding others out of that section of the bench as he made himself comfortable.

Revell heard the muttered comment and though he ignored it he could understand the sentiment. Certainly the simplest thing would have been to blast straight through to the last known location of the ‘A’ bomb team. Take a chance on the enemy not yet having found it.

“So, you think we should keep going in a straight line. That would make life uncomplicated.” Andrea could not keep the amusement out of her voice. Not for an instant had she ever comprehended the seeming debate on every important decision the unit had to make. She knew Revell had the last word, always, and that he was usually correct…at least he always had been so far…but with the East German forces she had been used to orders being immutable, fixed. “I do not see what the problem is about. We know the location, get us there and leave this,” she rapped the ribbon festooning case of thermite with her knuckles. “You are surely not serious in thinking we can hang around in the middle of Warsaw Pact position, playing with an ‘A’ bomb until we are sure it is safe and then carry it back to our own lines.”

She was not being subtle, she knew that, but the thought of carting a nuclear weapon across enemy territory filled her with dread. For the first time ever, that she could recall, she knew what fear was like.

A staccato blast of noise came from overhead as Libby opened fire with a clip of three rounds from the 30mm Rarden cannon and then there was a long crackling burst from the co-axial chain gun as the turret made a fast three hundred and sixty degree traverse.

The impact and detonation of the three high velocity shells at extreme close range shook the craft with sharp
punching cracks from the blast waves.

“I’ve got Russian infantry all over the place. Hit the gas!”

As Burke responded to the call and set the turbofans screeching to emergency full power there were thuds and rattles on the exterior of the hull.

“Grenades.” Andrea was the first to thrust the barrel of an assault rifle through a hull gun port and fire off the whole clip, then she slapped in two more magazines in swift succession and loosed those off in similar wild and un-aimed fusillades.

The other five ports were also sending out streams of tracer that ricocheted from walls and storefront door and window frames to make a wild pattern of zipping lights. Cascades of shattering sheet glass fell in shimmering avalanches then were picked up by the viscous downdraft from the ride skirt and sent across the mall in a lethal hail that cut down the surviving Russian troops.

Bursting from the building the hovercraft performed a broadside skid across the road to scrape along fifty metres of concrete bollards before Burke fully regain control and instinctively sent the APC plunging across a gas station forecourt, smashing down the pumps and then into a narrow service road behind it.

In the turret, eyes locked on the gun sight, Libby just caught a glimpse of a flaring fire in their wake before the barrel took a hard knock on a street sign and the impact jarred his whole body. He heard the detonation of a couple of anti- personnel grenades in their wake and knew that the major was taking no chance on their being followed.

The thin walled explosive devices went off in jagged brown puffs of smoke that filled the garbage can littered alleyway with dirty smoke and thousands of tiny razor sharp steel fragments.

“Ahead, on the left somewhere…” Revell held the mike against his throat to make sure their driver heard…”There’s an entrance to an underground unloading bay. We can use it to make half a block.”

“It will take us away from our destination.” Burke wrenched the controls; preventing the APC from more than occasionally slapping deluges of sparks from the walls and steel security doors of the buildings rear access.

Ahead of them a rocket impacted amongst the convoluted pipe work of an industrial air-conditioning system and sent lengths of aluminium trunking down in to their path.

Adjusting the ride so that the nose of the machine was lowered Burke sent the Iron Cow into the raining debris, giving it no chance to get underneath the ride skirt and do serious damage. The lightweight material was crushed and flipped above them, and then they were executing a turn that took them down a concrete ramp and smashing through a red and white striped barrier into the deep gloom of an underground service area.

After a hundred metres Burke brought the APC to a halt and let the air spill out to rest the craft on the ground.

“I want a close perimeter.” Revell hit the rear door release and felt a heavy draft as damp clammy atmosphere from outside swept in to replace the cordite-tainted air of the APC’s interior. He would not take the chance of their being jumped again. That they had been, he knew, was his fault. While his assessment was that the Soviets were still as yet unorganised he had not allowed sufficiently for the fact that some of the advance elements of the assault troops might have already been formed in to patrols. If that was the case then it was sheer bad luck that they had encountered one of the patrols, and an alert aggressive one at that. Of course it was also likely that they had run in to what was no more than opportunist looters, but still he could have been more ready. Should have been. Now with a close perimeter guard at this new location it was far less likely they would be jumped.

When he left the vehicle Dooley moved to its front plate, took ten paces forward and then settled down on one knee. He used his infrared sight to make the first sweep and then when that showed nothing more than patches of background heat from closed down machinery, resorted to plain eyesight. A long way off there was a small square of white light that had to be the exit. There were no obstructions between it and their location. He hoped it stayed that way. Anything blocking the distant opening was almost certainly going to be a Soviet foot patrol or reconnaissance vehicle.
To his left, using a concrete pillar for partial cover, Andrea was snacking off a chocolate bar. To his right Clarence was methodically scanning the segment of the perimeter that was his responsibility. He would do it with dedication and mathematical precision until the order to re-board came.

There were so many pressures on a man in this war. From its fifth day Dooley had been involved in the bitterest of the fighting. There had been the long and hard fought retreats with every day seeming it would be his last. Then the first wound, and a day after his return to combat, the second. Six weeks in all when he could surely have wrangled some way out of the front line, but it just wasn’t his way. Seven years of peace time soldiering had prepared him for action and now he was addicted to it. The Zone, as the newspapers called the ugly no-mans-land that was forming across Europe was, if not a home to him, where he wanted to be. No more Saturday night aggravation in garrison towns from hoodies, no more having to take their crap or in the event of his resorting to retaliation facing charges. Now if scum like that got in his way he took them out, and it felt good to be able to do it, to not have the weight of politically correct legislation bearing down on him.

Only a week back, in London, two Peace Campaign people had been beaten severely when they tried to noisily disrupt a memorial service for British dead in the war. Sometimes it seemed like things were moving in the right way.

People, civilian and military, were starting to do things their own way. Like the weapon he carried. The troops had been barred from using non-standard issue arms but he kept his Israeli-made machine pistol. Hard to believe that other units were still being issued with reworked versions of the British SA80 assault rifle. From its instant ignition tracer that marked the precise spot from which you were firing to its inability to take out an enemy behind the flimsiest of cover it was a multi- million pound disaster. So he hung on to the Uzi that had cost him two months wages and thought every penny of it well spent. Hidden during any inspection by senior officers, he had no intention of parting with it.

From the depths of the subterranean labyrinth emerged a group of civilians. Ten in all, they looked mostly frightened and utterly bewildered. Their clothes, doubtless recently smart and respectable were now crumpled, slept in, dirt stained. When they approached the open rear door of the APC it was Clarence who raised the long barrelled Barrett sniper rifle and motioned for them to advance no further.

“No.” His voice sounded echoingly loud in the bare concrete cavern. He repeated it in German, with a warning to come no closer. How it sounded though was not how he felt. There were so many groups like this, desperate for help, getting used to rejection and with the constant fear it would be a Russian patrol or vehicle crew they would encounter.

“We have no food to give you. Keep heading west.” Oh crap, how pathetic. Dooley knew these civilians had never in the lives had to think about heading east, or south or west. Everything had been ordered, neatly controlled. There had been no roads that lead to danger or to safety. It was a choice that would never have occurred to them. All had been safe. Now they were frightened, hungry, likely lost.

“Major!” Calling for the officer, there was nothing else he could do.

Revell saw the situation as soon as he emerged from the APC. He reached back to an interior locker. “Give them this. Show them the compass.”

Ripping open the small package Clarence handed most of the contents to the female leader of the group. It occurred to him how strange it was that so often the one in charge of such groups was a mature female. Separately he handed her the small and toy-like compass. It would not have looked out of place spilling from a cheap box of Christmas crackers.

With many millions of civilians trapped by the Soviet advance it would have been impossible for the swiftly moving NATO troops to have carried and distributed relevant maps. And so this sad package had been devised. Blocks of high nutrition chocolate, a toy-like compass and a five page Russian /German phrase book.

She accepted the package, handing most of its contents to an elderly man, turning the plastic device over in dirt-engrained hands that still displayed the remnants of expensive nail art. Gesturing past Revell, to the APC’s interior
she reached behind her and pulled one of the children forward. She spoke in German first and then in near perfect English.

“If you cannot take all of us, please take the children. We were on a bus…a Russian helicopter fired at us and our driver was killed. He was the only one who knew the city. We have had to walk slowly because of the children …” she hesitated, dropping her voice so as no to be heard by the three pensioners in her group who appeared to be taking no interest in the discussion. They just stood, apathetically awaiting what ever the outcome should be. “Please, at least take them, take the children…”

Her face, though dirt streaked was attractive. The tracks of tears showed but they were smudged, as though from some one she had held, giving comfort, rather than her own. She had at least managed to comb her jet-black shoulder length hair and brushed dirt and dust from her clothes.

Revell couldn’t determine her age, her soft round face was full enough to let no lines impinge on it but it didn’t betray any suggestion of overweight. The figure beneath her oversize and obviously looted ski-jacket was full and very feminine. He marvelled at the impression of strength and determination she exuded. At any time, striking out on her own, she could likely have made it to safety but she had settled for trying to help this sad collection of refugees. The city must be full of groups like this, larger, smaller…all trying desperately to get to the NATO side of the battlefield. And one by one they would be minced by the Soviet war machine.

The firm shake of the head that was all the Major made by way of reply was accepted without further argument.

“Can you at least tell us the direction to take.” From a pocket in the bulky coat she produced a good map of the city. Obviously she had been sensible in raiding a stationers.

Placing the compass on the map Revell showed her how to use it and gave her the general direction that should be safest. He could do no more.

Gathering a child with her free hand she led the pathetic group away, towards the ramp by which the hovercraft had entered.

“They won’t last five minutes out there.” Clarence didn’t turn to see them go. Experience told him what a sad picture they would make, framed by the opening.

“The Russians don’t have time for civvies, unless they can use them as human shields, or get them to tramp across minefields.”

Thinking back to the scene he had witnessed when the three NATO combat vehicles had crushed and gunned down other refugees Revell knew the dangers they faced did not come just from the enemy. Out there everyone was their enemy.

While the squad stayed concealed they had no visits from Russian patrols entering the area. Several times though they heard tracked and wheeled vehicles passing on the road beyond the distant exit. A cautious reconnaissance by Dooley and Ripper had revealed that the road was a main boulevard in the shopping district and already being employed as a cross-town route by Russian troops.

The traffic was a mix. Several lone vehicles were luxury saloons, their drivers invisible behind smoked glass windshields. Likely they were the last of the looters trying to get out, but one bullet riddled Saab at the roadside displayed that not all were being successful. An ordinary hatchback that lurched past. was obviously being driven by a Russian unused to the controls after the crudeness of Soviet transport. He was trying to race his trophy but succeeding only in grinding the gears and revving the engine so fast that the clutch was not going to last. Shortly after, they heard tracks and bellowing high-powered engines. It was a Russian patrol, two missile armed scout cars, a motorcycle combination and two old T62 tanks.

“Can we idle out of here on one engine, keep the noise to a minimum?” Revell leant forward over the drivers seat, watching while Burke tinkered with a loose bracket securing a lighting and power panel.

“She won’t take that ramp on one, too steep. But after that, yes I can motor on one for as long as you want. We’ve
done it in the past often enough” Finally Burke found a few shreds of thread on the bolt and managed to secure the board against the hull.

Revell had paced out the interior of the unloading area. “There’s a hundred and fifty metre run-up to it. If we start right up against the rear wall, could we do it then?”

“Possible, but I wouldn’t bet my life on it.”

But that was just what they would be doing. If the Russians had any weapons covering that section of the main street then their arrival at the top of the ramp with almost no way on them; they would be an easy target.

“I could take the run-up on both motors and cut one at the mid-point on the ramp, we should have sufficient momentum to drive out on to the street making the minimum of noise. This big cellar will shield most the racket we make getting up to speed.”

“That’s what we will do then.” Revell felt a moment of relief. “Ready in ten minutes?”

“No problem.” Burke started to activate controls and watched as panels began to flicker through their self-testing sequences. “Get the others out of the way. I will have to back up fifty yards to start the run from the best position.”

With five minutes to go the officer briefed Burke on the route they would have to follow. This time his street map was better, but in such detail they had to employ a magnifying glass in the poor light.

“Best place to aim for is this water tower. The area around is a load of salvage yards, transport parks and the like. The bomb should be just here according to the satellite tracker device that had been transmitting for a while. Close to a flyover complex, here.” Revell indicated the points to Sergeant Hyde.

“If the area is clean, if the Russians have withdrawn then we’ll do the last couple of hundred metres on foot, find out precisely what’s happening. If there’s only a bomb squad and escort present then we’ll devise a way to take them out.”

“Does this planning involve me?” Carson crowded forward and was almost shouldered aside by Lieutenant Andy.

“We’re parking as close to the location as we can. A scouting party will determine the situation and then we play it by ear. Ideally we grab the bomb, get you to check it and then call up the APC to load up. If that’s not possible, then you take charge and set this lot of calculated frightfulness,” Revell tapped the container, “prepare the bomb for destruction.”

“I presume this case of stuff includes suitable delay fuses or timers of some sort?” It was a thought that had occurred to Hyde before, but it was the first time he had expressed it.

“Sure, a mechanical timer that’s pretty accurate. Normally we’d back that up with a conventional fuse. I can set it for anything from five seconds to one hour. That is for anything from sprinters to the wheelchair brigade.”

“Five seconds?” Burke swivelled in his seat to smack the map. “You’re kidding, right. How far have we got to be from that bomb to be safe. Just in case it sets off rather than melts down, how powerful is it?”

“It’s as powerful as you want it to be. We’re told the one we’re due to collect is set at a fraction of a kiloton. Safety, well that depends on your definition of safe.” Carson looked at the much-embellished case of thermite. “If this stuff doesn’t do the job and the bomb goes off, then a kilometre would be nice. If you were out in the open then half that if you have a real nice chunk of masonry or a bit of a hill between you and it. At a pinch though, behind armour…” Carson glanced at the aluminium walls and pursed his lips, “A couple of hundred metres might do it in this contraption if you don’t mind being tossed about and collecting a dose of rad’s that will make your goolies glow in the dark. Of course if the weapon were dug in, especially in soft material, sand or clay…then the crap flying about to form the crater wall might just mean you’ll be buried. Not relevant here though. We are looking at a ground level blast, no problem. Lots of flying bricks and fence posts, nothing worse if we have a bit of distance between us.”

“You said ‘normally’ when you talked about the fuses. What do you mean by ‘normally’? Are we missing
something?” Revell expressed the sudden suspicion that was in his mind.

“We have to be sure the destruction goes according to plan. We can’t set it up and then retire to a safe distance, coming back to it if there is a problem. As the material of the bomb melts a lot of radio-activity will be released.” Carson played with the flap of material covering the top of the thermite casing. “Once the weapon is rigged with this stuff we have to witness the initial stages of combustion to be sure it’s all going to plan. Once we’re sure, then we can scoot.”

“So the equivalent of a staggering amount of conventional explosive plus enough radio-activity to fry us.” Sergeant Hyde voiced the fears he knew would be in the others. “And you want us to hang about and make sure we have a nice fire going before we leg it.”

“Correct.” Lieutenant Andy rapped with his knuckles on the floor and on the walls of the APC. “Can I change the subject a moment? This wagon seems pretty substantial but I sure wouldn’t mind knowing if there are any hull mounted auxiliary fuel tanks, and if they can be jettisoned real swift.”

“All the gas is under the floor, in the centre of the hull. Why do you want to know?” Hyde was aware he was piling one misgiving on another, but he felt he just had to know.

“Oh it’s just that if because of Warpac tinkering the bomb does go off while we’re motoring away, and we are still real close to ground zero, then we’ll have a pulse of super-heated air washing around us for a second or maybe two. I don’t suppose you mind losing the shovel handles and anything else combustible fixed on the outside of the hull but do you want to be close buddies with a couple of drums of boiling gasoline, because that is what you’ll have. External fuel storage, not a good idea.”

“How about the ride skirts?” Burke thought of the thick reinforced Kevlar fabric surrounding the air chamber.

Carson shrugged. “It’s a dense material, the worst you might get is some surface charring and bubbling. In any event it’s fairly low on the ground and should be sheltered even if the rest of the hull isn’t. If you’re reactions are fast though I would suggest collapsing the skirt to rest the hull on the ground so we’re not tossed about like a piece of loose debris.”

“Very comforting. How many times have you done this, how many bombs have you set off?” Burke was asking a question he didn’t really want answered.

“Oh heck, it’s a bit like being a guard on a death row the night before an execution. You are only allowed to do it the once.”

“So this is your first time.”

“Yup, sure is, Andy too.” Carson started to go through his pockets. “Say, have any of you got a black marker pen? I seem to have missed a few spaces.” Quite unconcerned at the expressions on the faces of the men around him, Carson was examining the fabric cover of his helmet and scrutinising the pale patches of camouflage fabric that were not embellished with a stylised ban-the-bomb insignia.

“I can tell you this though, I have had loads of theory pumped in to me. I am real good at that. OK? Does that sort of calm you a bit?”

“Loads.” Burke turned back to his controls. “Just loads.”

* * *

Anticipating the storm of dust that their charge across the underground facility would cause, Burke was already employing infrared vision. Dead ahead the exit stood out clearly and as they hit the foot of it he cut the port engine and felt the nose of the machine jerk upwards.

In the short climb to the road the speed fell away to a walking pace and the screech of the engines to a single muted whisper. This was the moment of their greatest vulnerability. The only idea they had of what might await them came
from the sketchy information gleaned from minimal observation from the head of the ramp.

Burke took the Iron Cow through a sweeping turn avoiding street furniture but for all his caution still grating the machine against a lottery booth and then pushing aside a heavy cast iron bench that squealed on the paving stones before toppling back with a crash.

In the turret Libby kept the sights of the high velocity cannon zeroed on a scout car parked at a junction. It was facing away from them and there was no movement in or about it. The two hundred yards they had to cover swept past, another bench was tipped over and two small trees whipped and showered leaves as they were brushed aside without breaking.

From the command position Revell watched the vehicles turret, but it did rotate towards them as they approached. “It’s a derelict.” Now he could see a plume of hot air seeping out through the four wheelers open and distorted engine inspection hatch. “The first turn is a right, immediately after you pass it. Use it as cover until the last second.”

All of the APC’s weapon ports were manned, with Clarence having taken an automatic from the rack and poked it through the rear door defence position. An image enhancing night sight served him no purpose there, positioned between the Allison’s exhaust pipes. He had made sure the magazines he had loaded had a high proportion of tracer rounds among the armour piercing. He might not be able to aim effectively but he would certainly be able to push out a frightening blast of pyrotechnics.

Clearing the abandoned vehicle the APC cut close in behind it and turned into a street that appeared to have suffered virtually no damage, as yet. There were a few shops, but mostly it was lined with service establishments, like insurance offices and hairdressers. For that reason it had not yet tempted the looters in any numbers. The fact that it ran across the city from north to south, cutting across the Soviet line of advance meant it had attracted no fighting and so they were able to travel down it without constantly having to swerve around smashed or abandoned transport. “Next turn coming up.” Burke let a hand hover over the engine selector and power panel as the hovercraft ran at slow speed on to the new course, and immediately he slapped down hard to bring the starboard engine on line and take it up to full power.

“That bloody map is wrong. It’s been turned in to a pedestrian area.” Revell saw the mass of lamps, fountains, benches and raised flower beds even as they ran over the first group of them and the street exploded in a thunder of noise and sparks. His shout was hardly necessary as the machine was already lifting to its maximum ride height and blasting forward. Tables and chairs outside the many restaurants, cafes and coffee shops offered no meaningful impediment but built up in a scraping, squealing wall before their progress, until they splintered and broke and disappeared under the Kevlar sheets.

Stone plant troughs, heavy concrete benches and fancy wrought iron statuary were thrown and rolled from beneath the ride skirt as it expanded to its maximum size and lift. Stone walls disappeared beneath the APC as it accelerated over the raised gardens. They reappeared in its wake stripped of soil and shrubs. Windows flanking their route shattered as fragments of brick scattered in every direction.

“Just keep going. Open her up wide.” Revell knew that the wave of sound they were creating would bring trouble fast and it came even quicker than he expected. There was a flash of light across their route and an explosion pounded a dry fountain to rubble, sending white stone chippings and lengths of copper piping high in the air.

At almost the same instant the RPG impacted, a light machine gun hosed tracer across their path. It ceased as they reached it. None of them saw precisely where the fire came from but every upper floor window above a baby-wear store was lashed by return fire from the flanks and turret of the hovercraft.

From the far end of the pedestrian area came a stream of heavy automatic fire. It was high, passing well above them but Revell knew there would be more to come. The size of the tracer indicated a cannon, or more likely a pair of cannon of at least twenty-three millimetre calibre.

As they surged forward, throwing ahead of them a constant avalanche of street wreckage, machine gun fire was hosed across their wake, missing as abruptly alerted Russians drastically under-estimated the vehicles velocity.
Enemy infantry were running from the cafes and bars.

“They’ve been stuffing their bloody faces and getting smashed.” From a firing port Ripper hosed a whole magazine in to a gaggle of enemy who had lurched from a heavily sign written bar, struggling to bring their weapons to bear as they staggered. The men’s heavy coats were instantly stained with blood as the high velocity rounds plucked at their clothing and went on to penetrate their bodies.

More streams of fire lanced towards the APC, hastily and inaccurately aimed Russians were caught with their weapons still slung and carrying big pots of beer or handfuls of sausage and bread. Some were unable to scream when cut down as their mouths were full of food.

Impacts could be heard as the spare Kevlar sheets shielding the turbo-fans and the sloped aluminium armour of the upper hull absorbed or shrugged aside the rounds aimed at them.

“There must be a whole company of the bastards.” Hyde mowed down a knot of infantry who were struggling up from where they lounged on benches with food spread on a table. None succeeded in reaching the weapons.

Rapidly closing the range on the unseen source of the cannon fire, Burke skidded the APC to a path close to the buildings. It was done barely in time. The distant Russian gunner had lowered his sights and sent a great blaze of cannon shells down the centre of the pedestrian area.

In the turret Libby had been waiting for just that and unleashed a return fusillade of armour piercing shells, aiming precisely at the point from which the enemy cannon shells were fired and that he could now identify by the powerful muzzle blasts and the wild thrashing of ornamental trees and shrubs.

All three rounds impacted on their target and momentarily a six-wheeled armoured truck was revealed by an ammunition explosion that stripped foliage from the concealing plants. The detonation among the anti-aircraft vehicles magazines sent the twin barrels rearing into the air and then all was hidden by smoke wreathing the vehicle.

Still picking up speed they passed the victim of their turret gun and crossed a road to enter another pedestrian area. A single line of light tracer flicked after them and Clarence silenced it with another pyrotechnic display from the rear gun port. Every round he sent against the Russian gunner went in through the top floor windows of the building from which that last fire had come. Briefly the rooms interior was revealed by tracer ricocheting about it then the curtains flared up and smoke hid all detail.

“Slow down.” Panning fast through the command cupola vision blocks Revell saw they had entered an area identical to that from which the deluge of fire had been launched. But despite the roar of the twin engines and another succession of collisions continuing the avalanche of noise, the enemy fire had ceased. “On your left, the arcade, put us in there stern first.”

Executing a sliding turn to line up with the narrow opening, Burke gave the motors a burst of reverse thrust to set them down among the debris of children’s rides and broken fancy goods stalls.

“Dooley, Andrea, out. Recon’ report…the immediate area. Turret gun, cover them.” Revell watched the pair out through the small front hatch then ignoring his usual weapon, the assault shotgun, he followed close on their heels with an M60 that trailed a fifty round belt. He knelt in the arcade entrance to add covering fire if it should be needed. Above his head came the whine of the traversing motor keeping the turret gun aligned with the two scouts.

He watched them dive from cover to cover, searching the surrounding buildings through the sights of their weapons. The street was darkening and smoke was starting to come down it in eddies from the distant flak truck. Through his glasses he could see a small but fierce fire burning at the top of the gun mount. Occasionally there would be a sudden glare of light as a round among the ruined magazines cooked off and a fraction of time later he would hear the report.

In five minutes the pair were back. It was Andrea who reported. “Nothing. We went as far as the next intersection. We can see down it for half a kilometre in both directions. Some evidence that fighting passed this way when the Russian assault came in, but nothing for a while The wrecks are all cold, so are the bodies.”
“And no one is stalking us. Who ever blasted at us just now has no interest in following up.” Dooley was surprised at that. Though the calibre of the Russian troops they had recently encountered was poor, he would have at least expected a couple of gung-ho medal hunting types to be sneaking along with an RPG.

“They’ve found the bomb Major. It’s got to be that.” Andy stood beside them, yawned and stretched. “They’ve located it and are working on it, or plan to in the near future. Looks like they have cleared an area, cordoned it and we’ve just entered it. No one is going to chase us in to here. Either because they know what is going on and they are shit scared or because they have orders to provide a cordon and nothing more. You know what the Commies are like. They obey instructions to the letter, no initiative.”

Carson finished adding embellishments to his helmet. “They sure as hell are being ultra cautious and setting the perimeter a long way out. They can’t have any idea what they are dealing with. Must think it’s in the Kiloton range.”

“Maybe that’s why they put the old truck on guard. They have positioned an expendable reserve unit to create the cordon.” Samson instinctively ducked as a crackle of fire from the flak-mount sent tracer rounds showering the storefronts. “They were not about to risk decent front line equipment, a Shilka or something on those lines where it might get flipped by a hefty whack from a pressure wave.”

“So we’ll be able to ride in and collect the bomb?” Burke had kept the turbines ticking over and constantly checked the temperatures were not rising. “Whether they are already working on it or not, there is bound to be some sort of guard detachment present.” Revell knew it was never going to be that easy. “If they have commenced disarming it, what’s the likely number of men we’ll face?”

“A couple of specialists maybe, plus a handful of guards, KGB and very few of them. It will be a punishment detail most likely. They will run if any shooting starts.” Carson smiled. “At least that’s my experience. Proximity to A-bombs is no good for the nerves of men who are not used to them. Especially if they are not of a good calibre to start with.”

“Well if they had the jitters before, the racket we’ve made will have jangled their nerves still more. We may be a fair distance off, but they must have heard that.”

Revell would have given anything to be able to listen in to the local Russian military radio traffic at the moment. If anything were being reported by the troops they had just encountered it certainly wouldn’t be believed at their HQ. The hover APCs were so rare that few of the enemy had ever heard of them and certainly never seen one. Any estimate of their speed was bound to be grossly inaccurate and if that were dismissed as fantasy then other aspects of the report would be. And now that the intruder had passed them and entered an area certain to be controlled by the KGB, any infantry commander would be happy to dismiss the whole thing as some isolated incident, a lost NATO patrol trying to make a dash for their own lines.

Andrea had sat quietly once the firing stopped and she had nothing more to occupy her. She heard their banter about the nuclear bomb but knew they were never going to bring it on board. It would be insane, especially when they had the materials to destroy it safely where it lay. At the thought of transporting the weapon she found her hands shaking. She gripped her M16 tighter to stop the nervous reaction.

An exchange of automatic and mortar fire far off to their right interrupted her thinking. A moment later there was another outburst, even further away and in the opposite direction.

The Major listened until the exchanges of fire died away. “That is happening all the time and all over the place. Who ever is baby-sitting that bomb will be getting more than a little nervous. Our recent exchange will be another bit of background noise to worry about. We carry on as planned. You getting anything useful on the radio intercepts Boris.”

Hunched in tight against the display consol of the radar and radio position. Boris, with his headphones clamped down hard had made no contribution to any of the conversations.

“Nothing significant major.”

“They’re maintaining a radio silence?”
“No, I do not think it is that.” Boris again scanned the frequencies he would have expected the Soviet forces to employ. “I think it might be something else. We know they are employing second-rate units and reserve equipment. I think it may be the case that they have simply not been issued with decent scales of communication equipment. What they have they may be too ill trained to make good use of.”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you.”

Boris ignored Rippers dig, not looking up as he knew the American would be displaying his mass of small teeth in a wide grin. He squeezed closer to his electronics position and ignored them all.

Revell made sure that Burke understood the route and then took over in the turret for the final approach.

Once they were out of the arcade and the last lengths of window frame and pieces of glass had fallen from the hull their progress was whisper quiet. At barely a walking pace Burke was able to avoid obstacles and kept the noise to a level where the crew would be able to detect incoming fire by hearing it well before they could see it, almost as fast as the hostile fire locator would pick it up.

While the squad stood guard at the firing ports, Carson carefully embellished his webbing with any peace symbols he could find room for. Satisfied there were no more spaces he began to carefully draw artistic patterns on the seat covers. That done he took out a small polished disc of titanium from a slim pocket in his flak jacket and using it as a mirror proceeded to give his face an elaborate arrangement of camouflage patterns.

Andrea looked at him from her kneeling position on the bench. “You know that is a permanent marker?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got something that will wipe it off.” He stroked the thermite casing.

Revell would not have thought it was possible for their vehicle to move so quietly and so slowly. Any moment he expected the barely adequate draft from the near stalling engines to fail and the APC to smack down on to the road.

Burke though was an artist and he located the precise position his officer had indicated, silently nudged in among abandoned and burnt-out vehicles and bringing the Iron Cow to rest virtually touching the partially collapsed wall of an old church. It appeared to have been converted to a workshop. Lathes and pillar drills showed through a hole in the wall.

The squad left the vehicle and spent some minutes draping it with various lengths of wooden rafter and any other debris they could move quietly. That done guard positions were set up. Putting together the recon’ team, Revell was sorely tempted to lead them himself but he forced self-restrain. With Sergeant Hyde to command, he allocated Clarence and Ripper. He watched them melt into the might before taking up his post and preparing to await their return.

“Waiting is always the most difficult part.” Andrea was close to the officer’s position, her trim form almost lost to sight in the gloom.

Though he heard her whispered remark without being able to see her, Revell was glad she was there. He would have liked to reach out, to confirm her physical presence. But, not knowing what contact he might make, aware it could have been inappropriate or suggestive; he could not take the risk. And so he hoped she would speak again.

She didn’t and he had to sit there, inches from her, wrapped in the silence that was all they shared.

* * *

Sergeant Hyde led his patrol in a cautious circuit of the area and they found nothing. The precise location the weapon was to be emplaced they knew to be close to the longest span of a flyover, where the road was carried above a twin track of railway lines. The satellite-tracking device had confirmed the bomb had landed in that area but actually lighting upon it was another thing.

Carson had wanted the sergeant to take a Geiger counter but had been forced to admit that its fine setting meant it would not have registered radiation until it was almost touching the weapon. Their main reliance they put on their
night vision glasses. Every few paces they would halt and check the ground to either side and ahead. He had been
told the bombs pack had been treated to make it visible as a faint orange glow in infrared.

“Off to the right, by that electricity sub-station. Two vehicles.” Clarence nudged the NCO and pointed out the
glimmer of flickering torchlight coming from beneath a tarpaulin stretched out from the side of a field car. That in
turn was partially concealed behind a MT-LB tracked vehicle. The number of aerials on its roof suggested it was a
command or communications vehicle of some sort.

It was easy to see why they had missed them on the first sweep. The location was right on the edge of the area
and the close huddle of surrounding derelict vehicles made them blend with the partially stripped buses and trucks.

Using night vision goggles Hyde examined the site. The line of the tracked command vehicles sharply raked glacis
plate was broken by an open drivers hatch. The roofline was interrupted by a small turret holding a light machine
gun. Several whip aerials sprouted from locations on the side and top of the hull.

There was a loud cheer from beneath the tarpaulin, followed by a burst of raucous laughter then a second. Immediatedly afterwards noisy and animated conversation was accompanied by clinking noises, clearly bottles being
knocked together. A figure came out from beneath the concealment and looked up at the sky as he relieved himself.

“Ripper, get the Major up here and be quick. Sound’s like Carson’s opposite number has succeeded in disarming the
bomb.” Hyde tapped Clarence on the shoulder. “I think we got here just in time.”

* * *

“Knives only.” Crouched among the wrecks, Major Revell took his own heavy knife from its scabbard and sensed
the others were quietly doing the same. The Russians were clearly in boisterous mood. They constantly called to
each other and laughing as they struggled to fold the heavy waterproof sheet. The field car swayed as one soldier
climbed on to the roof and made ready to receive it and lash it in place.

It was while it was being pulled down and stowed that Revell had the chance to get his men in to position. While it
remained in place they’d had no way of knowing how many of the enemy were beneath it, what force would have to
be employed to over-come them. By the time he had the squad positioned there was only an hour of darkness
remaining. The major had been worried that the celebration might have continued until dawn, or that the Russians
might have settled down to wait for it before packing up. At least one bottle had been emptied and hurled away to be
cought by the mesh fence flanking the railway.

The armoured vehicle presented the main problem. Under normal circumstances a single grenade in through the
open drivers hatch would have taken care of any crew but Revell had no way of knowing if the bomb had already
been placed inside it. There had been much confused movement between the vehicles and the area beneath the
sheeting as the Russians stowed their equipment.

Revell had to know what risks such a course of action might incur. “What are the chances of the bomb being
triggered by a small explosive, by a grenade?”

Carson shrugged. “A hard clout from a few fragments is not going to do it any good. No way of knowing what the
Russians have done to disarm the bomb, how many of the safety devices had been by-passed, even how many of the
inspection panels had been removed and left off. Maybe best not to push our luck.”

Now they edged as close as they could. Four Russians were struggling to get the cover on to the command car roof
rack, two more were watching, shouting advice and encouragement. Only a minute before they were to launch
themselves from various points of concealment about the small encampment, there was a loud clang of metal and a
hatch in the command vehicles turret was thrown open. A big man, made even larger by the greatcoat he hugged
about himself, pulled his bulk to a seated position on the top. Tugging at the thick material to straighten it he next
brushed himself off and then adjusted his helmet to a rakish angle. Even in another language his bellowed
commands were clearly slurred.

“I shall take him.” Andrea saw the officer’s dilemma. The Russian had only to launch himself back inside and then
beside having the trigger for the turret machine gun under his hands he had at only arms length the personal
weapons racks and the vehicles radio. Once back inside any of the choices of action open to him spelt disaster for the squad’s attempts to secure the bomb. If he did no more than slam shut and secure the hatches then they were blocked just as effectively. “I am the lightest, and the fastest. Just let me be a pace or two ahead.”

The sweep hand of his watch was climbing towards the top of the dial. The others were already in place; it was too late to alert them to any change of plans. Revell had moments to decide. “Ok, but go for his throat, those coats are thick.”

From the places of concealment amongst the brick supported trucks and cars they had at least twenty paces to cover before they could spring on the Russians. Andrea had five more than that plus the jump on to the rear of the tall hull.

The moment came and Revell dashed forward. Ahead of the others Andrea hurdles a pile of scrap and then used a stack of truck tyres to hurl herself on to the rear deck of the armoured vehicle. Even her slight weight made the hull buck and the giant Russian’s slab face whirled round to see her. The blade she thrust forward was Teflon coated and almost invisible but the slim sharpened edge was seen and an arm came up to shield its target.

The tip sliced into the thick blanket-like coat sleeve and stopped. Bellowing with rage the Russian swept a backhanded blow at Andrea and almost toppled her from the deck. Had he not been hampered by his awkward pose, still sat on the turret edge and twisted around from the waist, the strike would have smashed her face. Recovering her balance she threw all her weight behind a second thrust and this time caught the man under the chin. Another bellow, this time of pain, was cut short as the blade sliced in and up.

Blood erupted between teeth stapled together by the saw edge back of the knife as it sliced through the bottom jaw and up into the roof of his mouth. Another blow from a massive hand, more clumsy, distracted by the agonising pain, caught Andrea again and this time brought her down on to the heavily ridged engine covers, her senses reeling from the crashing impact of the flailing backhand. One fist clenched around the hilt of the weapon impaling his jaw, with his other the big man groped for her and caught a hold of the front of her jacket. Wrenching at the material he hauled her close, so that she was an inch from his face, smelling the stale vodka breath and the blood. Out of the corner of her eye Andrea saw a movement. She felt the fingers gripping her clothes bunch, making ready to dash her head in to the turret side. And then the hold was released; blood spurted from the Russians nostrils and just missed hosing her with gore as she fell back. Revell was stood over the man, both hands clenched on a knife he had driven with pile-driver force in to the Russian, severing his spinal cord just below the nape of his neck.

Not pausing, Revell grabbed a grenade from his webbing, yanked out the pin, held it for a fraction of time and then dropped it down the turret hatch. With both hands he shoved his victim forward and it was his bulk blocking the opening that caught and smothered the blast from within.

The detonation send a cloud of dust and smoke billowing out through the drivers hatch and was immediately followed by a scream than went up and off the audible range.

Minus his legs the knifed man slowly rolled down the side of the vehicle, leaving a broad glistening smear across the drab, slogan daubed armour. The corpse flopped beside Dooley. He had unfastened a side hatch and was examining the interior by the light of a red lamp that still glowed through the thick atmosphere.

There were two bodies inside. One, half on a bunk had been killed instantly, even as he sat up and began to pull his drink-befuddled senses together. The second occupant, a woman, still had some shred of life left in her. Both her arms were torn off at the elbow, the contents of her bowels oozed through her shredded clothing. Bleached white by shock and the loss of blood the woman looked down, from one stump to the other, then she looked up and half grinned at Dooley, an idiotic attempt at a resigned smile flickering across her features. In slow motion the expression became fixed and she lolled forward, diving head first on to the floor, her cranium making a sharp crack on the unprotected impact.

* * *

Several of the Russians were dead and another was not going to last long. Arterial blood was pulsing from beneath a bandage the Samson had bound about his chest. He had been propped against the hulk of a panel van and would be left for his countrymen to find. Another had survived by pure chance; his foot rolling on a vodka bottle and tripping
him as he took a stumbling pace backwards to avoid the wild assault that struck them. A comrade’s body falling across him had pinned him until the short-lived and one-sided fight was over. Hauled out from beneath a corpse, seeing the state of the others, his first reaction had been to vomit violently and then to heave and retch uncontrollably, sweat poured down his face. By the first light of dawn his visage had a distinctly green tinge.

“That was an insane chance, using the grenade.” Andrea still felt herself shaking, and hoped it did not show. That Revell had likely saved her life, and certainly saved her from serious injury, was of no consequence to her. She had retrieved her knife from the chin of the mutilated body beside her and she bent down to wipe the blade on one of the few parts of the coats material that was not splattered with blood and tissue.

“As I jumped for the side of the APC I saw that the bomb was still on the ground. They had been using it as a table” He indicated the mud-stained pack, two paper cups and a bottle stood on it. A stone was wedged under one edge so that it made a level surface.

Andrea backed from the sentient weapon and looked around to take in the scene. Close by it was the body of a paratrooper, recognisable by the harness and reserve ‘chute he still wore. His head lolled back, his arms lay at his side and his legs stretched out straight. He wore no helmet and there was no top to his skull.

Libby had been to fetch Carson and Andy from where they had been hidden, close by the Iron Cow. It was the lieutenant who recognised the dead parachutist.

“Sergeant Smith Good man. Looks like he managed to trigger the anti-handling mechanisms before they got to him” He looked about. “The others must have failed to make it out of the ‘plane. Had they reached the ground alive then no matter in what strength the Russian jumped them, for sure their bodies would be here. Don’t know what happened to them.” He indicated two crushed bodies that had been pulled aside and now were carelessly lain across a litter of scrap metal.

Revell sent Libby off to summon Burke with Iron Cow. While they waited he watched Carson going over the bomb. “Is it safe, what’s the verdict? Can we move it without it turning on us or do we destroy it here.”

By the illumination of a small flashlight, Carson was inspecting the open panels in the bomb casing. “Just like the Russians to use a sledgehammer where a scalpel would have been preferred, but yes, it’s safe to move it.” As he carried out a visual check Carson had noticed that the Russian prisoner had ceased trying to turn himself inside out and was furtively watching him, with nervous interest that showed through his fear.

“Major.” Carson spoke very quietly. It was possible the man understood English. “I’m going to poke about inside this thing, let me know his reaction.”

Unfastening a small panel that it appeared the Russians hadn’t disturbed, Carson selected a long screwdriver from a tool role and slid it down into the bomb. Very carefully he turned it clockwise, withdrew it and deliberately made a pretence of hesitating then reinserted it and began to turn the tool in the opposite direction. He stopped and withdrew the screwdriver. “Well?”

“He was OK at first, just watching. “ Revell whispered. “When you had the second go he looked like he was going to chew his fingers off, he went white and started heaving again.”

“The guy is their bomb man. I was just faking that move but he knew if I kept going I would by-pass every safety device and go straight to the trigger. I think our intelligence guys would like to have him. Got room for him as well as the bomb?”

“We can take him. Good job it wasn’t the big fellow.” Looking down at the corpse that had rolled from the turret Revell noticed for the first time that his legs were missing. “Even trimmed he would have taken up too much room.”

Dooley handed some papers to Major Revell. Most he had taken from the command vehicle but some had been on the men they had killed, and their prisoner. “That’s the lot. Carson went through their equipment; especially the tools they had been using on the bomb but he just kept on tut-tutting and finally threw the lot away.”

Looking up Revell noticed how fast the sky was growing lighter. It was likely to be another heavily overcast day so
there was no real dawn but soon it would be bright enough to bring them trouble. They had one small window of opportunity.” OK. Sergeant Hyde, get this device on board the Iron Cow. Fasten that Commies hands and secure him to the bench by the back door. There’s nothing he can reach or kick there that can do any harm.”

“You are not going to put that thing on board our transport!” It must be destroyed now.” Andrea’s voice was urgent and full of fear. She stood on the rear door-ramp, blocking any attempt to move the nuclear device inside and secure it. “We are surely not going to try and run back in daylight with that murderous contraption on board?”

Watching Dooley lift the device by its straps, Revell noticed how the others kept clear, as though a few metres would make a difference. But none made the same objection as Andrea.

“No. We’ll lay up today and have a go at getting back tonight. The Russians have been very kind to us, making this a ‘no go’ area. Maybe this lot had radioed that they were finished, though I doubt it.”

Revell conferred with the sergeant. “They have a decent radio set but Boris is pretty confident they broadcast nothing, and this close he could hardly have missed their signal. They wouldn’t want to be caught drunk so I reckon they intended spinning things out, leaving time for their celebration before reporting back. Soon enough though some KGB squad will be sent to look for them. Before they arrive we’ll be long gone and well hidden.”

Revell thrust the map at the NCO. “Want to pick somewhere? Not too far, not likely to attract the interest of the average Warsaw Pact looter.”

Sergeant Hyde had selected a spot before the rear doors were closed. Folding the large map he handed it back to the officer. “I know just the place. And I’ve persuaded Andrea her chances are better riding with the bomb than waiting for the Commies to arrive in force, and find her with these bodies.”

* * *

From more than a dozen paces the hovercraft was invisible, just another mound of reclaimed material. It had taken only a few minutes to conceal its angular bulk using broken boards, rusted sheets of corrugated metal and cloudy panels of Perspex roofing material.

Around them were stacked reclaimed material bins of all sizes and colours. Two six-wheeled garbage compactors were parked close by, concealing their transport from any casual inspection of the site through the wide unguarded gateway.

“I still reckon these garbage trucks look better.” Dooley ducked under the low shelter and watched their driver smearing thick rubberised solutions on odd shaped patches.

“You trying to say something about the state of our transport?” Burke had spent the whole day, under an improvised shelter, patching gashes and holes in the thick fabric of the ride-skirt. Twice helicopters had buzzed low above them and then he had been grateful for the ragged edged sheet of fibreboard propped overhead.

Revell had kept most of them busy on maintenance, of their transport, of their weapons. A bench had been cleared in a nearby workshop and all of them had, in turn, stripped and cleaned their personal weapons and then those from the racks aboard the APC. That done the Rardon had been serviced and the interior of the APC cleared of empty shell cases.

Their Russian prisoner had been apathetic at his situation, seemingly resigned to being a prisoner. Boris had tried to engage him, at Revells’ prompting, in conversation but he had produced no more than monosyllabic responses and a look of deep suspicion as the deserter continued the casual interrogation.

Carson had made himself enormously unpopular by working on the recovered ‘A’ weapon. Most of his work consisted solely of straightening and re-fixing inspection panels that the Russians had pried open, where they lacked the non- metric tools to do the work properly. Still his constant ministrations to the weapon had set everyone’s nerves on edge.

A half-hearted attempt by Dooley to find anything worth looting had turned into a useful scavenger hunt when his
first discovery was a five hundred litre tank of kerosene. Improvising a way of piping it to the APC’s fuel tank had occupied a good part of the day but was finally successful about half way through the afternoon.

It had taken a considerable and constant effort by the Major to prevent Burke from filling the interior with tools from the yards extensive repair facilities. Finally, to placate him, Revell had permitted him to fix a large toolbox to the hull side and he had gleefully set about making a selection to fill it.

“That’s all we can do” Revell gave his assault shotgun a last wipe over and reloaded it from the tray of colourfully tipped shells he had lined up on the bench. “We’ll need every minute of the night to make it back.” He pointed out the ration packs to Sergeant Hyde and the pan of water boiling over an open fire improvised in the centre of the floor. “They can eat now and then get their heads down for a couple of hours. Make sure the Ruskie gets something.”

He poured boiling water into a mug half filled with soup powder. Off-white fragments floated to the surface and grew as they circled. He strolled with it out of the far end of the high-ceilinged shed. Rain was still falling in the distance. It showed as faint black bars joining the low dark clouds to the jagged horizon of silhouetted rooftops.

Closer he could make out the black dot that was a terrain-skimming helicopter. One had crossed and criss-crossed the surrounding area for half an hour in the morning, holding up work on the Iron Cow, but then had moved off and was now circling several kilometres away. Water still dripped from the metal eaves and he walked forward to get away from them, ensuring he stayed sufficiently alert to hear any approach of the distant rotor blades.

Save for himself and Burke whose turn it was to guard the only entrance to the site all the others would be resting. Not all would be able to sleep. In the hours to come they would have to thread their way through territory that was fast filling with Soviet occupation troops, and that in the company of an ‘A’ bomb in a more delicate condition than he thought Carson was letting on. Thoughts of that would drive sleep from some of them. It did from him and most certainly would from Andrea. He had never seen her display a weakness before. Now though it was as if she was falling apart. She could not take her eyes of the bomb on the short drive to the reclamation facility and had been first out of the Iron Cow when the ramp began to go down, throwing her weight against it as though she might hurry the hydraulics.

Sergeant Hyde came out to join the Major, spooning noodles from an instant- food pot. “I think that having that Russian nuclear expert as our captive might be a good thing. If the Reds want him back bad enough there are going to have to tread softly. They’re unlikely to whack us hard without warning. Maybe he could be our safe conduct pass.”

“No, I don’t think they will be particularly bothered about getting him back alive. To the Russian way of thinking it would be far more important that the NATO does not have the use of him. So they’ll be happy to get him back dead or alive. Either way they’ll be trying damned hard to succeed.”

He sensed Andrea was beside him, alerted by her soft footsteps, before he looked.

“You should be getting some rest.” Revell tried not to, but could not avoid examining her face. Her delicate features, framed by the dark hair she had recently cropped short, usually had a dusting of eye make-up, no matter what the circumstances, but there was none now and her dark eyes showed the strain she was experiencing. He wished she had made the effort. It seemed incongruous at any time, perhaps especially so now but he knew the men liked it, as he did, and that she enjoyed stirring their feelings.

“There will be time enough to catch up on sleep when, if, we get back.” Not looking at the major, Andrea knew his attention, though concealed, would be on her. “The Russian kept complaining loudly about having to deal with Boris. Apparently he considers him the lowest of the low but Dooley threatened him and he is quiet now. In any event, Boris got nothing from him.”

“I didn’t expect he would.” Revell tossed aside his food container. “To have the position he has, he’d have to be a hard line party member, not the sort to start babbling classified information after a little gentle probing. Boris is no hard man.”
“Has the route for our return been chosen?” Andrea tilted her face up in to the rain that had started to fall again, as Revell and Hyde backed away from it, in to the cover of the shed. “From the far corner of the site you can see the flyover. It is packed with Soviet troop and cargo carriers running in to the city. Soon it will be impossible for us to get through the built up area. Perhaps it is already.”

Until that moment when Andrea said it, Revell had not doubted for a moment that they would be returning through the built up area. Suddenly though he had other thoughts. It was not the first time some casual remark from her had prompted his weary, almost stultified mind to become more active. She had a way of getting inside him.

“No.” He said it in a positive tone, giving scant indication that the thought had only just occurred to him. “No, we are going to swing out in to the country, track north and then when we’re well clear of the suburbs we’ll swing west and make a fast run for the river and our own lines.”

“They are still looking for us.” Andrea waved her slim hand towards the distant speck in the sky. “That will be backed by ground patrols and road-blocks. The hunt will intensify.”

“From the search pattern that chopper is working they must think we have moved out of the immediate area.” Higher up Hyde spotted a small reconnaissance drone. Its engine noise carried as a faint buzz, getting louder when on occasion it would swoop lower and circle a particular spot. Think they keep them up after dark?”

“If some one is keen to have their man back, and the bomb.” Revell knew he could be grateful the Russian night vision equipment was nothing like as good as their own but the Iron Cows infrared signature was distinctive and like a neon display at night. If the enemy choppers covered the right area, then they would be identified and ground patrols would be zeroed in on them. “I think they will maintain the search twenty four seven. We’ll have to have a couple of the crew riding on top with AA gear at the ready. That should take care of that risk.”

“Let us hope you are right.” Andrea shook the rain from his glistening short hair and went off on her own.

* * *

Taking no chances, Revell did not order Burke to power up until a full half an hour after sunset. For an hour before that they had kept watch for any aerial surveillance but it had either been stopped or had moved away. A suggestion of afterglow showed on the horizon where the rain clouds were gradually clearing, but the immediate streets they encountered were dark enough. It was an industrial area and for the first kilometre they saw no one and no vehicles.

“The Commies will have already imposed a curfew, they always do.” Burke kept the engine power steady, at a pitch that would enable him to accelerate almost instantly to top speed if the Major called for it, or come to a dead stop within their own length if need be. “Miserable lot of sods. They really know how to kill the nightlife in a place. Their own cities must be dreary holes.”

“They are, I have seen them.” Andrea was watching their prisoner and now as he stretched cramped legs she was especially vigilant. “It is easy to understand why their idea of celebrating is to get drunk as fast as possible.”

“You are wrong. We are a happy people.”

Coming from the Russian prisoner the words were a surprise to all who caught them.

“Well that’s saved the interrogation boys a spot of work. Proves he knows some English.” Libby offered the man a cigarette and shrugged when it was refused. “But we know you drink.”

“I do, yes.”

“Good job you didn’t start before you tackled the bomb.”

The Russian looked down and was grinning when he looked up again. “Actually I had what you would call a couple of good belts, when my officer wasn’t looking. The work is not bearable otherwise.”

All talking ceased as the hovercraft suddenly slowed.
“Patrol, a couple of motor-cycles and a scout car, cannon armed.” Burke let the speed slip further and allowed the uneven power of the engines to drift the craft towards the bulk of a high-sided trailer parked at the roadside. “They’re passing ahead of us, two junctions further on…they’re gone.”

The sibilant effect as they all breathed out at the same moment signalled their relief.

“You mean you do delicate, not to say dangerous, work disarming nuclear demolition devices while you’re under the influence?” Libby shook his head in disbelief. “You hear that Carson?”

“We all need something.” Between his fingers Carson held up a small orange tablet. “Morphine sulphate, sixty milligram.”

“Hell, the fate of the world is in the charge of drunks and dope fiends.” Libby looked at the bomb, wondered how his mind would hold up, working on those devices, whether he would need anything to calm his nerves.

Carson was laughing and from a small container shook out a dozen more of the orange pills. “Here, have some,” he swallowed half the amount and offered the rest around the interior. “They’re only tic-tacs. Just the right colour, yeah?”

Andrea enjoyed Libby’s discomfort. Her humour though was a brittle thing, instantly quashed by a glimpse of the bomb as it rocked on the floor close to the turret basket.

* * *

It took them two hours, at a snails pace, to elude motorised patrols that were crossing and criss-crossing the area. Obviously the Russian officer in charge of the search was taking no chances. Just in case they remained in the vicinity, waiting for the hue and cry to die down then his patrols would be waiting for them to break cover.

“ We’ve done seven kilometres in five hours” Burke was expertly manoeuvring the APC, faithfully tracking the stop-start route Revell indicated. “We are just down the road from where we picked up the bomb. That’s the same autobahn ahead of us. Every route we take we run in to it. The damn thing virtually circles this area. The alternative is to go back through the city, and that is a non-starter.”

Gently bringing the Iron Cow to a halt in the deep shadow of a flyover, Burke glanced to where Revell was looking at a repeat of the drivers’ screen. “We’re facing the right way, but how do we get through that lot.”

Snaking through the convoluted road network, in a seemingly never-ending stream, was a non-stop column of supply trucks and tracked and wheeled troop carriers. Well spaced out and displaying an unusual degree of convoy discipline, still the Russian vehicles were closer enough to each other to ensure that nothing was going to break through their line without being seen. While it was highly unlikely, as usual with the rudimentary level of equipment on Soviet supply vehicles, that even the convoy leaders would have the facility to signal for help, the line of trucks was constantly patrolled by motorcycle and scout car equipped military police.

If the hover APC tried to smash a way through the lines of traffic then the MP’s would transmit their position, and direction, instantly. Within minutes gun ships would be in the air heading their way and ground patrols would be closing in fast.

“There’s no way around this” Revell felt bitter frustration that they had wasted so many of the hours of darkness. Their maps had shown several places where the autobahn was unfinished, places where they could have slipped past the patrols but in reality the gaps had not existed, the road was complete and it encircled them.” Revell scanned the complex of ramps and slip roads. The Soviet column was unending. Clearly they were doing their best to make up for the delays they had suffered earlier.

“We could create a temporary blockage, a crash or fire maybe, and slip through during the confusion.” Sergeant Hyde indicated the thermite. “We have the stuff to do it.” He employed the turret gun sights to examine the problem. “If we can get them to panic, get a good flap going then we might be able to break through. After that we can use the railway lines for a few hundred metres and then we can turn off and we’ll have the concealment of another built up area.”
“It would have to be done without noise, without gun fire, without being seen.” Concentrating his attention on the flyover immediately above the twin tracks, Revell looked for a way to reach it. “The high level road offers the best opportunity. When the driver’s reach that point the last thing they will be expecting is trouble and there is no chance of getting around a hold-up on that elevated section. The front of the column will draw ahead and you’re right, we should be able to slip through a gap.”

“That’s twenty feet in the air. But I think we can do it, we just need some one really fit… Simmons!” Hyde started to unfasten the catches on the case containing the thermite.

* * *

The overhead power lines serving the railway were dead. The gantries supporting the thick steel cables gave Simmons the start he needed. A precariously balanced short section of fire-scorched ladder scrounged from a derelict fire tender in the salvage yard provided the rest of the climb. Propped from the top of the steel latticework post, to a cast iron stanchion holding a road sign and emergency telephone on the flyover enabled him to climb to the roadway and grab a hold.

Thick, lung searing, blasts of exhaust gas swept over him as Simmons gripped the post. He kept his head just below the top of the parapet, hidden by the telephone shelter. Balanced precariously on the top rung of the ladder he was careful to keep himself within the shadow of the fluorescent striped box. The noise was deafening, the rattle and sharp squeal of thrashing tracks blending with the bellow of engines and the scrape and rumble of poorly secured loads shifting on the cargo decks of the trucks.

With their headlights dimmed almost to extinction the vehicles were travelling at twenty-yard intervals. Simmons nestled an improvised thermite bomb against his arm where he crooked it around the thick steel support. He waited for a particular combination of vehicles, an open backed truck followed by a tracked carrier. The truck to make an easier target for his throw, the carrier because its driver would have a restricted view of the roadway between himself and the vehicle ahead.

His arm aching fit to break and his vision blurring from the clouds of fumes and grit constantly washing over his face Simmons knew he couldn’t hold on for long, then he had luck, and knew he would not have the need.

A six-wheeler Zil cargo truck wheezed up the long gradient towards him. Its stake sided cargo deck held a poorly secured selection of packing cases and even as it approached Clarence could see its covering of tarpaulin was flapping and cracking to constantly reveal various shaped containers. At a long distance behind, making even harder work of the grade came a tracked ammunition carrier. Not only was the roof hatch closed with no one standing at it, but the drivers visor was down. Even as he saw it the vehicle made a couple of crab-like corrections to its path, indicating just how little its driver could see and his inexpert driving.

The Zil drew level with Simmons and he saw that one of its rear tyres was running almost flat; another had long strips of rubber compound peeling away and flailing the underside of the cargo deck with each revolution.

Throwing the device was awkward and he almost lost his grip on the post. The kilo of incendiary material landed on the edge of the deck and for a moment he thought it was going to topple off, instead it went the other way and disappeared in among the variously shaped wooden packing cases.

Not waiting for the result he slid back down the stanchion. Freeing himself quickly from a projecting bolt head that threatened to snag him, he swung under the bridge and managed to grab a hold of the ladder. He was transferring his foothold to the top of the gantry post when a soft explosion on the roadway sent a shaft of white light into the sky.

The air was instantly filled with the sound of vehicles braking violently and doors opening and slamming. A huge wreath of white smoke spilled over the edge of the elevated roadway and then was blasted away as a secondary detonation dwarfed the first.

“You hit the jackpot.” Dooley had climbed up to help and held out his hand to assist Simmons to make the transfer from ladder to the more easily negotiated gantry. As he did the ladder fell, falling on to the granite ballast flanking the track. The conductor wire twanged and hummed at the weight they imposed on the gantry as they clambered
down. No faces appeared above the parapet. The clatter had gone unheard amid the noise from braking vehicles and shouting drivers. The pair ran for the hovercraft, Dooley quickly falling behind.

A more substantial explosion, rupturing oxygen cylinders, sent truck wheels, rocket casings and the broken and burning carcasses of heavy boxes across along the flyover for a considerable distance. Fed by the cylinders contents the fire was consuming the truck at a furious pace and pushing a pillar of red fire high into the night sky. Burning debris rained down over the edge of the flyover. Landing on other sheeted loads the red-hot debris ignited several other fires.

“Go, go, go.” Revell thrust himself in to the turret and threw open the hatch for a better view of the route.

The top of the overpass was one sea of flame, frequently swirled in to long tongues of fire as ammunition exploded. A long interval had opened up between it and the front of the convoy. Burke sent the hovercraft through the centre, sending an emergency blast of power into the ride height to clear the steel crash barriers. Down a shallow embankment on the far side and then a wire mesh fence collapsed before them as they swerved across a drainage ditch and on to the railway line.

Revell pushed the throat microphone harder in to position. “OK Burke take off along the tracks. We’re a train…”

The heavy ballast rattled beneath them, moved by the blast of the full power down draft. Revell turned to look back. The fierce blaze on the over-pass was spreading as burning fuel ran under vehicles that were abandoned or unable to turn or reverse away from it. The silhouettes of men running about showed against the blaze as it flared wildly out of control. Before a bend took them into a cutting and through a station surrounded by suburban housing, he saw a last glimpse of the scene, illuminated by a series of spurts of tracer and fountains of signal flares.

“Stay on the rails as long as we keep heading north.”

Burke heard the officer’s words and had misgivings he couldn’t resist expressing.

“That’ll take us back in to the heart of the Zone, away from our own lines.”

“We’re not going too far, I just want to put some distance between us and the Soviet troops who are still hyper active from the attack on the city. I want to find an area where there has been no fighting for some time, where everyone is sleepy.”

* * *

“Are your men asleep?” General Zucharnin, for the second time in twenty-four hours, felt he could happily strangle his stepson. Deliriously happily. It was just the thought of his mother, that gorgeous full-bodied, glamorous and highly experienced sex maniac that kept him from carrying out the threats he longed to transform from wishful thinking to harsh reality. He had never known that marrying her would mean taking on responsibility for this moron. In fact as she’d refused to go to bed with him until they were married he, in his hurry, never even thought to look for such complication. But he did have the problem of her useless offspring and as there was little he could do about it he had to content himself with bellowing what he felt. It was a rare day when he did not send an officer and several enlisted men to the firing squad and this poltroon had screwed up enough to warrant such action ten times over. Yet still he stood, or almost crouched, drooling with fear in a corner of the office.

“First you drop me in the shit by telling General Grigori that one of our patrols has discovered a NATO nuclear weapon before telling me. That makes me look like I don’t know what is going on in my own sector. So I get no credit with the Kremlin. And don’t you dare give me any of that rubbish about Gregori’s having responsibility for telling me. That poisonous rat is a master at getting the kudos when things go right and dumping the crap on others when they go wrong. And now despite my giving you a battalion of military police to safeguard the convoy route, it is closed down for two hours by sabotage.”

I think Father… General… it was perhaps just an accident… a poorly secured load… I have dealt with some drivers and the convoy commander as well as the escorting military police.”

“Bollocks. An accident just happened to occur there? Close to where the enemy had planted a nuclear weapon?
Right at our most vulnerable point? No, the bastards had come back and thumbed their noses at us.”

“But if it is the same squad, and they still have the bomb, why just burn three or four ammunition trucks and block the route for …for a short while.”

“I’ll tell you why.” Through the frosted glass of his door the general saw that no one in the clerks room was moving. No, they were listening. Well they would regret that later. “Because the buggers who took back the bomb had been holed up in the area while your men fumbled about trying to find them. The political position about nuclear weapons is hamstringing NATO strategy. Some one screwed up and they want their bomb back. Not only have you let them have it, they’ve stolen our own bomb disposal man. Instead of their dashing straight back to the west and risking running in to our major troop concentrations in the city they are circling to the north before making a crossing into NATO territory.”

“It might be to the south.” The captain felt smugly content with himself for making a point the general had missed. “If they want to circle the city then that would be the shorter route.

“So it is, but that is the direction in which we launched our recent attack on Regensberg. They will know the area is stuffed with reserves and service units. You can’t move there without tripping over a security check point.” His voice grew so loud that it made the cracked glass in the door vibrate and sent the stationary silhouettes in the outer office scurrying in to action.

General Zucharin got up from his desk and took a moment to rub his face with the palms of his hands. The two days growth of bristle made a sharp rasping noise. “That bomb is still out there. It may no longer be in our area but I don’t give a damn about that. Just make sure that when that NATO unit is intercepted your men turn up fast, you grab the bomb, I claim the credit. And I want that technician back. I had a fax this morning from a Lieutenant Colonel in the Strategic Rocket Forces and you know the clout they have at the Kremlin. He said he wants his man returned. I had to tell him we still need his services for a while longer. We have two days. I don’t care if he comes back alive or riddled with a fatal case of the pox; I want to be able to show him a body, warm or cold. What I don’t want is to have to say we have lost him altogether. So what ever you do, get in ahead of the KGB, they’ll be trying to do the same.”

“But what if a local commander insists on reporting the recovery himself.”

“Then boy, “ Zucharnin jabbed his finger in to the centre of the young officers forehead, “tell him to have a chat with me and I shall once again rescue your balls from the furnace. Take the best equipment, commandeer anything else you need, get the job done or I withdraw the protection you have magically survived under during the last three months of cock-ups.”

* * *

The salvo of shells landed on and close to the small towns police station. It was a fluke, pure chance but at a stroke the hopes of a swift and organised evacuation were lost. It was an artillery round plunging through the roof that did the most harm. Breaking no more than a handful of tiles and splintering a timber beam it went on to penetrate only as far as the third floor of the four floor building. The fuse burst the shells’ thin casing as it struck a filing cabinet. The binary load it carried had mixed in flight, the coated metal wall separating the component chemicals having been shattered at the instant of firing. The gas flooded out and began to flow down through the building.

As it reached a corridor, and officers making for a shelter, it flushed through their lungs as they breathed hard with the exertion of running. All were sent in to a frothing fit. The same fate overtook everyone in the immediate area of the police head-quarters as the gas released by the rest of the salvo merged to form a near invisible cloud There was no breeze and it gently swept about the streets, stirred only by the passage of vehicles.

A cars and truck collided, their drivers collapsing at the wheel without the time to pull over. Their eyes bulged and their hands grabbed convulsively at their throats, just like the few early morning shoppers who succumbed near instantly as they formed a queue waiting for the food shop to open. The nerve gas did not discriminate. Babies in pushchairs, dogs on leads, even birds pecking for minute crumbs between the table legs of a pavement restaurant, all died within seconds.
The suffering was brief in that central area, mercifully so where the heaviest concentrations formed. As the cloud moved outwards through the town centre it became attenuated, losing its rapidly lethal concentration.

The panic that quickly spread added swiftly to the fast mounting death toll as people chose to run rather than head for the gas proof shelters. Even the handful who did have their respirators with them died as they fumbled with stiff straps and catches.

More in their confusion ran into the cloud, others were mown down by a bus that mounted the pavement and crushed pedestrians against walls and street furniture.

An elderly couple had no chance; unable to move fast enough they were abandoned by the young woman who for a moment took pity and tried to help. Children walking with their mothers on the way to school were closer to the ground and parents found they were dragging a corpse before their own body was added to the toll.

Revell had seen the monitor flicker at the instant the klaxon sounded. Faster than any human reaction could have been the NBC system sealed hatches and vents and switched the air-conditioning to recirculating. By chance the hatches had been already shut as they motored in to the town centre. It was the Majors standing order that they should enter any new built-up area already secure against grenade attack through open roof hatches. It was a standard tactic of infiltrating Russian units to ambush from flat rooftops any reconnaissance vehicles nosing forward. Sure that the contamination was not penetrating their vehicle Revell joined the rest of the crew in taking the extra precaution of donning a respirator. In the APC’s restricted interior there was no chance to suit-up but they would before going outside, no matter how difficult the task.

Had they arrived a few minutes later, once sure that no enemy lurked in ambush among the seemingly harmless inhabitants, they would have pulled over, all hatches open and dispersed to try and restock with food. Any who had been caught outside at the moment of the gas attack would have been left there, who ever they were. The hatches would have slammed in their faces.

As the APC drifted to a halt and sat lower on the ground with its ride skirt deflated there was a thunderous concussion against the exterior of the hull. Like a wild drumbeat. Muted as it was by the thickness of the welded aluminium hull there was still no mistaking the frantic hammering of civilians desperate to find sanctuary from the nerve gas. Fists, handbags, and anything that could be wrenched from fences were employed in the wild assault. It created a furious cacophony that blended with the shouts and screams of those wielding the improvised weapons. The thundering reached a crescendo accompanied by screeching voices that produced sounds that went off the human scale.

Surrounded by stick flourishing civilians Revell could see most of the street from his elevated position in the command cupola. He flinched, reacting automatically as a large stone struck the vision block he was looking through, gouging a large chip from the armoured glass.

At the far end of the road, centred on a large building with two police cars outside, were a number of collapsed civilians. Closer, some who were down were still moving, their bodies giving ugly spastic jerks and their faces distorted by fear and suffering as they fought for air. The futile attempts to gain access to the hovercraft reached a frantic level as closer still a man screeched and began to claw the ground when his legs gave way. Another looked at him and reeled, toppling over, white foam frothing from his mouth and nose. A last assault of the Iron Cow was led by a woman battering at the rear door until the heel of the shoe she was using broke off, then with the broken piece she made a pathetic attempt to lever the panel open.

As insanely fast as the attack on the vehicle had been launched, it ceased. A last middle-aged woman clutched her face, trying to stuff the ends of a silk scarf in to her mouth and across her nose. Eyes bulging she corkscrewed to the ground and commenced a jerking spasm as she knelt in a puddle.

“What ever it is, it has spread a long way considering there is not a breath of wind.” Revell made an all round scan. “The Commies don’t seem to be following it up though, so what has that achieved?”

From the turret Libby had a good view of the area, in fact better than the officer as he could see all the encircling bodies, some of them collapsed against the hull or slumped over the folded ride-skirt, sightless eyes looking down at
hands that had bled from clawing the metal. Many still held whatever implement they had improvised to try and gain access to the vehicle.

“The cloud must still be spreading.” Libby watched. Although now so dilute that it no longer appeared as a faint droplet laden haze the effect could still be seen. People had rushed to the incident, to look for relatives perhaps or with unbelievable naiveté or stupidity to just gawp at what had happened. Coughing, fighting for air, was the first indication they had that the gas had not dispersed as yet. It was still here and in its less powerful form there was a delay in the on-set of the symptoms. The effect was to prolong its cruel effect. Those who were now ingesting the microscopic dilute amounts were fully as doomed as those who had walked in to that first massive dose. The only difference was a scale of the suffering. All died, but for some it was a horribly prolonged process.

“There is no follow up. Absolutely nothing.” Boris was monitoring the hostile fire locators and saw that the screen revealed no further traces, no more incoming shells.

“They must have done it stampede the civilian population.” He shuddered, finding it hard to believe that many of those who had devised the tactic, had executed it, were his own countrymen. “They are animals.”

“They’re your people.” There was a last noise outside and Dooley realised the sound came from beneath the floor. One of the dying Germans had crawled under the hovercraft. The scraping continued for a short while, then stopped.
“I am Russian, but I was never a Communist.”

The bickering between the two men was frequently non-stop and Revell found it wearing. “Give it a rest you two.” From a vision port he saw that all movement in the street had ceased, save for wisps of steam from a radiator in the crumpled front of a rust streaked old Mercedes saloon whose driver hung from the open drivers door.

There were about fifteen or twenty bodies in sight. Many others would be in the buildings, on the floors of cars or maybe so close to their transport that he couldn’t see them.

The behaviour of many had been pitifully ignorant, to the point of suicidal. When newspapers and magazines, TV and radio were constantly filled with articles on the dangers of the Zone, still people were caught unprepared and died because of it. Like the man who had crawled beneath the ride skirt. It would have given him no more protection than an umbrella.

“We can’t do anything for them. Let’s move out.”

Burke had anticipated the officer’s call and was already increasing the revs of the turbines. A deft touch of the controls and he had the craft rising on its cushion of downdraft. Another touch and he tapped sufficient of the power to give them forward propulsion, a percentage of the engines output channelling through the downdraft ducts.

The ride skirt firmed its contours, the thick material crackling and snapping as it filled out. Bodies slid off of it to the ground. Litter and scarves, spectacles and shopping bags flew outwards as the output increased and the craft rocked slightly as it nudged aside a VW delivery van that had come to rest across their bow.

Now Boris was kept busy at the monitoring and communications board. Several small screens gave him comprehensive information about what was happening in the area. His first act, as they began to bore deeper into territory where they might any moment see or be seen by enemy ground or air units, was to check the IFF was working. Many times before the Identification Friend or Foe device had saved them, it was likely it would have to do it again, and soon.

Anything that moved in the Zone, and much that didn’t, was a potential target. Air activity in this sector was on nothing like the scale it was in the central or northern sectors but there was still enough of it to pose a constant threat, whether from enemy fire or friendly.

To the fighter bombers and ground attack aircraft were added the unmanned drones, some of them armed, that roamed the sky searching the ground for activity. With real time transmission of information back to their controller’s, precision guided or area munitions could be delivered swiftly to almost any spot in the Zone. It was only the sheer number of targets that kept them safe. As a lone vehicle, they did not present an attractive target, unless of course that was exactly what some Russian controller was looking for right now.

“There is something rather weird going on around here major.” Boris watched his screen, re-entered data and looked at it hard.

“What precisely.” It was very rare for their Russian to volunteer information. When asked, Revell knew he could be counted on to give precise and accurate answers but it wasn’t like him to bring anything to his attention unless it was important. That was a useful quality in their communications man as he was constantly flooded with information and had constantly to make judgements as to what was relevant, really important to them.

“I have been plotting the fall of shell, to see if there was any more chemical rounds going down in our path.”

“And?”

“The Communist batteries are dropping salvoes in a crescent across the suburbs to the east of the city. If it didn’t go such much against the way I know they think and work, I’d say they are trying to stampede all the remaining civilians eastwards, into Warsaw Pact territory.”

Samson had stayed quiet during their witnessing of the chemical attack. He felt bad that he had been powerless to
help the population stricken by the worst of all weapons of war and to him it made no sense that the Commies would volunteer to take on fleeing refugees, even encourage them to move their way. “That’s weird, they are usually doing everything they can to get rid of them, lumber us with the administrative and supply problems they bring.”

It was unlikely, Revell knew that, unheard of even, but he trusted the accuracy of the work Boris did. A look a the screen, which he couldn’t help himself doing even though he knew the data would be as stated, confirmed what he had been told. The plot of the impact areas was a crescent across the most populated parts of the city, coming down just where they would be guaranteed to block civilians trying to get out of the Zone, heading west.

“Could be an aberration by a crazy local commander. Let me know if you spot anything else those swine are up to this time. In any event give me an update every fifteen minutes.”

Ripper had heard the exchange and now taxed Clarence. “You’re the brainy one. Why would the Commies be turning around the refugee columns? They ain’t never got enough food to feed their own troops, hell they were eating their own dead at Hamburg. A load of starving civvies would just be a nuisance to them, so what they up to.”

“Stocking their larder?” Dooley joined in.

“They’ve used refugees before.” Corporal Thorne had been in Hamburg, and Munich, he knew the extremes of which the communists were capable. “They’ve used them as hostages, to prevent us hitting some juicy targets of theirs.”

“You reckon?” Simmons had heard so many stories during training, from instructors, and since he had entered combat in the Zone just six weeks before. They had mounted and mounted until the sheer number of them and their ghastly detail had seemed to become so bizarre it was impossible to believe them all.

“It’s a fact. Up north they built a mock-up of a section of a camp right next to the real thing, to conceal an underground tank repair shop.” Clarence watched the young Americans unbelieving expression.

“Heck, I learn something new about that load of cruds every day. Nasty lot of sons of bitches, ain’t they.”

Boris huddled closer over his board, and said nothing.

Carson had been taking what looked like temperature readings on the bomb and now he moved to sit next to the major and spoke quietly to him. “I’d like us to pull in somewhere so we can have a look at it.”

He said no more, made no drama of the request but Revell had seen enough of him in action to be impressed by his quiet efficiency when it came down to serious work. If he wanted to take a look at the bomb then there was a reason.

“OK.” The major switched to speak to their driver. “Find us some where quiet for a short stop. But first a bath or shower would be a good idea. That crap they dropped was likely non-persistant but why take chances.”

Burke managed to find them two in succession. A farmyard produced a broad but shallow pond and their passing through it at various speeds produced cascades of water to wash down the hull. Soon after leaving that the next water they found was a stream where a fallen tree had partially blocked the course to restrict it and form a flood meadow. Twice he sat the iron Cow down in the still water and then spun it, uncomfortably for the crew and passengers as the skirt was re-inflated.

“That should do, now we’ll hope for rain to finish the sluicing.”

Ten minutes later the major got his wish and a short sharp shower ensured that every nook and cranny of the Iron cow was thoroughly washed clear of the poisonous residue.

* * *

They motored across country slowly, and in fits and starts. Frequently running parallel to a distant secondary road they cut through a succession of hedges and fields and negotiated farmyards. Forced by heavy woodland to change course they crossed the road, finding themselves a hundred metres behind a Russian armoured personnel carrier
whose crew failed to notice them. Tempting though it was as a close range target, with its fuel cell filled rear doors; they let it pull ahead out of sight.

By chance the unwelcome detour brought them to what looked like a gated development of large detached houses. A remotely controlled double wrought iron barrier went down before them.

“The Ruskies haven’t been in here yet, they’d never close the gate behind them.” Driving in to a dead end street, Burke slowed, looking for a house with an adequate double garage.

Several of the properties showed the signs of a hurried departure. Front lawns and driveways had odd pieces of luggage where owners had packed more than their vehicles could accommodate. Prominent among the urban litter were large children’s toys, trikes, pedal cars and dolls houses. A set of golf clubs were propped against one front door and there were quiet a few adult cycles lying about.

It was one of those that a lone Russian infantryman was riding. He was wobbling along, balancing a plastic storage box on the handlebars, an assault rifle balanced on top. From improvised straps over his shoulders hung a selection of colourful shopping bags. All bulged and clinked as they swung together. His knees stuck out as he tried to propel the load down the middle of the road. He ignored his brakes, took his feet from the pedals and slothered along the ground to a stop when suddenly confronted with the APC.

His face was a mix of befuddled alarm and confusion. Clearly he didn’t know what the Hover APC was. He’d never seen one before and with no insignia showing he could not identify it.

Undecided, the infantrymen took a long time to make up his mind as to what course of action to pursue. Eventually he decided to ere on the side of caution and bolt. Hob-nailed boots scrabbling on the ground either side of its frame he began to tug the laden bike around.

The rear ramp lowered and Revell heard some one go out. Glaring brightness from a sun low down on the western horizon temporarily blinded him and he couldn’t see who it was. He could only call out. “Let him go, he’s so drunk he doesn’t even know where he is.”

Having completed the ungainly turn the Russian got his feet on the pedals and with the front wheel swinging from side to side began to ride away. A single shot rang out and he stopped pedalling. For an instant he was balanced, stationary. Then he fell sideways and the bags hitting the ground split and cracked and spilt their contents. A single vodka bottle spun in a circle before rolling towards the side of the road.

Andrea walked forward and kicked the prone body. It made no movement. Surrounded by a small lake of liquor, the man was dead.

* * *

Andrea said nothing to explain what she had done, or why, but the act injected crude fear into their prisoner. The men of the squad didn’t say anything, though several looked as though they wanted to and were having to make an effort to stop from shouting at her.

Sensing, if not understanding their attitude she kept away while the hovercraft was backed into a capacious three-car garage and the bomb hauled out. She would have done in any event. The presence of the bomb made her skin crawl and she did not want to display any weakness while the men were around.

Looking towards the dead body she saw that the slight camber of the road had drawn a sluggish mixed run of blood and spirits down to the curb where it had formed a partially congealed puddle.

Over at the garage several of the squad had overcome their fear of the nuclear weapon and were watching Carson. Assisted by Lieutenant Andy he had delved inside the largest of the inspection covers and removed an object that he put gently on a tray covered with a pure white napkin. Obviously some one had been exploring the nearest houses.

She could only hope that he would declare the bomb unsafe, and that they were to use the thermite there and then. But he was taking a long time, suggesting that he thought he could fix the dreadful thing.
In the early days of the war, when she had been in the East German border guard, one of the hated Grepos, she had seen the results of the weapons employment. NATO counter attacks had been stopped by the use of missile delivered bombs. Just small ones, like this, but dirty, with a high radioactivity count.

Injured soldiers and civilians with horrific burns and severe radiation sickness had turned up for a week afterwards. It had been mostly civilians. The British attack had been stopped even before it had formed, when the troops were passing through a town on the way to their start line.

At night, though her post had been almost nine kilometres away, the whole area about the site of the airbursts had glowed. As the firestorm had died so that eerie dull orange haze had shown in the night sky. She had woken up one morning to find that in the night, and that a full ten days after the strike, a dying woman had made her way to her barracks. She had opened her eyes to look into the melted face of a corpse propped against the side of her bed. Down on its knees and only a fraction from her, the corpses hand, burnt to a talon and frozen in death, reached out for her.

Within an hour Carson announced himself content with what ever it was he had done and they reloaded the bomb, without enthusiasm.

* * *

The sweep out in to the country should have taken them well clear of enemy activity. Revell knew that the Russian advance had centred on the two main routes from the east in to the city of Nurnberg, with little activity to either side of that main corridor. That was particularly so in the south where roads were mostly on a north-south axis, of little use to them except for communications. The Zone here was scrappy, a ragged bordered strip of land that the Russians held more by fortifying easily defended areas rather than by forming a regular front line. Their only aggressive until recently, when they had launched their attack on the city, had been patrolling, sometimes in company strength. It had enabled them to dominate broad swathes of territory.

The Czech and Polish forces that had been responsible for this front in the first days of the war had quickly been reduced to less than fifty percent strength by mutinies. Only the rapid injection of reserve Russian units had stabilised the situation.

That miss-employment of valuable reserves had played havoc with Warpac plans. The long term consequences had been that the Zone in this sector was partially within original Warsaw Pact territory, the only place where it was, and it was the narrowest point in the whole of the Zone. It was to create room for manoeuvre before the spring offensive that the Communists had started this current push, intending to increase the Zone far beyond its present width.

As they drove east Revell was surprised to encounter several groups of refugees heading in the same direction. That just had to be wrong, even though they had witnessed what looked like Russians attempts to herd them back, away from the NATO front line. Usually the civilians made every effort to move west, in to NATO territory. Twice they had to cut across country to avoid slow moving east bound truck convoys loaded down with dejected looking non-combatants.

The vehicles occupants were for the most part well dressed, their clothes clean. Only a few had bandages on wounds and those were neatly done, evidence that they had come from the city and been attended to before the medical resources had been stretched too far. They also narrowly avoided another Russian convoy; a straggling line of impressed civilian vehicles, mainly open trucks, piled high with colourful broken and water stained boxes. They almost ran in to it at a hill top cross-roads, just managing to drive off road and hide in a rough paved area holding various heaps of road mending materials.

As the convoy climbed closer Revell could see through his binoculars that most of the heaped cargo appearing to be salvaged food stuffs, obviously looted from supermarkets and cash and carry warehouses, and none too carefully. Virtually all of the visible cans and packets were buckled or torn. The contents oozed from many and mixed with masses of dried pasta and the defrosting contents of ready- meal and bulk freezer cartons There were six vehicles in all and on the long steep hill they had become widely spaced, some of them struggling on the gradient, clearly overloaded.
Revell took Andrea with him when he left the Iron Cow and stole up to the road to look through a gap in a high mesh fence. The bottom half was smothered in vine-like weeds and closely flanked by tall thistles. He chose Andrea not because he particularly wanted her company but he knew that if she stayed then even Sergeant Hyde would have trouble preventing the men from having a go at her over the shooting of the Russian on the bike. In truth Revell had to admit to himself he had found that distasteful. All of them had killed, most could recall instances where they had shot down unarmed men, even in the back, but the incident in the gated estate had been different. There had been something poignant about the solitary Russian they had encountered. He had posed no threat, was befuddled by drink and the nature and volume of what he had been looting strongly suggested he was taking the booty back to share. For those reasons and others the men found her murderous reflexes unpleasant, certainly in this instance.

Crouching low and parting the bindweed they monitored the traffic. Each vehicle betrayed its civilian origins, though a handful had been roughly sprayed with camouflage colours. In no case did it conceal the names of transport companies and manufacturers that adorned them. In the cab of every truck sat a stone-faced Russian guard, a rifle between his knees. The only animation they displayed was when a vehicle began to fall behind on the hill as it reached the steepest gradient opposite the resurfacing material depot. Then they could be seen waving their arms shouting and threatening, successfully intimidating their press-ganged civilian drivers, urging them on.

“Where the heck are they going with that lot?” Revell watched the third vehicle approach, a small dump truck with a quarrying company logo on the cab door. He could make out the assortment of foodstuffs the truck carried. There had clearly been no selection involved. Every conceivable type of food had been thrown aboard. Smashed ketchup bottles leaked their contents over tinned fish, cellophane wrapped bread rolls and even a carton of drain cleaner. The Russians who had supervised the loading had been more interested in the quantities rather than the actual content. Language problems had very likely not helped the choosing of what was heaved aboard. They must have emptied the shelves of a cash and carry.

Perhaps the food is to feed the refugees they are rounding up.” Andrea watched a woman driver respond with a scream and shield her head with her arms to avoid a second hard slap from her escort. Her hands removed from the steering wheel, their truck swerved towards the roadside and the Russian had to cease his assault as the Scania threatened to fall over sideways on the soft verge.

“They don’t ship in food for those, you know that. The Commies wouldn’t lift a finger to help refugees.” Approaching them was another yet another dump truck, obviously hi-jacked from a quarry or motorway building project. It was piled higher than any of the others. Revell heard the engine spluttering and watched the vehicle constantly stall and make an erratic jerking progress. Eventually it had to pull off the road close by them, its wheels flattening broad tracks in the rank growth.

The motor cut out with a long over-run and after the sound of the fierce application of the parking brake, applied only just in time to prevent the over-laden wagon from rolling back, all that could be heard was the screaming of the Russian guard.

“He is accusing the driver of sabotage, he is threatening her.” Andrea levelled her M16 at the tall cab. “I can just see him…”

Before she could finish her sentence a single shot rang out and the drivers door swung open. The guard jumped from the passenger side, stalked round the front of the truck and dragged out his bruised and bleeding victim. But the woman still had fight left in her and she clung to the door handle. The Russian cracked her across the head with a heavy automatic pistol and when she continued to cling to the truck brought it up again but this time levelled it at her face. Surrendering her grip, the civilian fell out, hitting her head hard on the ground.

“No, I want him.” Preventing Andrea from firing, as the Russian thug brought up the pistol again Revell jumped forward and hurled a half brick he had picked up, straight into the face of the soldier.

At the last instant the Russian must have seen it coming and tried to shy away from the projectile but it caught him on the side of the head, drawing a spurt of blood as it tore his ear. Before he could recover from the shock Revell had jumped through the hole in the wire, grabbed the guard’s jacket and deliberately thrown himself down on top of the short but heavily built soldier, Twisting as he fell, Revell let the stunned and surprised man take the force of the impact and unleashed a pile driver hard blow straight between his eyes.
Revell had deliberately chosen the unorthodox attack to take the Russian down into the tall weeds as the second to last truck came grinding past. Its driver and guard took a casual look out at the dump truck but after a glance ignored it. Breakdowns must have been that common. Certainly they had seen nothing of the action when Revell delivered two more crashing blows before the guard was fully subdued and gave up the fight, almost unconscious. Andrea too saw the other crew lean forward to take a cursory glance at the stationary vehicle but then sit back, unseeing, uninterested as they drove past.

Waiting until the other vehicle had gone, Revell grabbed the lapels of the Russians coat and dragged him through the long roadside growth and back through the hole in the fence to behind a pile of tar stained oil drums. There he wrenched the mans arms behind his back and bound him with a thick length of sticky rope.

“The woman is dead.” Andrea returned from checking on the driver. “She has an enormous wound in her side, just under the arm. I cannot imagine how she lived long enough to resist being pulled from the truck.”

The man was fast resuming consciousness. Blood ran from a broken nose and his eyes were already puffed and showing heavy bruising. The Russians first reaction was to struggle, to wrench himself around and try reach for his holster but the major had already taken his pistol and now waved it in his face.

“Andrea, ask him where they are going.” Keeping the Russian covered, Revell enjoyed the man surprise as Andrea conducted the interrogation in her barely adequate Russian.

His initial reaction was to sneer, and he was about to spit but a sharp crack on the side of his head across the wound he already had, with the barrel of the pistol, spelt out to him the potential danger of his position. It took several questions and another threatening move by the officer but eventually and highly begrudgingly he faltered out responses to repeated queries.

“This is the second journey he has made.” Andrea passed on the information as she got it. “The delivery of foodstuffs is to a refugee site that is a few kilometres south of Bayreuth.”

“What did he see the first time. He knows this is not normal behaviour for the Commies.”

Andrea pressed the point but Revell could see the prisoner was sweating, obviously more afraid of divulging something than of the consequences of not telling them what he knew.

As Andrea turned to pass on the latest refusal to talk, the Russian launched himself to his feet and bolted, pushing them hard together so that they fell in a tangle of arms and legs.

At the fence he was snagged for a moment by the sharp edges of the broken wire and then as he ripped himself clear and fell in the process Revell fired a hasty shot.

The bullet plucked at the Russians collar and grazed his neck as he tried to recover from his fall. Then an expanding ball of white and pink tissue enveloped the lower half of his face and he went down making ugly gurgling noises.

They reached the Russian to see that what was left of his head was lolling from side to side. His eyes bulged, blood poured freely from mouth and nostrils He quivered, went into a convulsion and died.

Examining the pistol, Major Revell exchanged looks with Andrea. Her eyes were shining.

She plunged her hands into the corpses pockets and extracted two magazines for the pistol, then held out her hand for the automatic. “Explosive bullets. I can use those.”

Revell smacked the gun in to her outstretched palm and then put his hand on her shoulder to push her down in to cover as the last truck lumbered past, almost coming to a stop as its driver sought a lower gear for the last stretch of the incline. The broken exhaust pipe it trailed made a horrendous racket that must have drowned the sound of the shot. Certainly the crew didn’t even bother to look at the parked vehicle.

“You’re welcome to it. Just don’t have it on you if the Russians take you prisoner.”
“While I have this I am certain that is unlikely to happen.” Tucking the pistol in to the waistband of her jeans, Andrea went back to the Iron Cow, feeling the reassuring bulk of her new weapon.

As soon as he was back aboard their transport, Revell put on his headset and spelt out what they had learnt. “The Russians are running supplies of food to some refugee camp that must be across our route. From the position I was given it seems to be far closer to the front than is usual. The most likely source of the stuff is Nurnberg. Everywhere else their troops have already looted.” Revell looked across to Andrea. She had taken the bullets from the magazines and was carefully wiping each with a lightly oiled scrap of rag before slotting it back, savouring the smell of gun oil on her hands.

“I don’t see how we can go around it.” Sergeant Hyde listened to the officer and made his own calculations and estimates of time, direction and distance. “If it’s covering the area the Russian alleged, and reasonable assuming that their units as usual will be thick on the ground around it, then doing a detour would drive us far into the Warsaw Pacts territory before we could swing back in to the Zone. We’ll be adding twenty kilometres or more to the journey and a whole lot of risk.”

They had sat for an hour among the heaps of gravel, spent tarmac and yellowing piles of salt waiting for nightfall. At irregular intervals other enemy vehicles had passed along the road, always coming up the hill and occasionally including armoured vehicles. With only one exception no one took any interest in the parked truck. That was a lone military policeman on a powerful motorcycle. He took a brief look at the abandoned tipper truck not dismounted for a closer examination, only writing down the vehicles registration number on a note pad and then had gone on his way.

Musing over the complications that seemed to be mounting, Revell knew that the first one was to get across the road. The night when it fell was jet black and held the danger of motoring out of the compound and straight into the sights of a prowling Soviet armoured column. It was Ripper who came up with an idea, as so often it was with anything that involved motive power.

With the handbrake released and the gradient in their favour it took only three of them, Dooley, Burke and the major, shoving hard on the front of the truck to set it moving backwards, across the narrow strip of vegetation and then on the road. Within its own length it had been swallowed by the darkness. They heard a brake shoe scraping for a while and then silence. They were turning away, thinking it must have run off the road and quietly buried its wheels in soft soil when they heard the first collision. A shower of sparks showed it had struck another vehicle at the foot of the climb, just where approaching trucks would be doing their best speed as the took a run at the incline. Seconds later there was a second crash, much louder, and a spurt of flame revealed a six-wheeled truck towing a howitzer slowly falling over on its side. After that and out of sight came the sound of brakes being applied, the hiss of air reservoirs emptying and the echo of another heavy collision.

Dooley did a little dance of celebration in the road “I think it's all clear to cross the road now Major.”

* * *

Slewing sideways but raising the minimum of dust from the road material depot, the Iron Cow swept over the tall weeds, across the momentarily empty road and into the plantation of young spruce trees on the far side. The slope became steeper and Burke had only to keep the engines at a power level sufficient to keep the skirts partially inflated for them to maintain momentum. At the bottom they splattered across a muddy stream and then collided with a close spaced plantation of mature firs that resisted the hovercrafts weight and power. Burke turned the machine and they began to run along the edge of the tree line.

“Is the bomb OK?” Simmons watched Andy checking the straps that restrained both the thermite pack and the bomb, keeping them lashed against the edge of the seats.

“Our Russian friend here,” he indicated their prisoner, “is a bit ham fisted and it is now a tad more fragile than it was, but its what a couple of bullets did to it rather than anything else I’m worried about.”

“Will it make the journey back?” Major Revell had watched Carson as he regularly made checks on the bomb, taking readings from a small liquid crystal display beneath a buckled inspection cover and regularly checking the
temperature of the casing with the back of his hand. He kept the Geiger counter on the floor between his feet and it
didn’t escape any one’s notice that he kept it turned on. Every few minutes it gave a weary ‘tick’.

“Earlier I could have given you a definite answer.” Carson straightened up after his second inspection in ten
minutes. “Now though I am beginning to think that there may have to be a change of plan. If we can get back within
the next ten hours though, then no problem.”

“And if we are likely to take a bit longer than that?”

“Well I hate wasting a good bomb.” Carson began to deal out a hand of cards on top of the thermite pack, to have a
game of poker with Dooley and Ripper and Samson. “Major, can you contact NATO HQ and see if there is a target
of opportunity any where in the vicinity.”

“I take it they would never give you that sort of decision making opportunity.” Revell handed Carson a slim cross
head screwdriver that had rolled beneath his feet.

“Thanks. No, they don’t give us that sort of discretion.” Carson refastened the thin metal of the hatch, ramming the
screw in at an angle to get it to bite and hold.

“So what is the position with the bomb? Are we in real danger that it might become unstable?” Watching Lieutenant
Andy dealing with practised ease, Andrea sensed there was much the specialists were not telling.

“Actually we’d all like to know.” It was a question Revell had been on the verge of asking for himself. “They may
have trained you two to consider yourselves expendable but me and my men are not, not to our way of thinking.”

“OK,” Carson caught the almost imperceptible nod from Lieutenant Andy. “The Russian was clumsy. Some of the
stuff in here is pretty basic engineering, springs, levers, and clockwork. Some of it works to slap the critical mass
together when the time is right, but there are other bits that are working to keep them apart. They damaged some
retaining devices. The clock could start any time and there is no way of controlling the point from which it starts so I
don’t think I would be able to control the duration of the mechanisms run.”

“I get it.” Dooley had heard. “We’re back to your five seconds to whatever. Can’t you just wedge some stuff in
there, lock it up solid?”

“Not that easy…”

The hovercraft made a heavy impact, a collision with a derelict piece of farm machinery parked in the corner of a
field. They had demolished a rotting gate and then struck the old combine, tipping it over and spilling air from their
ride skirt so that the craft went down on one side.

Using all his skill Burke kept the craft level and brought it to a halt under the shelter of several tall hedgerow oaks
and behind the machinery with which they had collided. Using the front exit door in front of his position Burke got
out to inspect the damage. He returned within a minute. ”Not too bad. It will take an hour at most. One of the
reinforcing ribs has been lifted. It’s buckled and hauled up a couple of skirt panels with it. Sledgehammer would be
too noisy, we’ll have to do it the slow way.”

A momentary relief the rest of squad enjoyed at the announcement the damage was not worse was stifled by several
sharp ticks from the Geiger counter. Carson went down on his knees and working intently on the mechanism
beneath an inspection panel on the bomb. There was a sudden silence in the cabin, no questions, no comments.
Collectively they shared the moment of ignorance and anxiety.

“It’s OK. All under control.” Carson and returned a calliper-like tool to its place in a tool roll. “But I don’t think it
will take another jar like that.”

“You mean boom, as in mushroom shaped boom?” Dooley felt his guts churning. For the first time, as he got up
from the floor, beads of perspiration showed on the young specialists face. Carson wiped it away with the back of
his hand. It was a gesture not missed by the others. “The timer is now unstable. All I can do is keep an eye on it,
intervene if the timer is triggered. When, if, that happens I will be able to see how long we have but not control over
it.”

“That’s it then, what ever the length of the count down you will not be able to stop it.” Revell shared with the others the fear of uncertainty. It was one thing to be in a fire-fight, where you knew the risks, felt you had some control over them. But riding with this unpredictable atomic bomb was another matter entirely. He could not expect the others to live with this nerve shredding risk for another thirty or forty kilometres through enemy territory and then likely have a fierce fire-fight to break through the opposing lines to reach safety. Certainly Andrea wouldn’t. Her face was white, so white that even her lips had paled. She looked to be on the verge of fainting.

“Then we burn the thing. If you screw up and it goes off out here it won’t do any harm, there’s only a few farms and chances are those have been evacuated.”

“The orders are to take it back. The decision to destroy it is down to me alone.” Lieutenant Andy prepared to stand his ground. An interruption from Libby in the turret broke what had the makings of a standoff.

“You better take a look at this major. What on earth are the Russians up this time.”

From the deep cover of the broad leafed trees Revell stood half out of the hull top and watched a column of slow moving civilians snaking across the fields a hundred metres ahead of them. Russian guards with Tommy guns and some with growling, teeth baring dogs on short leashes flanked the column. Revell would never have seen them in the dark except for the fact that the escort had powerful torches, with shielded lens, that they occasionally and briefly flashed to pan across the straggling line.

Using night vision binoculars Revell saw the column tramping quietly and wearily. It was composed of a thousand or more civilians, both sexes and all ages. A babies cry would occasionally float across the field but was instantly stifled by a barked command from a member of the escort and a thin flicker of light would sweep across the civilians seeking the source.

“There are only a couple of places they could have come from in those numbers.” Revell watched as the column gradually passed them and was swallowed by the moonless night. “Either the Russians are emptying the smaller camps or they’re rounding up the people their chemical weapons have driven out of the city and herding the whole population out into the countryside.”

“I get the feeling that the food we saw on the trucks and those poor devils are to get together somewhere but it’s not like the Reds to provide supplies on the scale we’ve seen, on any scale in fact.”

“Could they be concentrating the refugees for some reason? Clarence had sat quietly thinking through the unusual events. “If the starving families living in the hedgerows hear that the Ruskies have a big food dump somewhere, then they will all head for it, fast.”

“Kind of scuttles your plan for burning the bomb in these parts Major. Unless you want to risk nuking three sparrows, two voles and a few thousand displaced persons.”

Toying with the broken strap on the pack, Carson tried not to look triumphant.

“Seems like it will have to stay with us for a while yet.”

Their Russian prisoner had surreptitiously monitored the exchange and could stay out of it no longer. He had flinched when the Geiger counter had become more active. “The civilians count for nothing Major. Leave the bomb here, burn it. Or bury it if you want to not run the risk of it detonating before we are at an optimum distance. On a minimum yield setting the worst those people have to face is the potential fall out, perhaps the danger of some flying debris. That is if they even halt near here, perhaps they will not.”

“After your fumbling around in there,” Carson indicated the backpack, “there is no guarantee I will be able to select a low yield.”

“I knew this area.” Boris had brought up a map onscreen. None of the symbols revealed anything out of the ordinary. “A year ago I came here when my division had been in battle and taken heavy casualties. It was regarded
as a quiet sector, being used to rest and re-equip depleted Russian infantry division. It was so quiet that I was able to
desert from here. I found the opposing American formations to be in much the same condition.”

“So we assume that if we bump in to a Russian unit it is likely to be poorly armed green replacement troops,
conscripts most likely.” Sergeant Hyde looked at the screen, examining the indicated network of narrow country
roads around a little village at its centre.

Boris hunched lower in his seat as he was crowded by the officer and NCO.

“There are trucks there, and more arriving.”

Andrea lifted up the pistol with explosive bullets and made pretence of aiming it at Boris. “Yes he is.”

* * *

Hauling himself up and out through a roof hatch, Clarence pulled his sniper rifle up after him and began to use the
night vision scope to pan the countryside, examined the ground out as far as its high powered lenses would permit.

“Major, come here and have a look at this. There’s a village surrounded by open farmland about a kilometre ahead.
At least it should be open farmland.”

Scanning the area Clarence noted a small hamlet surrounded by huge fields, dotted with broad patches of woodland.
“It looks as if that village is the refugees destination. There are trucks there, and more arriving.”

“At this distance, with them having no substantial shelter, our bomb will wipe those fields clean as a pool table.”
There was no need for Carson to look for himself. He knew the highly trained sniper would be correct about the
distances involved and his own knowledge told him what could happen.

“Get that skirt fixed.” Revell decided on a course of action that went against his common sense. It was likely there
was nothing they could discover that reconnaissance aircraft or drones would not eventually uncover anyway but
something, some intuition, told him that time might be an important factor. He knew that NATO over-flights had
become rarer since Soviet missile batteries had started appearing along the southern front in large numbers. With
vast areas to cover, this chunk of countryside would be way down on the list of priorities for the depleted NATO air
forces.

“While we are being repaired and before we’re ready to get away in a hurry if we need to, we’ll put out a patrol for a
closer look.” Revell pulled out a grubby sack from under a bench and began rummaging thought the odds and ends
of civilian clothing it held.

“Ohio great. Not enough we’re carting an ‘A’ bomb about the countryside. Now you want us to go for a stroll in to a
Ruskie prison camp.” Ripper watched as the Major selected an old coat and a threadbare scarf.

Burke passed down the compartment. “Usually I’m happy to stay here while you lot go off on expeditions,” he made
sure he did not brush against the two bulky packs, shuffling sideways past them. “This time I think I would rather be
joining who ever goes. Being around those things is starting to freak me out.”

Outside he climbed on to the engine housing to reach the toolbox he had fitted at the reclamation depot. “Now I
have to hang around the damned thing while others wander off to a respectful distance.”

“Could be worse.” Dooley took a long handled wrench and began to loosen the bolts securing the ride panels. He
wiped each first with an oily cloth to reduce the squealing of the distorted metal as it resisted his efforts. Right under
the trees it was so dark he had to work by feel alone, unable to see inches in front of his face. “Anything happens to
Carson then you’re the only one among us with mechanical skills. I never thought to hear myself say it, but we can’t afford to lose you.”

* * *

The land was clean, uncontaminated by the chemicals that had saturated the Zone that commenced just a short distance away. Corporal Thorne pulled together the civilian rags that concealed his uniform; tugging at them where they bulged over the pistol and grenades with which he had armed himself. Not that it was unusual for refugees to carry weapons but the Russians were highly aggressive towards armed civilians and if they caught them the consequences were inevitable and swift.

Hyde had seen his officer’s face when he had paused before accepting Andreas volunteering to go with the patrol. Though Revell tried never to make any public display of feelings for the girl the effort was imposing an obvious strain on him when she took some extra risk. Hyde knew that one day Revell’s protectionism towards her was going to lead them all in to trouble.

It was Thorne who made up the last member of the patrol. As usual he wore a bizarre combination of cast-off civilian clothing that only a long time resident of the Zone would have worn. It blended khaki shorts over ragged jeans, old boots whose laces had been replaced with frayed string and a filthy dark blue windcheater topped off with a chequered Arab style scarf.

Libby had volunteered but it had taken no thought on Revell’s part to turn him down for this job. Somewhere in the Zone was his girlfriend Helga. He missed no opportunity to look for her and once in so large a camp he would have been lost to them.

The countryside they made their way through was well maintained, or had been until fairly recently. Although the area was covered in trees that should have provided masses of firewood, it was the gates and fences that had been pillaged. Even with the war on their doorstep the farmers had ploughed and sown with meticulous care until the very last moment. Now their work was all wasted, with the local boundaries of the Zone becoming so fluid it was too dangerous to stay and wait for a harvest they might never be able to bring in or would be contaminated if they did.

They kept to a narrow track at the edge of the woodland, soon being joined by one or two other small groups of civilians, all heading the same way. No one spoke, no greeting was exchanged. As usual silence was a refugees best protection, keeping them safe by avoiding unguarded talk among strangers. It was always possible that those who heard your words were those who would seek money or favours from the Russians by betrayal.

As they neared the camp they noticed more and more activity within the close spaced plantations of Firs. Under heavy camouflage were masses of Soviet infantry. Tents and improvised shelters filled some patches of woodland. In others were long lines of light armoured vehicles, scout cars and small armoured personnel carriers. Most appeared to be equipped with roof mounted anti-tank missiles or compact radar dishes accompanied by anti-aircraft armament. One area was filled with long lines of Zil trucks beneath camouflage netting leaving only narrow walkways between the rows. Sentries patrolled just within the borders of the trees, their guns cradled in the arms and ready to use.

The strictest of regulations must have been in force. No Russians came near them; none seemed to stir from their shelters. Only once, a Russian officer saw them slowing down to look between the trees and bellowed at them, gesturing at them with a machine pistol to keep moving. The whole scene was surreal. Usually such a situation would normally have meant soldiers swarming out to barter with or bully the passing civilians. But discipline must have been iron hard. Revell realised the sentries were keeping the Russian soldiers in as much as keeping the refugees out.

He tried estimating the number of enemy soldiers but after they had seen three patches of woodland jammed with units he gave up. If the other plantations were as packed and they must be or there would be no point in jamming so many in to the few he had seen, then the best part of a division was close by. As they got nearer the refugee settlement the small parties travelling wearily across country coalesced into large and larger groups. Guards began to appear beside the human convoys. For the most part the escorts were few and far between, widely spaced except where a couple would get together to share a cigarette, and then a gap of a hundred metres would open up before the
men wandered back to their positions.

Several times Revell saw evidence of the ruthless herding of the civilians. The first time it was a body beside a wheelchair. Buckled spokes had prevented its further progress and its occupant, unable to keep up, had been shot. From the back of the head a large quantity of blood had run out to stain the grass with a glistening mess. A few paces away, almost hidden in the deep ruts of the muddy ground was the corpse of a young woman in a fur trimmed coat and headscarf. A burst of automatic fire had punctured her chest and abdomen.

“A clear picture” Andrea walked past showing no emotion. “Perhaps he was her father. She must have gone for the Ivan who shot the old man. Foolish, there was nothing she could do that would help him. She threw away her own life.”

“You’re all heart.” Much the same scenario had occurred to Thorne. He could picture the girl’s grief and fury when that had been the outcome after hours of exhausting herself pushing the chair. Perhaps the attack she had unleashed on the killer had surprised him, even momentarily frightened him. He hoped so. It was likely the guards were all too well aware how thin on the ground they were. A determined effort by the few men among the civilians, at the risk of some loss of life, could certainly have overwhelmed the escort.

But to what purpose. The presence of more enemy infantry in the area was now all too obvious. The refugees might have taken on the escort, perhaps grabbed a few weapons but then the world would have fallen on them, and not just on them. Likely a great swathe of the trudging column would have been slaughtered.

The second time they saw death it was when their line merged with another column. Beside the route there was a child’s body, a girl of maybe ten years. A few steps from the widening trampled path, she had very likely been shot down when youthful thoughtlessness had prompted her to stray. Just visible were some wild flowers clenched in her hand. Perhaps it was the innocent urge to pick those that had been the cause her death.

When the head of the column was within fifty yards of the single strand of rusted barbed wire that marked the camps perimeter they were called to a halt.

“It’s a huge area, at least twenty hectares including the village.” Thorne estimated the encampments extent. It stretched right across the gently sloping farmland entirely surrounding the village.

A ruddy-faced Russian officer bellowed for silence. He didn’t get it. For most of the civilians this was a new experience, they kept chatting. A loud burst of machine gun fire hosed tracer above their heads and they fell silent as swiftly, and as shocked, as if they had been slapped in the face.

“There are rules. You will obey them or be shot. Do not go beyond the wire unless on an organised work party with an escort. Disobey and you will be shot. Do not speak to my guards. You will be shot. Do not create disturbance. You will be shot.”

With that he turned on his heel, gesturing for the column to enter the camp.

“Well you can’t say you haven’t been told. Simple and to the point. Thorne watched the civilians as they moved in to the area. Most seemed dazed, lost. Crowding around them came the vultures, the black market operators, with offers of help, offers of trade. Even those who managed to thread their way past those thieves were marked people. Their cleaner clothes indicated that they were new arrivals. What little they had in the way of valuables, even the most mundane of possessions they were not going to keep for long.

On the far side of the village there was a cloud of exhaust fumes marking where trucks were entering the area and were about to unload. A stampede commenced, with children being abandoned and old people flung down in the rush to reach the vehicles. To Revell it looked like the trucks of the convoy they had seen tackling the hill. It was an unsophisticated process. The first one reversed to a clearing under Russian direction, its perimeter was marked by barbed wire, again a single strand It sagging between poorly dug-in posts. A handful of Russian soldiers vigorously pushed back a fast increasing number of civilians who were crowding as close as they could.

The first truck, a dumper, tipped its entire cargo on to the dirt. Even as the load began to slide on to the ploughed field the surrounding mob surged against the wire and the posts came out of the ground. Most of the first rank fell as
they rushed forward, tripped by the wire, and were trampled by those following. The few who tried to step over the wire became caught on its vicious barbs and after a moment of trying to maintain their balance they went down as well. It was only when the jagged strand was covered by bodies that the mass of people could throw themselves on the avalanche of various foodstuffs without impediment.

The other trucks did not even try to reach the same spot. Two more were tippers and they shot their loads at the closest point they could reach. Masses of cans bounced across the tarmac of the single village street and into ditches and drains. It was the children and the elderly who flung themselves on the deliveries. Two at least were buried beneath the loads, and their plight ignored. Others were pushed against and under the wheels but such screams as there must have been were drowned by the baying of crowd as they tore at the piles, grabbing up anything within reach.

The remaining trucks were driven in to the camp and simply abandoned by the drivers and their escorts. A wild surge and the mad fury with which the refugees attacked the foodstuffs intensified, becoming a wild scramble to board the trucks and loot whatever could be snatched.

The ropes and chains that were retaining some cargo were thrown aside and the grossly over-loaded vehicles rocked violently. The first time it was caused by the cargo pouring over the sides and then by the frantic women, children and men jumping aboard. Their actions ensured that even the cartons that had survived the rough handling and journey were now reduced to battered pulp as the entire consignment fell with a crash that spoilt more of the lightly wrapped food. And then it was used as stepping-stones by people desperate to reach the most valuable canned goods.

“The Russians aren’t bothered about a proper distribution network.” Thorne watched as human anthills formed over every vehicle.

“They don’t need to, “Andrea had watched with contempt. Before joining Revell’s unit the camps had played a large part in her life as an East German Border Guard. “Much of that food will still be circulated, as currency, in a years time. Only fools will eat it.”

The newcomers watched the scene in amazement. Too tired and too frightened to join the throng they were learning the first of many lessons. Bedraggled and weary they never noticed that the few guards just walked off and they were left to their own devices. They milled about, hardly registering the importuning of the few black-marketers who had remained. Most of those poisonous scavengers had dived off to pillage what they could from the trucks. Revell recognised the opening gambits of several black market transactions as cases were opened and property changed hands. As they carried no baggage and their clothes were worthless no one bothered the trio.

“I don’t see any evidence that the Reds are hiding equipment in the camp itself. There’s just that load of infantry and light armour in the forestry plantations.”

“But they are up to something.” Andrea had witnessed many strange scenes in the camps but never the Russians handing out food. On this scale and in this manner it was unheard of.

“This is by far the biggest camp I have ever seen.” Revell had tried an estimate and his best guess was in the region of twenty thousand, a staggering number, four times the size of most other large camps. But it seemed to have been established almost overnight. There were hardly any shelters erected and he couldn’t imagine what the overcrowding and sanitation would be like in the few buildings in the village. Also there didn’t appear to be anywhere the refugees would obtain materials for shelters. It was not quite spring and the nights were cold. The children and the old would be affected first but soon there would be a death toll of hundreds per night. Especially if the weather deteriorated from the mild spell they were fortunately enjoying at present.

And food. There were no crops in the ground to be lifted, no roots or berries and no game. Such a camp was not viable. Within days it would split up and disperse, that was why the Russians were trucking in food. Nothing else would keep the people here, and that would not work for long, not unless the few tons of food were swiftly followed with the materials to create minimal accommodation. These were not hardened Zone dwellers, experienced in scraping a living from the ugliest terrain in the world. They were town and city people, torn from their comforts. In
fact few of them seemed to have bought anything useful with them. The open cases he had seen appeared to contain little more than mementos from home, photo albums, favourite ornaments. They should have contained tools, food, waterproof sheets and general survival gear like matches and fishing gear. On reflection Revell knew his estimate of the potential death toll was woefully inadequate. It was going to be thousands every single day for the next few days.

In the distance he saw a small family group clustered around an old man laid on the ground. His face was blue and the females of the family and a couple of children were crying. This was the first of many.

The whole area was a seething mass of unhappy humanity, except for the children. They seemed to be taking it all in their stride, and hunger had not yet made them fractious. It would be a different matter when in the next few hours their parents or guardians ran out of the scant rations they had doubtless brought with them. The children were making friends, playing. It was the adults who appeared to have been crushed by the sudden change in their circumstances. Coalescing into small groups, the women seemed for the most part to be apathetic and even frightened.

“We have to get back I’ve seen enough” Revell had a gut feeling that the Russians brutal but effective efforts in gathering together a vast number of refugees was going to lead to bloodshed on a huge scale. The Russians would not be able to hold on to the camps inmates for long. When the food was gone the refugees would depart, breaking up in to smaller viable groups. And the mass burials at each dawn would soon scare them away. So whatever the Russians purpose in gathering these poor souls together they were going to have to make effective use of it in the next day or two or the camp would atrophy very quickly.

Some small groups though were seemingly better organised than most with tiny quantities of food and canned drinks being shared out in an orderly fashion.

It was in one of those, an obviously new group, that Revell recognised some one he knew. Her raven hair made her stand out, it was the woman who they had encountered in the underground service area. Rounded up and trucked in she still could not have been here for twenty-four hours yet but she was already organising a flimsy shelter.

Attempts by other individuals and groups to pilfer plastic sheeting or sticks she countered by waving a nail studded piece of plank. With it he saw her see off a couple of shaven headed young men who tried to muscle in and commandeer her developing shelter. Taking a chance, Revell made sure she noticed him when they walked past. It was a risk, her behaviour marked her out as single-minded and that might extend to her betraying them to the guards.

“Have you deserted?”

He could understand her line of thinking. The Zone was full of men who had deserted, from all armies. There was anger, bordering on contempt in her question.

“No, we still have our transport. Will you do something for me?” From a deep jacket pocket he took out a mobile phone and concealed it between them as he offered it to her. “If the Russians start to move you, will you let me know? Use hot key five.”

She flipped it open and noted the battery held a full charge. “You think they will?”

Revell swept his hand over the listless crown around them. “This camp cannot be sustained. They trucked you here so they want you. They might have followed their usual course and let you and the others die in the city. No, they wanted you, but they will have to employ you fast. Before hunger, illness and lack of facilities forces dispersal.”

“What can you do? Can you get us out of here?”

It was a shrewd question. She could yet give the ‘phone back.

“I doubt it but if you keep the phone I just may be able to do something. I cannot make any promises. It’s a long shot though, just finding you…”
Slowly she pocketed the ‘phone. “Do you have any idea what the Reds have planned, what they intend doing with us.”

Revell knew there was no point in trying to lie to her. “At this time, no. If I find out, if I am in a position to let you know then I will. That is likely the best I can do.”

There had been a flicker of hope in her eyes, Revell had seen it come and then go. One of the children was hanging on to her coat and whining about some trivia, an argument with another child. With a word or two she resolved it.

“I’m Linda, what’s your name.”

“James, James Revell.”

“Special Forces?”

“Yes, good guess.” Revell was starting to admire her sharp mind as much as her looks.

“My husband is…was Special Forces. A Ranger. He didn’t make it out of Hamburg.”

Revell wondered if he should tell her he had been there as well, almost did, then decided against it. “But you’re British.”

“That hardly constitutes a mixed race marriage, does it.” She couldn’t prevent a flicker of a smile. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“No, unless you know a way I can get back to my APC with these two.”

For the first time Linda looked at Thorne and Andrea. It was on the girl her eyes rested. “Which direction is your transport.”

This was the dangerous time. The Russians would have given a small reward for the capture of spies, as they would doubtless label the three of them, but for a tip off on their vehicle, for that they would have been more generous and when you have nothing, anything is generous.

Revell pointed up the slight slope behind them to the untidy copse at the top of the hill, where two hedges made a sharp angle. “That way, just beyond the rise.”

“You are fortunate. To the other side of the trees I have been told the Russians have excavated a pit. We have seen them taking bodies that way.”

“Any suggestions how we get there?” Thorne kept a nervous lookout but so far had seen no one taking any interest in them. The only Russians in sight were outside the wire, strolling in pairs and mostly deep in conversation or watching each others backs as they took turns to roll a joint.

“First you need a body. Then you take it to the gate.”

“I know where I can get one, if we’re quick.”

Revell felt awkward, he would have taken the woman’s hand but she leant forward on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek.

“Good luck. I hope I see you again.”

It was one of those ambiguous statements and he would have loved to have the courage to ask in what way she meant that, but he didn’t, especially not with Andrea standing close by.

* * *

Lieutenant General Gregori gently tapped the Havana cigar on the edge of the ashtray and watched with satisfaction
as the light cylinder of ash collapsed into a thin even layer across the coloured glass.” The attack on Nurnberg is going as planned?”

Major Andropov held his breath as the nauseous whiff of the strong tobacco flowed past him. “Yes Comrade General Gregori. It is failing.”

“Good. Zucharnin has no hint of an idea that I influenced the decision by the Army Command to reduce his scales of armour and air support and replace them with the thirty-two punishment battalions who have been sitting around, eating their heads off?”

“No Comrade General, he knows nothing. His ignorance ensures his attempts to take the city continue with a degree of desperation. Leading elements of his troops have reached the river but the bridges have been blown and he has not the armoured engineer assault equipment to replace them. He has taken barely a third of the city.”

“That’s very good. “Any thing else you know that might add to my pleasure?”

“I understand the NATO rearguard had been successful in blocking some autobahns, slowing his ammunition convoys. I understand that difficulty may be overcome now to some degree but his stocks must be low and will take a while to build up again.”

“Oh excellent, so even the Gods are on my side. I never planned on that. Yes, excellent. And have you compiled that report on him and the nature of his covering for his stepson, Captain Pritkov whose incompetence he has repeatedly condoned and concealed.”

“The report is here.” Major Andropov slid a bulky folder on to the desktop. Many loose leaf sheets inside it made it untidy and he ineffectually tried to pat it straight, then stopped when he realised his fussing was irritating the General. After removing his hand from it he could not resist giving it a little extra push forward for emphasise.

Ah, how Andropov wished he had such a report on General Gregori. His KGB controller had made it very clear that his further promotion depended on his submitting a dossier on his superior. Damn, the man had to have a weakness. A liking for expensive cigars hardly qualified as evidence. He had also furnished his office and quarters with the last word in luxury, but it was all looted from the West Germans, so enjoying such trappings was hardly something he could make much of in his reports. Indeed he was not above indulging in such luxuries himself. There had to be something more substantial.

General Grigori was a realist, a hard headed practical man. He knew that the report on Zucharnin protecting his stepson was of no real consequence. Everyone in the army was doing favours for someone else, but any such facts coming to light at a critical time, like just after an assault has failed could have a measure of importance quite unexpected when added to everything else.

If things went wrong, mistakes were made, and there was a trial, such a document could be made to serve many purposes. He knew General Zucharin to be a spiteful man. He was also devious and ruthless. And his fate, his future, could possible be determined by a few lines that told how he covered for a worthless relative who, among other errors, sent a few trucks the wrong way and in to a enemy ambush.

“And Captain Pritkov himself, what of him. Is he of any use, beyond presently supplying snippets of tittle-tattle about his step-father?”

“To employ a saying the British have, he is a waste of space General. Incompetent, deceitful, untrustworthy.”

General Grigori ignored a second file that was edged towards him. “So, there will come a time, quite soon, when General Zucharin will be eliminated. But the Captain, he has been a useful tool. Could he be again?”

“The report on the General could not have been compiled without the information he provided” Major Andropov measured and delivered his words carefully. He did not want to appear to gloat. He tried to project an air of efficiency with just a touch of subservience. A balance that made him appear valuable, prepared to carry out his orders to the letter. No matter what they were.
“So he adds traitor to his other qualities. He is quite prepared to betray his family…for what?”

Andropov coughed behind his hand. “There was a certain clerk in my office he wanted to meet.”

“And was he suitably rewarded, did he get his leg over her?”

“Him.”

“It gets better. I have the whole family on a plate. That is in his file as well?” Grigori played with a paper knife, spinning it on the top of the inlaid rosewood desk. When after several rotations it came to rest with its point facing Major Andropov, he let it lie. “Tell me, it is some time since I saw the Mother. You visited Moscow recently. Has she kept her looks, has she still that superb figure, and does she flirt just as much?”

“Yes Comrade Lieutenant General, very much so. She is much admired, a superb woman and much in demand for the Moscow dinner party circuit.” Major Andropov felt a gentle breeze of satisfaction waft through his body. The hint was the lightest but he had found what he was looking for, a weakness. He knew Lieutenant Gregori’s ambition would eventually be his undoing but that might be far in the future, too far to do him any good. but this gave him a definite lead. He knew Gregori was inordinately ambitious but he hadn’t realised it ran to Zucharnins wife as well as his position. Later he would add some pages to the file he had on his General.

Gregori could be smugly satisfied with himself. Zucharnin had frequently absenting himself from head quarters on fishing trips and during those periods of absence he had sat in his place at planning meetings. Drip by drip he had influenced the outcome of those, chipping away at the allocations of armoured and airborne support. On his superiors return he’d sadly reported the outcome, but not that he had engineered it. Andropov was well aware that having made sure Zucharnin was short of the helicopters and armour he needed had been a risk but he had done it through hint and innuendo without taking any part in the direct decision-making. His contribution to the meetings had seemed so slight he had rarely featured in the minutes. There was method in what he had done and the way he had done it. By ensuring Zucharnin had barely sufficient manpower but an ample supply of ammunition to do the job had ensured that failure would be his and his alone. Grigori would be there to step in, to pick up the pieces and to succeed in his place. Any miraculous turn around of the battle would be to his credit alone.

If it came to an inquiry then the members of any tribunal, knowing how parsimonious had been their ammunition scales when they were field commanders, would have scant sympathy for any complaint about the quality of the troops he had been given when his ammunition supplies had been so lavish.

The mass infantry assaults would stall, he was certain that they would. But whatever the reason he would have his excuse to eliminate Zucharnin, then he would unleash the surprise he had prepared. His assault troops would leapfrog across the river at Nurnberg, using the bridging equipment he had held back. It had been a thorn in the Warsaw Pact side since the first days of the war. It still held out and threatened every advance in that sector. Already the cities defences had blunted and stalled a dozen major assaults.

He had spent so much time working on this plan. All the time as second in command he had been forced to do no more than organise the training of reserve troops. Even now he looked again at the map on his wall and in his minds eye saw advancing columns and fleeing enemies.

There were still nagging doubts in his mind. There was the salient centred on Bayreuth, further to the north. Zucharnin had used the area to hold troops being refitted and brought up to strength. When he took over it would be better to not be too adventurous in that direction. Better to use those second rate infantry units to continue to hold the northern flank than to risk them in an advance that might fail and need reinforcing with units from elsewhere.

But even with this limitation on his objectives he would still be the hero of the hour. Nurnberg would be a huge defeat for the British and the West Germans. They would have no choice but to pull back and with luck the retreat would turn in to a route. The old fools in the Kremlin would have to promote him to full general at last. He clenched his fist, he could feel a Marshals baton in it already, and Zucharnins neck under his heel.

* * *

“At least he doesn’t weigh much.” Thorne had wrapped strips of cloth around the pliant hawthorn branches to form
a litter. He wished he had instead tied at least one around his face. The old man smelt terrible and his body still leaked some of the filth he had evacuated as he fought for his last breaths.

Twice the slight body had slipped off the makeshift stretcher, or rather through it, when the thin material forming the sling had given way. The Russians had not allowed them to gather better timber from the fir plantations and they had been forced to use all that was available, a stunted overgrown shrub growing beside a near derelict cottage. It was so spindly that it had not even been raided for firewood, not as yet. Eventually though even its roots would be grubbed out.

The scrap of rag covering the old man face kept falling away and Andrea in her character as a grieving daughter had frequently to replace it.

The Russian escort trailed along behind them. The soldier had picked some daisies and was, with some blades of young wheat, creating a miniature bouquet. With his rifle slung over his shoulder he was taking no interest in the burial party.

The pit was enormous and had obviously been excavated with explosives. The sides were ragged and chunks of loose material stuck up in places through the single layer of corpses in the bottom.

They carried the old man's body to the far end. Had the Russian guard been paying attention he would doubtless have objected and stopped them as soon as they reached the hole. Instead he traipsed along behind them, taking no note of where he was, intent only on the miniature flower arrangement he was going to press and mail to his girl friend in Minsk. He did look up as the body tumbled down the crumbled side of the grave, and started to look round to see where the sole mourner had got to, and received Andrea's blow on the side of the jaw with total surprise.

She would have delivered a second blow but he sagged to his knees and slumped sideways to join the body that was still slowly rolling to its final resting place. They ended up enmeshed, a tangle of arms and legs.

“Come on, the squad will be wondering where we’ve got to.” Revell led a fast pace through the straggling plantation. It had already been harvested of mature trees but those too stunted or storm damaged had been left, and with the high piled debris from where the trees had been trimmed they had ample cover to make it back to the Iron Cow.

Two bodies lay beside it, two Russian officers. They had been stripped of the heavy quality coats, pistols and badges.

“We let them walk right up to us.” Dooley was examining the Makarov pistol he had kept for himself. “They were chatting away, happy as you please. Must have come as quite a shock.”

“The ultimate, I imagine.” Revell looked at the bodies. “You took a chance, if they’d been on the button they could have run off yelling for help.”

“Once they’d seen us it seemed safer to keep our heads down and let them come to us.” Burke was stood on the top of the engine housing, packing tools, binding each of them in strips torn from the coats, to stop them from rattling.

“How come they got so close”?

“They came up from the other side of the hill Major. We could only keep a watch from beneath the hedge and that had a limited view. If I’d put someone on the other side or on top of the wagon they’d have been visible for miles. These two just came up on our one blind spot.” Sergeant Hyde was securing a gag on their technician prisoner. “At the last moment this perisher spotted them and went to call out, Libby just managed to clamp his hand over his mouth in time. I don’t want to take any more chances.”

“Are there any others about?” Revell ushered the crew aboard.

“Far side of the hill there is a GAZ command car with a driver reading a book.” Hyde stowed an M60 that had been positioned outside. “He could be their driver. Their boots don’t look mucky enough to have walked too far over this ground. I think they must have trotted up here for a view of the woodland, to check their camouflage, or something
like that. If we’re taking off in that direction then he can’t miss us. The thing has two damned great aerials so he can
call down problems for us pretty quick.”

“I think we can deal with that OK.” Revell was last in and smacked the control to close the rear ramp.

Using minimum power Burke nudged the APC through the hedge and started almost to glide the machine down the
hill towards the distant staff car. They were still a couple of hundred metres away when the driver saw them. He got
out of the car, folding a page to mark his place, calmly put his book on the seat and then stood waiting with his head
on one side in an attitude of puzzlement, not recognising the unmarked hovercraft.

At fifty yards distance his alarm showed and he reached back inside, bringing out a radio microphone. Even then he
acted undecided. At twenty metres, as the approaching vehicle accelerated towards him he began to bring the
microphone up to his mouth, then threw it down and turned to run.

The Iron Cow slewed sideways, skidding across the young crops. It caught him across the chest and crushed him
into the side of the vehicle. A spurt of blood from his pulverised lungs arced across the fully distended ride skirts. The
heavy Kevlar sheets were as hard as metal under full inflation and the collision with the staff car sent it toppling
over while the body of the driver ended up thrown inside it so that his legs stuck out, straight up in to the air.

“No dignity in death, is there.” Clarence caught a glimpse of the bizarre tableaux as they drove past.

“Who gives a shit when they’re dead.” Libby looked out through the gun port in the turret.

Sergeant Hyde sat down to watch Carson and Lieutenant Andy trying to fasten more straps to the nuclear weapon.
They had already lifted it and wadded cloth beneath it, as an improvised shock absorber.

Several of the others were watching as well. Andrea could no longer look. She had her head in her hands and her
eyes closed. She was sat as far to the back as possible, opposite their prisoner. He too was watching, making little
groaning noises through his gag. Sweat was pouring down his face and soaking his collar. At every jolt the two
specialists put their hands out to steady the device.

Burke took them down a shallow streambed and then up a section of bank when a large fallen tree blocked their
path. As they climbed the craft canted over and then levelled up with a jarring crash. There was a sudden series of
clicks from the Geiger counter.

Carson tugged at Revell sleeve and put his head close to talk to him. “I think we had better find some where to pull
over.”

“Urgent?”

“Yup, kinda getting that way.”

* * *

It had taken a nerve wracking three-kilometre drive before they had found somewhere suitable. The tall unpainted
metal silos flanking the derelict building suggested it had been some sort of food processing plant. All the windows
were gone and the cast concrete structure was cold. Its roof had collapsed long ago and its interior, exposed to the
elements, had filled with leaf litter. A few straggling shrubs sprouted from cracks in the floor and walls. That very
likely explained why it had not become a home to refugees at any time in the past. There was no evidence that it had
ever had any sort of occupation since it had closed down, that and its isolated position at the end of a rusted and
overgrown single-track railway line.

Only Carson had remained in the vehicle. The tension had been too great for most of the others and all had
volunteered to stand guard about the place. It took Major Revell an hour to make contact with the nearest NATO
headquarters. Fortunately it was only six kilometres away, in Bayrueth but the question he had got Boris to encode
and send was never going to be answered by a commander at local level. The question had a long way to go up the
chain of command and it would be some time before it started its tortuous journey back down to them.
The counter was still rapping out its steady series of clicks but Carson had helped to soothe their frayed nerves by turning its volume right down.

“What do you think? If it’s going critical, that the right term? will we be able to lift it out and drive away or will it be a case of not touching it and doing a runner.” Not even wanting to rock the craft by going back inside, Revell posed the question from the open rear hatch.

“I truly don’t know.” Carson drummed his finger tips on his knees as he sat with them either side of the much decorated pack. “The problem is here.”

With the chisel end of the felt tip pen he indicated the two neat puncture holes made by the Russian bullets. “I can trace the path of one of them, it didn’t go far and didn’t hit anything serious, but this one,” he indicated the lower hole, “is not so straight forward. In fact it is actually a bit of a bugger.

“Is it still in there?” Revell wasn’t sure he really wanted to know, but he could not prevent himself asking.

“Oh yes, in fact they are both still in there, but as I said, this one higher up is not that important. “Bombs are like bodies.” Sitting back, Carson put his pen away. “It’s better if you can get the slug out, because if you don’t, and its some where vital, then it can move about and do more harm.”

“Especially if the body is moved?

“Just so, especially if the body is moved.”

“That stuff you encoded for HQ. Was that just technical stuff, or political.”

“Both, and even if it hadn’t been I suspect that either would have been dealt with in both ways before they got back to us.” Carson wished he could talk to the officer openly but very little of his work was suitable for shop talk.

“You mean if you asked a technical question the answer could well be based on other than technical considerations.” Revell was beginning to get an inkling of the depths of the matter with which they were having to deal. He was under no illusions; he knew that in many respects they were considered expendable. It would not be consideration of their lives that was holding up the decisions.

“Yes, that’s about it. And if I asked a why or where question they would ask for technical information before answering it.” Checking the Geiger counter to see that the volume was turned down as far as possible, Carson debated with himself whether or not it might be kinder to shut it off altogether for a while. He decided against doing it. While the respite from what sounded horribly like a count down would doubtless be welcome, at some stage he would have to turn it on again, and that would be worse.

Boris had sat on an old piece of partially dismantled machinery. It was starting to strike cold through his combat clothes. He knew he would have to be the one to return inside before any of the others. The thought that if anything happened it would be so fast he’d have no knowledge of it was uppermost in his mind, but somehow it didn’t help. After a minor stroke his father had spent the last five years of his life worrying himself physically sick at the thought he might have another. Now Boris knew how he felt. For the first time ever he could understand the fear his father had lived with for all that time. He had eventually died of liver failure instead.

Simmons struggled not to show the anxiety he felt. He tried to get others to play cards, but the couple of times a game was started it soon fizzled out, with players making foolish mistakes and throwing in their hands early, or misdealing or any one of a dozen reasons for not continuing. As the youngest member of the unit he had made much of his fitness, his toughness. He had in many previous dangerous situations acted recklessly, even shown off but this was different and he couldn’t summon any of his usual banter, his usual willingness to make light of a situation.

“Message coming through.” Carson heard the printer chattering and called Boris.

Entering, Boris wished he had originally left the APC through the slim front door, leaving it open for his return. It would have meant squeezing past Burkes controls and drivers seat before reaching his own position but it would not have meant moving past the bomb. The stupid thought occurred that if he stumbled and set it off then they would all
blame him. But they wouldn’t. Neither he nor they would ever know he had fallen against it and set it off.

But with most power turned off, the drain on the batteries to actuate the door would have risked taking too much away from the communications panel. And manual operation was out of the question. A glancing cannon shell hit had distorted the door and opening it was now an operation that called for force and frequently resulted in the doors resistance suddenly ceasing and the thing flying back and crashing in to the hull.

So he found himself very conscious of the noise his steel shod boots made as he went up the ramp. Every move he made, as he crabbed sideways between Carson and the bomb, every noise as his chair squeaked when he turned it and then sat. Checking the printout his heart sank when he saw it called for an acknowledgement. He knew it would, was certain, but he didn’t want to. His fingers barely brushed the keys and then he was done, except that he should have to go out again. He couldn’t bring himself to do it. It was now obvious why Andrea had occupied the rear bench seat. It was hard to know which was worse, squeezing past the bomb or staying in here with it.

“I’ll stay, here, take it.” Reaching out as far as he could, he just managed to pass the slip of paper to Carson’s fingertips.

Note pad on one knee, the document held on the other Carson began to transcribe the coded message. After completing the first third of the close spaced print he called Andy and gave it to him for completion. When it was done he read it through and then went out to beckon Revell aside.

“Is there any chance you could give us a smooth run from here, across the Warpac lines and in to ours?” Lieutenant Andy looked sheepishly apologetic as he asked, especially as he knew the answer.

“Even if HQ in Bayreuth can give me some indication of the Russian dispositions and some advice on terrain, maybe a few aerial photographs, then there is still no chance we’ll get through without hitting a lot of bumps and very likely having some commie shells bounce off of us pretty hard. Do I take it that our little ticking friend is not in the condition to do the journey?”

“Bumping it about about does alter all the odds.”

“Reading between the lines it sounds like NATO Head Quarters is worried we’ll get so far then go pop and take out our own front line.” Revell was sure he could imagine the gist of the message. “If we obliterate our front line then that will give the local commies a walk through. This may be a quiet sector but they would be sure to take advantage of such an incident. I can’t pretend otherwise, the run will be bad, real bad.”

Revell had made many crossings of the front lines to get in and out of the Zone. Usually they would be negotiating ground that had been reconnoitred, either by drones or satellites or even by ground patrols. That sort of information wasn’t available to them this time, they would be crossing territory they were not familiar with, encountering enemy emplacements whose position and firepower was largely an unknown factor. Even if Bayreuth HQ told him everything they could scrape together there would still be much that could come as a bad surprise.

“I should think it will be about as rough as you can imagine, and then some. We’re talking about the military equivalent of a blindfold wild roller-coaster ride.”

The lieutenant rubbed his face with both hands and then took off his helmet to run them through his close-cropped red hair. “Then it’s a risk we can’t take. We’ll unload where we are.”

“We’re destroying it?”

“No, we’ve had word and technical advice from the powers that be. They want us to fix it, bring it back. They reckon two hours work to stabilise it sufficiently to take the knocks of a cross country journey.”

It was not the news Revell had been expecting and the squad certainly wasn’t. Their react was mixed, noisy. He had to be loud himself to quiet them down and regain control.

Clarence’s objection was the most valid. “So we’ll be carting it home just as we lose last light. You want us to do the journey in the dark? We are as likely to get shot up by our own side. You know our gunners, none of the pay one
jot of attention to the recognition charts. They’ll shoot us full of holes before we can get out any visible recognition signals.”

The point was a good one. Revell himself had been worrying about crossing the territory between the opposing lines. Every conceivable obstruction would be encountered. It was better to wait and go at first light instead. If they lost the cover of the night at least they had a better chance of negotiating the chewed up land between the Russian and NATO lines safely. Revell made that decision. Instantly and instinctively he knew it was the right one and announcing it had the effect of subduing the squad, placating their near insubordinate questioning.

“Well that will give us plenty of time to work, and test the results.” Carson spat on his hands and rubbed them together. “Right, who is going to give me a hand moving my box of tricks to a spot with a tad more elbow room.”

* * *

General Zucharnin experienced a sensation of contentment. It was brief, coming from the satisfaction of a plan that was falling in to place. All morning he had been working on staff problems, paperwork. He hated it but he had no wish to get a black mark at this stage because his returns were not up to date. But now it was all done and he could again concentrate his attention on the wall map. Reports had kept coming in all morning confirming that the advance into Nurnberg was definately stalled at the river.

Surprisingly, considering the calibre of the troops he had to work with, to either side of the city some local crossings had been made and tiny bridgeheads established. Heaven only knew what with, they had no bridging equipment. Of course they would not last, he had never expected that any would, but if by a miracle one or two were still clinging on the next day he would allow his local commanders to exploit opportunities.

In the south of the sector Regensburg was still a rock against which he could hurl troops and armour to their destruction if he wanted to, but he didn’t want to, not yet. The time would come, when the cities defences were threatened from behind as well.

The reports from Bamberg in the north was exactly what he expected to hear. After some initial successes the attack had stalled. Probing attacks between the centres, little more than a series of reconnaissance in force type engagements had done no more than tie down NATO troops who might otherwise have reinforced the cities defences.

And that left just Bayreuth a town in the far north of his sector only ten kilometres from the demarcation line between his and another command. It formed a small salient in to the Zone but was of no consequence from any point of view. NATO shunted troops in and out of the area for rest and refitting. It had been Warsaw Pact custom to employ the ground for much the same purpose. Apart from a little sniping and occasional artillery exchange there was nothing much going on there.

At least there hadn’t been. At the side of the map General Zucharnin had a supply of spare coloured pins and arrows. Nice bright shiny new ones that had never been used before. How he longed to plunge those into their appropriate positions and get ready to move them, but he couldn’t do that yet. Not just yet.

Looking again at the map the General sighed and moved the spare markers down the side from the top to nearer its centre, where they would attract no attention or comment.

Captain Pritkov entered and as was his habit when the General had not have been expecting him, would not have had the chance to conceal anything, his first action was to glance at the map, to ensure nothing was happening that he should know about. Lieutenant General Gregori had been delighted with the snippets of information he had initially provided, had promised him promotion on the strength of it. Of late though there had been less to pass on. It was very frustrating. How he wished his mother had never married Zucharnin. She just couldn’t see that the man was after her family influence as well as her money. He had coveted the lovely four-bedroom apartment over-looking the Kremlin wall and spires from across the river. And the dacha on the Black Sea, that was what he was after.

Pritkov had got rid of earlier boy friends. Zucharnin might be harder to ease out, but it could be done. If he could get
him demoted, even jailed, then his mother would divorce him fast enough. But he would have to be careful or she
might begin to suspect.

“What is it this time?” Zucharnin was finding himself with less and less patience

with the boy. Certainly that was how he thought of him, as just a kid. He might have the grand title of Staff Captain
but it conferred almost no authority on him, and certainly as little responsibility as was possible.

“The units in the sector south of Bayreuth.”

“What about them.” Zucharnin was instantly on his guard, the boy had been trawling for information quite a lot
recently. For a basically lazy person it appeared strange that he was taking an active interest in anything, but
especially that he should be curious about that location.

“Alright, what about them. Get a move on.”

Trying to appear casual, Pritkov put a stapled wad of papers on to the general’s desk. “They have been taking
delivery of large quantities of ammunition lately. A very large amount for reserve units. They have also been trying
to obtain stocks of petrol and diesel, far more than their vehicle scales and static situation would require normally. Is
there a reason?”

Zucharnin pursed his lips and allowed himself a few moments to gather his thoughts. He was certainly not going to
reveal his plans to the boy. The alternatives were to bawl him out and frighten him off or to offer some plausible
explanation that would satisfy him. It just wasn’t in his nature though to handle a situation by taking the soft option.

“What the bloody hell has it got to do with you? You’re job is not to oversee such things so keep your damned nose
out of business that is no concern of yours, that you don’t understand. If you did a half decent job of sorting out my
transport problems you wouldn’t have time to go poking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

The blast made Pritkov take a step back and his bottom lip trembled. “I was just asking why…”

“Well don’t bloody ask. Get on with your own work, stay out of mine.”

As Pritkov closed the office door the staff in the outer officer hurriedly bent over their desks, simulating activity. Of
course they had been listening and they certainly could not have helping hearing the tearing off he had got from the
general. God, how he hated the man, loathed him. Uncouth, ill mannered. A peasant. What on earth did mother see
in him.

Making his way back to his own office he could feel his face burning and a bitter fury burned inside him. Now he
had to get him, claw him down from his lofty position and have him thrown into a penal battalion. Yes, that would
be nice. But how to do it. So far he had passed to the Lieutenant General Gregori no more than tittle-tattle, nothing
of any real substance.

He found he still had the papers in his hand. Throwing himself in to the deep-buttoned leather armchair beneath the
window he scanned the list gain. What little he had absorbed of what the army had tried to teach him told him that
these fuel requests and ammunition quantities were far in excess of the requirements of units in a static reserve
condition.

Nothing was planned in that area. The hard look he had taken at the general’s map told him that. So why would they
need anti-tank rockets and gasoline on these scales. What could it all be used for? He rang for one of his staff.

The officer who came in was a good choice. A bookish looking lieutenant he was one of those irritating men who
studied his subject hard and was always able to show up his superiors by being better informed, better grounded in
any of his specialities. It was why he had never got beyond his present position.

Pritkov handed over the sheaf of close typed sheets. “If I gave you that to execute, what would you think was
planned?”
The officer gave a weak smile in acknowledgement of the instruction. He flipped back and forth through the information. “I would say you are asking me to equip a reinforced infantry division for an assault and follow up pursuit.”

“Follow up?”

“Yes Captain. The fuel requirement is too much for attacking a limited objective. It is insufficient for massed armour but the proportions of diesel to petrol would suggest an anticipated high mileage by light forces; scout cars and armoured personnel carriers for an assault and break-out.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes.”

The officer ran his finger down one of the pages.

“The engineers supplies, it is strange. If it is an assault against prepared defences then there is no provision for mine lifting. And the artillery stocks. Sufficient I would say for some long range counter battery work but most of the weight is close support munitions, mortars and Katushas. I would say that some one, judged by the absence of armour is embarking on an infantry assault against anticipated light opposition. Unless their Intelligence information is flawless they are taking an enormous risk.”

* * *

Zucharnin had enjoyed giving vent to his feelings. He had said what he had wanted to say for a long time. Of course he risked making an enemy of the boy, but what harm could that do. The wimp was in no position to do him any damage. Beyond office tittle-tattle what could he have that would make trouble. He looked again at the map and plucked out one of the new pins and let it hover over the north of the area. The tip of the shining point rested on the paper. It had a pink head. He looked at the others and ran over what they would represent in his mind. There was something missing. Of course, something to mark the refugees. He buzzed the intercom to the outer office.

“I want some more map markers. I want red ones. Blood Red.”

* * * *

The bomb felt hot to the touch, or at least Revell imagined it to be. But then he had also thought he had seen it glowing. Fear was capable of doing strange things to the mind.

Andrea had gone off to the far side of the site and now crouched on the ground, hugging her grenade launcher, her eyes closed. None of the others had such extreme reaction but all were showing the strain. Their ways varied, from Ripper’s forced light-heartedness to Burke’s veneer of nonchalance.

Four of them carried the bomb from the APC to a corner. Some slabs of broken concrete were stacked close by to use as improvised tables to hold the tools.

Corporal Thorne began preparing detonators for the thermite blocks. If a sudden need arose to employ them there would not be the time for such delicate precision work. He moved well away from their transport, taking out only two blocks at a time. He was happy to get the distraction, laying them on a rusty steel cabinet door ripped from some storage room.

“OK.” Carson looked up at the clouds and then down to tiny sliver of light that came from a heavily masked torch. “Let’s hope the sky stays clear.”

A few wisps of cloud were scudding past, occasionally concealing the wafer thin slice of a new moon. Lieutenant Andy was laying out tools and testing meters. “If the weather is the worst we have to worry about, I am happy.”

Dooley took up an M60 to go to the guard post he had been allotted. “I wish I was as easy to please.” He took a look at the bomb, almost invisible in the dark save where a small patch inside an inspection panel was illuminated by a
narrow beam from a torch. “And I wish I wasn’t so shit scared.”

The work on the device took far longer than expected, with Lieutenant Andy twice having to relay questions through the local HQ about technical matters. When tools were dropped or the shielding from a torch slipped and filled the ruined building with glaring light it stretched all their nerves to breaking point. A couple of times the two specialists walked away from the job, to quietly discuss some problem, to ease the tension they were experiencing.

For long hours Revell watched them work, breaking off occasionally to check the guard posts. Always though he returned to keep his vigil. Strangely, he had been thinking about the dark haired woman when his mobile phone vibrated fiercely in his pocket. Shaking himself fully alert he took the call. He recognised her voice.

“It is Linda, I have no time”

There was a lot of noise in the background, shouting.

“The Russian soldiers have come in to the camp, thousands of them. They are flooding out of the tree plantations. They are rounding up people, everyone, at random.”

“Can you tell what their purpose is, can you see what they’re doing.” Still Revell could hear the loud confusion behind her voice, and in her voice, fear. It must be taking a super human effort to keep talking when everything inside her was prompting her to run, or hide.

“They are lining people up…I thought they were going to shoot them, but they are not. They are marching them away, the soldiers pushing the people ahead of them. They are doing it very fast, they are shooting any who move too slowly.”

To verify that Revell could hear single shots, but so many of them that they crackled almost like automatic fire.

He couldn’t think what to say. ”Can you tell what direction they are heading?” The first pale streaks of first light were visible on the horizon.

“Oh yes, they are marching them towards the west. Away from the sunrise. I am sure. And now they are coming this way, what should I do? They will be here soon. I must put the children’s coats on.” There was an edge to her voice, barely controlled fear.

“Hold back as long as you can. Get in to the middle or back of the column. Avoid the front at all costs.” The phone made a scratching, scrabbling noise and then Revell heard the signal end abruptly. He could only think she must have jammed it in her pocket and switched it off, before the Russians saw it.

‘Away from the sun.’ Even now her feminine inability to know direction had been obvious, but she had come up with what she could. The Russian infantry, propelling tens of thousands of civilians was moving away from the sun. They were moving west, straight for the weak NATO defences south of Bayreuth.

“On your feet, now.”

The major’s shout carried all the urgency he had intended and the squad bolted for the hovercraft. The bomb had already been fastened on board. None of them worried about bumping it now as they packed on to the benches. Dooley, last man in, pushing past their Russian prisoner. He looked weary, exhausted. All night others had been pushing past him to take their turn to sleep on the benches.

“All aboard. Closing up.”

Revell had been scribbling on a pad, now he tore it off and handed it to their signaller. “Make it top priority and don’t make a mistake.”

“What’s happening Major.” Sergeant Hyde asked the question loudly.

“The Reds are clearing out that camp. They’re marching the refugees ahead of them as human shields.”
“Engines up to speed and running sweet as a nut Major. Five percent extra on the port motor.”

“All electronics functioning, signals poor.” Boris was the next to check in over the intercom’ circuit.

“Turret guns OK.” Libby checked his ready-use ammunition was to hand.

“Good. Hold it for the moment.” Major Revell listened as Burke eased off on the power so as to keep the turbine chambers within the optimum temperature range.

Hunched over his communications board, Boris was hitting his keyboard with lightning speed, his face creasing in concentration. Twice more at short intervals he pounded them then turned to the officer. “They are jamming Major. Every frequency with a strength I have never seen before. They’re pushing us back in to the dark ages. No radio, no sat-nav, no satellite links, nothing.”

Revell knew the truth of the dark ages remark. Now it was up to who ever had the fastest horse. “Burke, I want every ounce of power. Use the route we checked out last night, towards the NATO lines. Everyone else, man the ports. Load the turret gun with high explosive. If I call for fire give it all you’ve got. Don’t worry about conserving ammunition. Any action is going to be short and bloody.”

* * *

Zucharnin smirked as he picked up the first marker his clerk had placed on the desk. They made a dark red line on the white blotting pad. His expression became one of intense satisfaction as he began to mark the route of his division and the civilians being herded before it.

His commanders would only have got back to their units an hour before their troops were due to cross their start line. He had deliberately called them to meet him down here, at a secret location. By the time they got back to their commands they would have missed a nights sleep, a supper and breakfast. They would be tired, hungry and bad tempered. That was just what he wanted. If the refugees slowed, tried to turn aside or even turn back, then the Soviet soldiers among them would drive them forward. If the Commanders were ill tempered then that attitude would cascade down to the ranks and for once the ordinary soldiers would have others to bully, to drive.

He added the other unit markers. He had no need to refer to anything, he had it all engraved on his memory. The nature of the terrain he knew by heart. Several inspection trips had familiarised him with every valley, every town, village and every hedgerow.

Everything that needed to be done, had been done. And now that the moment was here there was nothing more for him to do. Every one down to the lowliest NCO knew his place and function precisely. The mass of staff work had been completed on the spot so that no one in his headquarters would have any idea. His imbecile stepson was the only one who had openly questioned what was going on. Any others of his officers who had suspected the planned attack had retained the good sense to keep their mouths shut.

It was now just a case of waiting. Signallers following the advance would be laying landlines. NATO jamming counter measures would be by-passed that way. Three hours, perhaps less if the troops were utterly ruthless, as they had been ordered, would see the first wave of the refugees approaching the NATO defences. The minefields would be breached quickly beneath the civilian’s feet. The light outer defences of the NATO line would likely be empty by the time his men reached them and even if they weren’t they would go down like straw as they hesitated to fire for fear of hitting the refugees.

He could well imagine the total confusion among the NATO troops, faced with a herd of innocents being propelled towards them. They might try selective fire but with his division so enmeshed with the refugees they would surely not resist for long. They would fall back and once that started to happen it would have a domino effect.

Even when the civilians no longer served any purpose, when his troops had burst clean through and were swinging south to roll down behind the NATO defences those headless sheep would be swarming through the countryside, blocking roads and rapidly becoming a logistical nightmare for NATO, with their demands for food, shelter and medical supplies.
In anticipation he put a gnarled finger on to one of the markers and nudged it forward an almost imperceptible distance.

For the next few hours he would not leave the map. All he needed was that and his telephone. It sat on the desk, the only white one among the several black handsets. In the next few hours it was not just the success of the assault that would hang in the balance; his future, even his very life depended on this brief passage of time.

The gamble he was taking was colossal. He had siphoned off troops to form the attack division. Concealed them, trained them, equipped them. All they lacked was gunships and main battle tanks though he had obtained fifteen heavy tracked assault guns. Keeping them moving with their gargantuan thirst for fuel was a commanders nightmare but the quantities of light weapons his division had required and the ammunition, that had been easy to obtain. The quantities of such things in the Zone were vast, so great that no one really tried to keep a tally any more. Even the Soviet High Command, so meticulous about controlling every aspect of every function of its armies would take months to discover the materials that had been redirected, the infantry Division that existed on no Kremlin order of battle. Even the fleet of armoured personnel carriers and scout cars had been produced from nothing, battlefield salvage, vehicles that had been declared write-offs. He had them put through his own improvised workshops, even produced some new ones in an automobile plant they had over-run months before. He had reported it to Moscow as being beyond hope of being made suitable for vehicle production ever gain. Smaller factories, employing impressed East and West German workers and many Czechs and Poles had been turned over to production of essential bridging equipment and radio jamming sets to be mounted on trucks. And what he saw as one of his most successful diversions of supplies, the conversion of seventy new GAZ six wheel trucks to carry 210mm Katusha rocket launchers, plus sufficient reload rounds to last through a prodigious expenditure of ammunition during the opening stages of the battle.

And all this done secretly. The staff work alone had been a masterpiece of subterfuge, involving the setting up of a shadow HQ well away from this one. And all drawn from ex-staff officers he had combed out of the punishment battalions. At least forty senior staff officers had been found in the ranks of those outfits, and with them all the clerks, mapmakers and Intelligence staff he could want.

The secrecy so essential to his plan had been guaranteed by using those men. He had made their lives better, guaranteed they would indeed live longer than they would in the ranks of the penal battalions. An offer none had been able to refuse.

And the closest anyone had got to spoiling all that had been the dolt Pritkov, stumbling across a piece of paper that should not have even been here, let alone where he could find it. Too late for him to do any harm now though, Zucharnins’ men and their captive shield were on the march. By the end of the day he would have achieved the breakthrough that the High Command had been so eager to see but were too stupid to manage themselves.

Time after time they had forced him, usually before he was ready, to throw his division against the NATO defences of the cities. And that with second rate, reserve and untrained infantry, mostly with minimal armoured support. Such attacks went against the doctrines that had made the Russian army so successful in the Second World War. Cities swallowed army’s, diluted any assault until instead of progressing many kilometres every day a full strength division of fourteen thousand men would regard another couple of streets captured as good progress in the same twenty-four hours.

He wished he could be with that first assault wave. He could picture it. The sky torn by sheets of flame as the rocket salvos roared overhead. The dashing scout cars hurling forward to unleash their anti-tank rockets against NATO tanks and bunkers and the battle taxis exploiting every hole in the defences, dropping their troops to tackle difficult objectives. And at the heart of the attack the giant 152 and 210mm tracked assault guns blasting any strong-points.

Best of all, his infantry moving forward, propelling the lines of refugees before them and all that with virtually no fire being returned, the NATO forces falling back, abandoning everything, unable to retaliate for fear of slaughtering the ranks of the civilians.

For them it would be a death march. To keep them going the Russian troops would show no mercy.

* * *
The infantry and the accompanying refugees had traversed only a third of the way to the NATO line and already there was the crackle of gunfire as mopping up parties shot those who couldn’t, or wouldn’t keep up. Many of the people were wearing shoes never intended to be more than fashion accessories. As their footwear disintegrated so they began to hobble and finally to collapse with the pain inflicted by thorns and stones. The quick-witted tore off an item of clothing and wrapped strips around their bleeding soles. More slumped down, sat and waited as the sound of gunfire came nearer.

Old people suffered first, and the most. Unable to keep up they gradually fell back through the marching ranks until they were caught and killed by the military police units.

Linda carried one child on her back, dragged another two by their hands or their clothes, what ever it took to keep them moving and ahead of the trailing killers. She had risked falling back through the first twenty or thirty ranks from their original position near the front. Now they were in the midst of the Russian soldiers and she worked hard to ensure they lost no more ground.

Many of the civilians had not benefited from the tons of food delivered the previous day. A huge quantity, it had still not gone far among the mass of refugees. The younger men, the thugs, crooks and black marketers had grabbed a disproportionate amount, taking whole cases of canned goods that would have fed several families. The absence of drinking water had been worse. The cans of lemonade and other gassy drinks had only served to make people thirstier and now dehydration was making many ill and the numbers increased rapidly.

She had to drag the children aside as a squadron of armoured personnel carriers surged through the ranks close by. Their thrashing tracks caught several whose lack of hearing or inattention gave them no warning. It was a terrible sight as bodies were first thrown down and then lifted and smeared against the armour by the thrashing tracks.

Most sprouted weapons, from ports down their sides, from squat turrets with stubby guns surmounted by missiles and with heavy anti-aircraft machine guns on the turret tops. In many cases Russian infantry had boarded their hulls and now clung to any projection as they rode in to battle. Frequently they cheered as they saw the remains of run-down victims sprayed out behind them.

The whole was a scene from hell and Linda knew it was going to get worse, far worse.

* * *

Admiring himself in the gilded cheval mirror he’d recently had installed in his office Lieutenant General Grigori looked at himself He turned first left and then right, admiring the new uniform. How he longed to have the new insignia sewn on. He knew he would be able to do so soon enough, but in the meantime he had to cultivate patience, still more patience. It was only a matter of time before General Zucharnin would do something to put himself in serious disfavour with the Kremlin and then he would get his step up to command the front, his long deserved promotion.

Captain Pritkov was announced by his clerk and Gregori grunted, indicating for him to enter. This was annoying, the boy seemed to be forever running to him with valueless snippets of gossip. Usually he had already heard them from elsewhere anyway, but it didn’t do to discourage him. Who was to know when he just might come up with something really useful?

“General Grigori. There is something I think you should know.”

“Calm down, get your breath first.” Good God, the fool had been running. By so flagrantly drawing attention was he trying to get a fresh line of gossip going? One that would not be to his advantage. “So what is so urgent.”

“This.” With a trembling hand Pritkov held out a sheaf of crumpled type written papers.

With an experienced eye Gregori flicked through the sheets and offered them back.” What of it. It’s a summary of recent supplies to some units, likely an infantry division”

“It don’t exist.” Pritkov could not keep the excitement out of his voice. “This information came by mistake to Head Quarters. It should have gone to HQ in the Bayreuth district.”
“Don’t be silly. All we have up there are some worn out infantry battalions undergoing training and being bought up to strength. They don’t even have an HQ of their own, they are run from here. If they were run as in independent command it could be done with one staff officer and a couple of sober clerks. If you could find them.” Grigori smiled, pleased with his little joke. “You think some one is opening a large black market cash and carry?”

“But there are is fact a reinforced division there. A yet I can find no information about it, they have no designation but they are there. And I have heard they are launching an assault on Bayreuth. In the morning, at dawn.”

“Rubbish.” Grigori called for a map and snatched it out of his clerks grasp, spreading it across an elegant marble topped table pushed against the wall in a corner of the room. “Damn it, I’m his second in command.” Grigori lowered his voice, almost whispering to himself. “It would not be possible to form and equip and then launch in to battle a whole division without my knowing. No, quite impossible.”

His forefinger tapped up and down on the map. “Anyway, what point would there be? There is one American supply depot in Bayreuth, but nothing else of interest. The border with Warsaw Central Command is only a few kilometres north so there would be no advantage in going that way and to the west its just farmland and forests. They charge into that and a dozen division would just disappear.”

“There is this as well.” Pritkov withdrew a single sheet of good quality paper from his pocket and handed it over.

“Now you want me to keep an eye on the Red Cross as well?” Gregori noticed the letter heading and its distinctive emblem. He read the five lines of the letter. It was often enough that they got this sort of thing from aid organisations. “A request for information. So what.”

“If you will read it again, the numbers involved, and the location.” Pritkov was almost hopping up and down with frustration as he waited for the general to unfold the letter again and go through it once more.

“…In the area of Bayreuth. A new refugee camp. A rumoured twenty thousand. Twenty thousand! That would be the biggest camp in the whole of the Zone!” Grigori spun around to the map again. He still had the letter in his hand but now he had unthinkingly crushed it into a ball.

“A mysterious division with armour and artillery bolted on to it…. twenty thousand refugees. Zucharnin has always favoured human wave tactics. He has used civilians to clear minefields by marching across them before now. Perhaps he intends to do something like that again, but the figure of twenty thousand, if it is correct, that has to be wrong. A few hundred to tramp over minefields would do any job adequately. But where, where would he…” realisation struck Gregori. “Shit, he’s going to use them to get his division through the NATO lines and wheel them south west to get behind Nurnberg and so threaten Regensberg from the rear as well”.

“I was right to come to you then?”

“Yes, quite right. This is valuable information. I shall not forget this.” With eyes only for the map Lieutenant General Gregori made a vague dismissive wave at the Staff Captain.

“Where to start!” Gregori’s brain clicked in to cold calculating mode. If even half what he suspected was true then at last he had Zucharnin where he wanted him. He made a fist and closed it so tight his stubby nails drew blood from his palm. Step one would be confirm the existence of the ghost division that his commander had formed. Then find out about the refugees and at the same time try and get confirmation that an assault was soon to be launched. He had to find out if he had surmised the object of the attack correctly. It had to be done quickly.

He wrenched open the door and bellowed for a pad and pencil. On successive pages he wrote brief notes, writing so fast and hard that he gouged the paper. Each one he ripped off, shoved in to the hands of a clerk and told him what staff officer he wanted to deal with the matter. That done he retreated back in to his office. So Pritkov had come up with the goods. Rather late in the day but it still gave Gregori a few hours advantage over any one else. Although the only other people that mattered were the oily politicians in Moscow and in particular the Army Committee in the Kremlin. It was how he presented all this to them on which everything hinged.

As he waited for the first pieces of the information to flow back to him he forced himself to be calm. He sat in his swivel chair and made it turn gently from side to side while he leant back with his hands behind his head. At the end
of each turn to the right he again saw himself in the mirror. The new uniform looked good. It was going to look even better with the new badges of rank on the collar and cuffs.

* * *

The Iron Cow was being driven fast and being used as a weapon in itself. Twice Burke drove in to the centre of Russian artillery positions, scattering sandbags, equipment, stacks of ready use ammunition and gun crews in wild confusion.

The Russian reserve lines were only thinly held and the vehicle that launched itself at them from behind caught them all by surprise. With the cannon blasted away at point blank targets and machine gun fire hosing from the gun ports it charged in succession through a small field headquarters, a radar directed anti-aircraft site and a mortar battery. Only once in that first rush was a single shot got off against them. That was a shell from a dug-in anti-tank gun. Aimed at their rear after the vehicle had raced past, the shot from the towed 100mm gun ricocheted off the ground beside them and whirled high into the sky.

Snaking lines of trenches presented no obstacle but twice they encountered deep anti-tank ditches and had to run along parallel to them for some distance before finding crossing points. In both cases they were temporary wooden structures, very likely rigged for instant destruction but there was no one manning their defences. It was unlikely that any Russian would in any event have taken it on himself to destroy the structures in their path.

“I estimate these defence lines will be about three kilometres deep. The next one, the reserve line, will be the one most likely to be manned.”

“I think we’re coming up on it now major.” Burke sent the hovercraft through a long skidding turn to avoid a battery of field guns and charged through their vehicle park, the hovercrafts blaze of weapons setting several vehicles on fire and mowing down at least ten men as they dived for inadequate cover.

In keeping with usual Russian practise the guns were set out almost wheel-to-wheel and gun crews raced for them. They would be too late. By the time the heavy calibre weapons were loaded and aimed the Iron Cow would be out of sight. And it was, but only to run into other trouble.

Twice they took hits from small calibre automatic weapons, 7.92 and 12.7mm machine guns. The thick aluminium hull was proof against them but still they made a frightening hail of noise on the armour. The larger rounds in particular smacking the metal viciously hard, two of them boring into the thick ride skirt panels but just failing to penetrate.

They tore in to the reserve line at close to the machines maximum speed, using a short stretch of road unobstructed by craters or gun pits. A command car tried to drive out of their way and was clipped hard. Both its rear tyres punctured noisily as they were scrubbed sideways and then it was left rocking wildly, throwing out all loose equipment and its driver.

From the turret Libby sent cannon shells in to any potential opposition. A dug in T84 began to traverse its gun towards them, the commander, half out of the top hatch urging the gunner on by slapping the sides of the turret. As he realised the gun could not be brought to bear fast enough he reached for the roof mounted heavy machine gun.

Cannon shells from the racing APC splashed sparks and molten metal from the massive dome of cast steel that was all that was visible of the Russian tank. The machine gun was ripped away and one high explosive round striking the hatch in front of the commander snapped it back to crush his chest.

At the rear gun port Andrea unleashed a pyrotechnic stream of tracer and armour piercing bullets into a pair of radio trucks that stood close together, joined to each other and a tall mast by a mass of cable. The trucks soaked up the fusillade without apparent ill effect until a figure stumbled from a rear door, clutching his stomach.

Events were now beyond Major Revello’s control. Their driver had the skill; all he needed was the luck, to clear the succession of obstacles. Another anti-tank ditch looked to be a problem for them but it was an old one, had not been maintained and the sides had begun to cave in. Juggling the ride height and speed Burke was able to slide sideways in to the bottom of it and then at maximum power send them leaping up a rough slope of tumbled of soil on the far
side and back on to the level.

Single shots and light machine gun fire were starting to make a continual patter on their flanks, creating a different sound when they hit the steel turret, aluminium hull or Kevlar ride skirts. A single round found a weakness in a joint and its super-hard tip made a pimple on the interior wall where it came that close to penetrating. Twice grenades detonated against the top of the hull, coating some of the vision blocks with speckles of carbon and filling the interior with the stench of cordite and burning paint.

“We’re through. Just the front outposts now.” Burke saw that the zig-zagging communication trenches were running away from their path, not across it. They were the ones that would enable reinforcements to get to the front line without showing themselves. Now thought the defences were fully alerted and a continual hail of small arms fire hosed across the Iron Cow from every direction. A cannon shell bounced off the turret side, another produced a loud grinding sound as it wrenched away a bank of decoy launchers and they swung back and forth on the armour, still attached by a single distorted fixing and a length of cable.

The country they raced through had changed dramatically, from the green of fields and woods they were now in the midst of shell torn ground where nothing could grow. This area was regarded as only lightly fought over and yet great swathes of the land had been churned and burnt again and again, by explosives and by the crushing tracks of tanks and the deep treaded tyres of armoured vehicles, by explosives and napalm.

It was honeycombed with bunkers and gun pits. Torn sandbags and splintered baulks of timber flanked tracks worn deep by trampling boots and dragged equipment. Wire and tape cordoned huge swathes where every puddle had a scum of poisonous chemicals and the ground itself had a ghastly sickly look. As they travelled further in to the strip of land that separated the two armies so they encountered belts of razor wire, much of it torn about with ripped up posts. What remained was designed to channel attackers into minefields protected by interlocking fields of fire.

The war in the Zone had taught the men who fought in it every conceivable skill in killing, brought to a pitch every art of defence and attack. One after another the squad were driving through positions that were mutually supporting and layered in such a way that attacks by armour or infantry would be sucked in to a maelstrom of destruction.

Ahead of them a curtain of mortar fire was going own. Out beyond the front line positions a barrage warmed in intensity, waiting for them to run its gauntlet.

A continuous curtain of dirt and shrapnel was lifting, becoming impenetrable.

“We come out on the other side of that and we are going to run straight on to our own guns.” Revell was all too well aware that in that lay a risk as great as any they had faced in running through the Soviet positions. Possibly a greater risk. The hovercraft was a rare beast and was not even on a lot of gunner’s recognition charts. On either side. That might confer advantage among the Russians when, unable to positively identify the machine they had at times held their fire, but not when faced by their own sides anti-tank guns and teams when they would run the real risk of coming under attack for the same reason.

Pulling hard over to avoid a falling salvo, Burke could not prevent the hovercraft side-sliping on liquid soil and dipping the machines nose in to a giant shell hole. They hit the bottom with a monstrous splash, throwing out much of the oily water lying there.

The involuntary halt in no-mans land was an opportunity not to be missed. Revell realised.” Simmons, Thorne, grab the recognition panels and fix them on the front.”

With the front exit jammed in to the far wall of the crater and the rear access being rapped by machine gun fire and shrapnel where it projected above the rim of the crater they had to exit through the turret hatch, with streams of tracer passing close overhead.

Sucking mud grabbed at them as they stretched the orange panel over the armour, securing it to any projection.

“Major, we’ve got company coming.” Simmons saw the Russians first. They were running from one strip of ruined trench to another, pausing in shattered machine gun posts as they advanced on the stranded machine.
About twenty men were in the advance. Their hands were filled with satchels and loose grenades and several had single shot rocket propelled grenades. Even as the two men saw them coming one launched a missile and it soared towards them, perfectly visible as it popped from its launch tube. A few metres from the tube the main motor cut in and its flight became a blur, the air behind it rippling in a haze from the super-hot gasses coming from the jet pipe.

Simmons felt he could have reached up and touched it as it soared above him, going on to be lost amid the continuing mortar deluge. “Give me an M60, and make it fast.” Both men had only their side arms and the range was too far for their pistols to be effective.

A machine gun was thrust up, butt first, and a box of ammunition was pushed up on the rooftop after it. At the same time the second hatch opened and the commanders cupola swung back.

Revell had swapped his close range shot gun for an M16 and crouching on top of the hull he opened up on the nearing infantry. As he did the M60 also clattered into life and then jammed after ten rounds. The closest of the Russians was only fifty yards away and knelt to send another anti-tank round at them. He fell clutching his throat before he could fire and Revell switched his attention to two men who were dodging from cover to cover to get close enough to hurl the grenades they carried. When one fell his companion went to ground, and stayed down.

Urged on by an officer about half the men left cover and began a dash towards the APC. Several became enmeshed in obstacles, sharp stakes and heaps of wire catching on their flapping coats and making them easy targets as they paused to pull themselves free.

Having cleared the M60 Simmons sprayed wildly, using a short belt in seconds. He lay on the port Allison housing to reload. As he did Andrea pushed up through a hatch and without pause fired off three 40mm grenades from her launcher.

The first struck the ground between two men and fragments of metal casing scythed their legs from beneath them. A second struck a charging rifleman on the chest and his upper body burst apart. The weapon he was carrying became a lethal projectile and decapitated the man beside him. A third grenade detonated in front of the officer and when the fountain of flame and smoke rose in to the sky he was down and moving only sluggishly. The barrage had driven the others to cover but several grenades flew from pits and dips in the churned terrain. All exploded well short of their target but chunks of casing still reached as far as the rear of the vehicle, zipping away in glancing blows that left only shallow silver scratches on the metal.

“There’ll be more of the blighters.” Clarence joined the group and they formed a defensive half circle about the rim of the crater. “And here they come.”

From the distant enemy emplacements sprang a full company of Russian infantry. They were shouting furiously and all had bayonets fitted to their rifles. Starting across open ground from a hundred metres away they were an easy target for the heavily armed squad and before they were half way many had been shot down and several more were limping back, holding heads and limbs, wounded by fragments from air bursts Andrea had sent over.

The losses and casualties were near instantly replaced with another group that broke from cover far off to the right, splitting the squads fire. Another bunch appeared on the left, further diluting the massed effect of the squads weapons.

“Burke, can you get us out of here, they’re starting to look awfully determined.” Libby had dropped down from the turret. With the APC nose down he was unable to depress the cannon or it co-axial weapon to bear and had joined in with an M16.

“Sure, get me a crane, or a ramp.” Juggling the controls, Burke selected a combination of down draft ducting that would lift the Iron Cows’ nose and lifting it from the cloying mud bring it back nearer to the horizontal. He just had to avoid over doing it and digging the rear of the hull in to the crater rim as they reversed. “I think I can do it. Tell the major.”

Revell was going to have to put more trust in their driver than he ever had before. He knew Burke was good and that their machine was versatile but their predicament was bad. With the full crew aboard he did not think they could do
He felt a sharp pain in his arm as a splinter of grenade casing sliced through his uniform and made a long cut across his shoulder. It was Clarence who brought the man down before he could throw a second. From among the wet soil in to which it fell the grenade went off and lifted a body, minus its arms in a bizarre push-up.

Thorne had been wounded also and blood poured from the side of his head, deeply grazed by a bullet that had clipped and removed the top of his ear. It was a growing attrition rate they could not afford. Revell estimated that at least two companies of men were trying to work their way towards them. Another missile streaked past, the roasting heat of its rocket motor starting a fire in a pack stored on the roof. Not seeing where it ended up, Revell fired off a whole clip at the direction from which it had come.

“Get everyone out, just leave the prisoner.”

Piling out at the command Libby glared back through the open hatch at the Russian, now looking white and trembling. “Great, the only one not living dangerously is the bugger who’d be happy to vaporise us all.”

Other comments were lost as the twin turbofans screamed to top speed and the front skirt inflated, successfully lifting the machine out of the crater floor. The engine notes changed and the APC thrust backwards. As Burke had feared the rear edge of the hull, riding above a barely stiffened skirt dug hard into the clinging ground. The engine note increased further as he found some extra revolutions and then the Iron Cow flew back, covering thirty yards and coming within grenade range before its driver could bring it under full control. With a nose up attitude the hovercraft slewed across the front of the crater. While it gave the crew cover to board it prevented their firing and the storm of incoming rounds peaked at the slab sided target. Thump after thump marked bullets impacts against the skirt, some penetrating it. More bullets flattened them selves against the engine housing and hull. Mercifully the only anti-tank rocket fired was ill aimed and missed by a wide margin.

The interior was a tangle of arms, legs and weapons as the squad flung them selves aboard. Libby raced to the turret and instantly machine gun fire was slashing back and forth against the lines of infantry who had suddenly got the courage to advance.

They went down as though mown and when the high velocity cannon added its power, slashing bodies to ribbons before they fell, the rest turned and bolted. Whirling the APC in its own length Burke sent the craft howling into the continuing deluge of mortar shells.

The last of the hatches was pulled shut just as a bomb exploded on the roof. They felt the air sucked from their punished lungs and then the over-pressure. Acrid smoke swept down and with it steel fragments that turned the interior in to a bloody shambles.

Pieces of the casing lanced into the prisoners arm and chest. Another slashed across Dooley’s cheek and tiny razor slivers made blood well from Clarence back and neck.

Hearing the pandemonium behind him Burke tried to select a level course but over-lapping craters made the ride a nightmare. Thrown about the compartment, more wounds were inflicted as the occupants were tossed against fittings and each other, while Samson tried to wipe away blood to determine the extent of injuries and secure dressings.

Of them all only the Russians chest wound seemed life threatening. There was blood coming from the side of his moth and breathing, especially coughing, was agony for him.

“Hell, they’ve got it again.” It was Thorne who noticed the smoke coming from the pack containing the bomb. A wide and spreading section of the marker pen embellished canvas was burning around a chunk of mortar casing that rested on top of it.

Carson reached over and dabbed out the small flames with his palm, flicking the hot fragment on to the floor. “This thing is starting to look real tatty. Think we’ll get our deposit back?”

Lieutenant Andy ruffled the thick material where trails of sparks still made beads of fire along the ragged edges. “So long as they want to take it back I just don’t care.”
Lieutenant General Gregori felt exultant. An hour of threatening, promising, bribing and sheer brutality had obtained for him the information he wanted. He didn’t have the whole picture, there was much fine detail still to be filled in but he knew enough to bury Zucharnin. In fact bury his commanding officer and rival so deep and so fast that there was no chance he would ever resurface. The only thing left to do was decide on the precise manner in which he would do it. To keep his own nose clean it would be best to go up through channels, stick to the book. But if he did that there were others above them both who would not scruple at siphoning off some, or all, of the credit for themselves.

The Kremlin had been more paranoid than usual of late, they were seeing plots in everything, the most trivial and harmless of activities. If he chose he could go to them direct. He knew they frequently accepted intelligence in its raw state, straight from its source with no filtering by the agencies who specialised in grading such material.

To tell them direct that a favoured general had built a private army, was even now using it for some purpose of his own, that would come as a shock to them and reinforce their belief that every one plotted against them. He could offer them a scalp for which he ought to be well rewarded. He had already turned over many times in his mind how he should do it. A coded signal, a ‘phone call? If a call then he would have to be ready to be interrogated, possibly passed to a senior politburo member. Would his nerve hold under snap questioning from such an analytical, politically motivated mind. The signal was the better option, safer and just as powerful in its impact. Better perhaps, a signal can be passed about. His revelations might be diluted in the retelling after a telephone conversation. And then, again, even those in the highest level positions were not averse to slanting things so that they gained credit with the Chairman, especially for uncovering plots in the Army. They always distrusted the army. Even after the millions of lives that had been laid down for their ambition, they still suspected the army of plotting counter-revolution.

He looked back to the pad he had been using. Only a few of the fifty-odd pages remained. The rest had gone into his waste bin and been burned. There could never be enough precautions taken in circumstances like these.

It was important for the sake of impact that he get all the salient facts on to one page. In any event as yet he didn’t have that many. The pressure he had brought to bear on others had provided the bare bones and there would soon be more that would flesh them out, but it could not wait.

He knew General Zucharnin had formed a phantom Division out of various units he had been able to siphon off without them being noticed. Staff officers and specialists had been drawn from the punishment battalions. Grigori looked at the names he had so far, he only knew a few but among them were some of the best strategic and tactical thinkers in the Army. It was their cleverness that had made the Kremlin suspicious of them and reduced them from exalted ranks down to privates and NCOs. One of them had been a general, top of his class at Staff College; others had been colonels and staff majors. Brilliant men whose original thinking had jarred with the small minds of the Army Council. At least four engineering works and a small car plant had been redirected to produce the larger and more sophisticated equipment an assault required. Bridging sections, radio-jamming devices, conversion mounts for anti-tank missiles, to fit them to scout cars. If the information was to be believed Zucharnin had intercepted two convoys of brand new trucks and had them fitted with rocket launchers. It was an incredible achievement. His admiration though was dangerously misplaced, Grigori knew that condemnation, not congratulation was what was called for unless he wanted to be tarred with the same brush.

But still, to equip and train thousands of men, keep them secret and to prepare them for a major attack! It was not something he could have done himself, he was forced to admit that. He would never have had the nerve to do such a thing.

The clock struck six. Its musical chimes and chunky mahogany case made it out of place. It had been Grigori’s mothers and he trusted its time keeping more than the utilitarian wall clocks beside the map. One hour to go if his informant had told him the truth. The methods he had allowed his thuggish HQ military police section to employ would certainly have extracted that. The matter of the time puzzled him. It would be light, or almost so, when Zucharnins troops crossed the start line and commenced the assault. He was sure they had virtually no armour. Odd infantry units could disappear without trace in the vast behemoth that was the Warsaw Pact Armies but not tanks, not in meaningful numbers. Without armour to lead the assault they should have needed the cover of darkness for
their approach. It was almost as if they wanted to be seen. But then much of the information coming in did not make sense.

Sitting at his desk he prepared to write the final draft of his signal. He found his hands were shaking, and he had to grip the pen with both to stop it. Until now he had always had a senior officer above him to deal with the Marshals and politicians. If he did this and moved up to command of a whole sector then that burden would fall on him. The shaking slowed, almost stopped. Sweat stung as it dripped in to his eyes.

A rap at the door and a signaller came in, handing over a sheaf of messages at arms length, as though he feared contamination from them.

Going through them carefully Grigori noted that most duplicated information he had obtained from other sources and by other means. The last two lines were the most important. Zucharnin’s assault force had failed to reach its start line on time. The attack had been put back one hour. It was what he could have hoped for; things were already starting to go wrong for the General.

* * *

“Sorry about that. Our gunners have never seen one of these things before. You were lucky you were travelling fast and they had time to get off only one.” The Lieutenant Colonel watched while Dooley tried to hammer out the shell that had struck, partially penetrated and fused to the sloped front of the hovercrafts turret.

“What about my report Sir.”

“That the Ruskies are going to attack? This morning? I don’t think so Major Revell. This has been a quiet sector for a long time. Apart from a little more refugee activity than usual there is nothing going on over the other side.”

Revell had done all he could. The colonel had been surprisingly reasonable about being woken so early but resolutely refused to countenance the possibility of the Russians crossing no mans land.

“We’ve got the measure of them. Lord knows we’ve had long enough to get to know them. The colonel waved at his map. The Russian territory opposite the NATO line showed a sparse sprinkling of pins. “Look at that. We could walk over them with two cooks and the sanitary corporal. But why bother, it’s a quiet sector and I am happy to see it stay that way.”

“Can’t you at least move your men to a greater state of readiness.” It was a last attempt, a compromise, but at least it would have been something. Revell waited for the response.

“No, I don’t want to provoke anything. Let sleeping dogs lie I always say. In the meantime though I would be very grateful if you would motor on out of town with that cargo of yours and you’d best take your prisoner with you. My medic’s say your guy did a good job on him, he’s stable and in no immediate danger. I have an idea that who ever collects your bomb will want him as well My men don’t have the knowledge to interrogate him properly.”

A telephone rang and a signals clerk languidly picked it up and listened in open-mouthed confusion.

Revell had been about to leave; now he paused and waited expectantly. He looked at a clock. It was just seven.

“Colonel, we’re getting loads of calls from the front, by land line. All the radios are jammed.”

“Well?”

“They report that thousands of civvies are trekking out of the Russian lines and straight towards them.”

“Tell them to look again.” Revell interrupted before the Commanding Officer could snap him self out of his surprise. “Tell them to look for Soviet troops among them.” He turned to the Colonel. “In the next few minutes you have decisions to make. I don’t envy you but I did warn you.”

* * *
There had already been a massive attrition rate and the Russian executioners following the advance had stopped killing those who couldn’t keep up. There were too many. The last five kilometres of the route was almost paved with the young and infirm, and when the children especially fell back, their parents tried to stay with them. For their attempted compassion they were booted and clubbed back in to line.

The troops tried to keep in formation among the crowds. Obstructions diverted the human tidal wave again and again and it broke up units until some battalions were split into their component companies, then platoons and some of those were splintered further until individual riflemen were plodding on surrounded by a personal escort of cowed refugees.

Armoured personnel carriers escorted by missile carrying scout cars began to catch up to the throng and men, women and children were forced to ride on top of some. The clung to anything that would give them a hold but many times that grip failed and those who fell clear of the tracks, breaking legs and arms were the lucky ones.

Every effort by the officers could not maintain the cohesion of the advance and when the head of the huge column breasted a slight rise and saw the broken and churned ground ahead they faltered, almost coming to a stop and were only kept going by the pressure of those behind and the beatings administered by the troops around them.

In the centre of the advance, draped with terrified civilians were the enormous self-propelled guns. Their broad tracks left a wide trail of flattened earth in which followed their supply echelon of fuel tankers and ammunition trucks. They too were festooned with refugees. Ropes had been fastened to the sides of the camouflaged bowsers and their human shield clung tight until their hands bled.

As they stepped out in to no-mans land the artillery opened up from further back, probing for the NATO batteries. Instantly drowning those loud reports was the deafening howl of the heavy Katusha rockets firing salvo after salvo over their heads.

In the far distance the mist softened outline of Bayreuth suddenly sprouted tall columns of flame as the powerful warheads reached the extreme of their short range and enveloped the outskirts of the town in destruction and boiling smoke clouds.

The trampling refugees cringed at the ear-splitting howl, as the number of missiles seemed to increase, each tearing through the air towing a long streamer of flame. Many tried to hold back but from the top of a scout car an officer opened up with a machine gun, firing bursts in to the crowd where it seemed most to resist the urgings to go on.

A man who had seen his children shot down jumped on to the back of the car, grabbing the gunner. Mad with grief and rage he plunged his thumbs into his eye sockets. An instant later he was shot down and rolled to the ground, his corpse joining those of his family. It was almost the only example of fighting back in that whole crowd. Most of the men were weakened by thirst and in many cases by hunger. Subdued by the treatment they had received and seen handed out to others they were only anxious to protect their families. So they did nothing.

Still buried in the centre of the column but now staggering under the weight of the two young children she carried Linda managed to keep going. She knew there would come a point when the presence of the refugees would have conferred on the Russian attack all the benefit it could. Then they would be dumped and their gravest danger would be the risk of being run down. Already she had seen the Russian combat drivers making no effort to go around those who had fallen for any reason. She tried to keep the children’s eyes averted but it wasn’t always possible. If they survived this day she knew they would wake and scream every night for a long time.

Smoke with a choking stench rolled across them and she looked for its source. Off to her right two tall pillows of smoke were rising and drifting. Although she had heard nothing she knew it was shelling. To add to the other agonies of the people some NATO units had opened fire.

At the head of the procession there was a sequence of detonations. Unidentifiable pieces of bodies were thrown high. A ripple of fear ran back through the refugees and they actually stopped, shocked by the loss of life as they entered a minefield. As many again went down beneath the gun butts and boots of the Russians. There were two more waves of destruction before the minefield was cleared.
Linda and her children were ten ranks nearer the front by the time it ended and they walked through a field of dead and dying.

* * *

General Grigori had sent his signal and had waited twenty minutes in an agony of suspense. He might have had to wait hours, a day…perhaps the first response would be KGB units arriving to arrest any body, every body, who might be involved or responsible for what was happening, to the extent of the whole head Quarters staff. That would include him. Signal or no signal he might not be believed when he swore he had known nothing. Perhaps there would be a penalty to pay for not having known when he should have.

He bellowed at any one who approached him. He wanted the worry that made his heart pound and his head to feel as if it was splitting to go unseen by others. His back was giving him hell, a stress spasm he hadn’t experienced since he’d been at risk of being found cheating at his Staff College examinations. He wondered how Zucharnin’s attack was going. The first assault waves would be on the NATO front lines about now. Would the ruse work? Would the NATO forces hold their fire when faced by the approaching civilians? It was likely they would. That was something he could really worry about, Zucharnin might get away with it if he scored a spectacular success. But still, there was the indisputable fact that he had built his own army, something the Kremlin feared more than anything else.

Gregoris’ staff were at their desks, not daring to move. They knew the mood he was in and would do or say nothing that would draw his attention. He once again thought through the course of action he had taken. In a way the risk he took was no less than Zucharnin’s. But if it payed off, it would pay off handsomely.

He noticed a signals clerk hunching further over his radio, his hand poised over the out-tray of an attached printer. “This must be it.” He longed to rush into the outer room and snatch it away but forced himself to be calm, to wait.

The man took an age, withdrawing the single sheet slowly and methodically folding it in half before standing, brushing down his jacket front and pushing his chair back. Gregori wanted to hurl himself through the door, grab him and choke him to instil a sense of urgency but forced down every outwards appearance of the churning mental turmoil he was experiencing.

The glass door opened and the signaller presented himself at the desk. Even now he kept his arms by his side, keeping the paper out of reach. It was impossible to restrain himself any longer. As the man punctiliously saluted Gregori leant as far across the desk as he could and his hand went out like a claw.

“If you do not hand me that message instantly I shall rip it from you along with your fingers.” He took it from a hand that shook like a leaf and dismissed the man.

Restoring full self control he waited until the door had closed, again agonisingly slowly, before opening the paper and orientating it to read. There was only one line, just two words. ‘Arrest Zucharnin.’ Nothing more, no instruction to assume command, no direction as to what to do with the assault that had already begun. It was only half of what he wanted. A start, but still only a half.

The general would be in his office on the next floor up. Grigori would have too move fast. He would gather a squad of military police on the way. The building swarmed with the parasites and after the frequent blasts they got from the general they would welcome the chance to get a measure of payback.

* * *

“Until we can get rid of the bomb we can do nothing.” Revell listened to the rockets rending the sky on their way to blast apart the NATO defences. He well knew the hitting power of those massive warheads. From the nature of the detonations he had seen he was sure some of them contained napalm. Fires were springing up everywhere as the frightful liquid was jetted in to buildings and across rooftops.

The jamming had stopped. Perhaps there had been a lucky hit by one of the few retaliatory NATO shells, or more likely the Russian equipment had failed. Usually the Russians built redundancy in to their systems with back-ups for everything but that was no guarantee the second line units would be fit to take over. Often they would be incapable of doing so with the troops manning them nothing like the calibre of the front line units.
They parked in the shelter of a sports stadium to clear out the ankle deep accumulation of shell cases and empty ration packs. Although the sounds of the barrage came clearly none of the salvos of Russian missiles seemed to be directed to this area.

There had been comparatively few of the original population remaining in the region before the attack. A quiet sector it might have been but its position in a slight salient was a sure indicator that before long it would be just another swathe of ruins within an ever-expanding Zone. Their anticipation was proving prophetically correct, more so than the NATO High Command who had allotted the area a low priority in men and materials.

* * *

The Russian troops, now supported by swarms of scout cars and APC’s were reaching the southern suburbs of the town. In places their commander’s impatience had induced them to drive on ahead of the covering refugees and the few NATO weapons able to engage them had extracted a heavy price. Others had driven outside of the trudging column and run on to mine fields. The lightly armoured vehicles had been blasted apart by weapons designed to knockout far heavier main battle tanks. The lighter construction of the armoured personnel carriers had seen them erupt in flames and fall apart, throwing to a great distance any civilians still clinging to their hulls.

In places a circle of bodies surrounded a crater like petals around a flower, mown down by devices that on being triggered had bounced from the ground to waist or head height and unleashed a storm of ball bearings.

Gradually the mass of people had tended southwards, crossing an autobahn that made a wide sweep around the built up area. Bridge they crossed or passed under showed no evidence of having been prepared for destruction. Such West German and American soldiers as they saw in the distance melted away even before they were attacked, retreating rather than open fire on woman and children.

Once through the NATO front line, within a short distance the landscape miraculously returned to normal with industrial areas and sprawling breweries alternating with modern housing. There were some areas of traditional half-timbered buildings, where outlying villages had been swallowed by the expanded suburban development.

The Russian commanders had anticipated a problem and a steady stream of missiles fell on and around the breweries. Most were already well alight and huge vats of copper and stainless steel were exposed by the collapse of the walls around them. Giant fountains of casks and bottles flew in to the air and the air was saturated with the heady smell of hops and malt.

The civilians were being pulled down off the APCs and replaced by Soviet troops. Infantry swarmed through side streets and industrial areas seeking out vehicles to confiscate and piling aboard them in numbers far exceeding anything the manufacturers had intended. A whole battalion found space aboard several luxurious six wheeled buses. NCOs punched out Perspex roof panels to mount anti-aircraft machine guns and grenade launchers.

Where they thought they were no longer being watched, refugees made a break for it. Few had the strength or endurance to go far and most did no more than duck out of sight and hide. For some who chose to hide in stores it was a terrible mistake. There were few establishments still open this close to the front and the Russian officers threw grenades in to most, suspecting them of stocking beers and spirits. Even so there was sufficient alcohol found for many of the marauding troops to get blind drunk in next to no time. Some were amongst those who died in the stores, having got their ahead of the officers and hidden when they heard them approaching. They found themselves concealed behind the same stacks of cartons and display-topped counters as refugees. Phosphorus bombs turned the interiors in to blazing pyres, the conflagrations fed by the bursting bottles of spirits. Chances to escape were rare.

Among the swarming four wheeled armoured vehicles were some tracked carriers. Behind their armoured cabs their flat load decks sported multi-barrelled anti-aircraft cannons. A single NATO helicopter gunship that approached was greeted with streams of tracer and rocket-propelled grenades from among the mass of infantry.

Standing off at a distance beyond the slant range of the Russians weapons the chopper launched stubby bodied missiles. None failed to find targets among the close packed enemy armour. Massive warheads reduced any vehicle they struck to a blazing hulk. Pillars of black smoke rose straight up in to the morning sky.
Zucharnin had not been allowed to talk to anyone. He sat in a bare office with a three-man military police guard outside the door. The men of the Commandants Service were strict in their enforcement of the instructions Lieutenant General Grigori had given them. It never occurred to them to question what he ordered. All that concerned them was that they obeyed orders to the letter. There was risk enough just by this nebulous association. They were nervous, not wanting to take risks by appearing to show any concessions or favours to the prisoner. Each kept as close a watch upon the others as their high ranking captive.

Gregori had risked another signal, requesting further instructions. Just that and nothing more. If only the Kremlin would give him some task, anything, he could start to use it as a lever in to his ex-commanding officers position. All work in the Head Quarters had come to a stop. Nobody dared to move as much as a single sheet of paper. Any thing could be construed as aiding and abetting the traitor.

Apart from aiming a fierce glare at Grigori, Zucharnin had shown no reaction at the sudden turn of events. His arrest he had greeted by calmly lifting his arms so that his burnished holster could be removed. He had stayed still as his pockets were searched, displayed no emotion.

Gregori had watched the Generals arrest. Some how things were not going as he expected. Not that he had anticipated any great storm of wrath, display of histrionics. Zucharnin might bellow a lot but he never did it without cause. The shouting was always aimed at slow moving staff, at any incompetence. But still, something, some reaction was to be expected. And yet, nothing.

Gregori closed out his thoughts on the subject. That next communications from Moscow was all that mattered now. There were routine message coming in, but nothing from the phantom assault waves that Zucharnin had launched. He had discovered the white phone was exclusively for contact with them, but since the arrest there had been nothing. An attempt to use it to call out had been ineffective and now Gregori felt entirely cut off. He dare do nothing, show no initiative for fear of being stuck with the same label as Zucharnin. And so again he waited. All he could do was have the signallers check the links to Army HQ regularly. He did not dare test the line to Moscow Head Quarters, in case it should result in an accidental connection. He was not ready to talk to them yet. Indeed he hoped he would not have to, at any time.

The end of the jamming had been like having a blindfold renewed. The local commanders seemed to be at a loss to handle the situation but they were at least passing back an accurate assessment of what was going on. There appeared to be an obsession with casualty figures and it was impossible to give those with any degree of accuracy. The best estimates put the civilian casualties in the hundreds and those of the NATO defenders at not more than fifty.

Revell knew that both had to be woefully inaccurate. The refugees had left a trail of bodies that stretched back ten kilometres and many more were still being forced forward into the dangers of minefields and artillery fire from NATO units not yet appraised of the situation. The Russian breakout appeared to have commenced already but masses of refugees still milled about, being employed to protect the flanks of the Soviet thrust. Thousands, several thousands was a much more likely figure. As to the NATO dead and wounded. Revell was aware that it was very likely to be even less than the given figure. Most had fallen back before the first waves of the assault, not firing a shot when they knew what they were faced with.

The crew of the few emplaced armoured vehicles had surrendered quickly, unable to drive out of the hides that had been rapidly surrounded by the mix of enemy infantry and terrified civilians.

From the bell tower of an ornate Gothic style church Revell watched events through high-powered binoculars. Many of the civilians had managed to break away from the Russians and were now making their way in to the city. No relief organisation could have coped with such numbers in such a short space of time and Revell saw them breaking in to houses and stores, coming out with nothing more than blankets and bottled water. That found they wrapped themselves and sat in the road and drank and drank.
The light Soviet armour was fanning out, frequently visible at intersections, when two or three vehicles would be seen stopped and their officers visible, consulting over a map, obviously lost. Once he glimpsed a short column of heavy armour, self-propelled guns of enormous size. Trailing them closely had been tankers and ammunition trucks.

There was a definite shift southwards. Even as the NATO artillery was trying to get a grip on the situation, firing on those areas where the enemy had pulled ahead of their human shield, the Soviet armour was moving out of those locations. The road network was empty of traffic, there was nothing to stop them, even slow them down, as they were already behind most the NATO defences and the local civilian population had bolted.

“Major, there’s a bit of flap going on. Some one has found we’re in the area and wants to speak to you.” Sergeant Hyde Looked out across the multi-coloured tiled rooftops. As he did two nearby building collapsed into piles of rubble. The adjoining properties were hidden inside the giant cloud of dust that hung about. A great thunderclap of sound went on and on as the structures progressively avalanched in to the street. “I wonder who the hell fired those?”

As they made their way back down to the ground Revell knew what point the NCO was making. The battle was growing more complicated. The attackers had lost some of their cohesion and the NATO defenders were struggling to find an answer to the Russian tactics. Confusion was blunting any NATO response while the Soviet troops could lash out in any direction with little fear of hitting their own side and the certain knowledge of doing damage to the NATO forces.

As he climbed in to the hovercraft he saw that their prisoner was growing pale and his head was lolling. He floated in and out of consciousness. There was no time for him now. He was too valuable to be lost in a POW stockade, but if they did not find adequate treatment soon then he would be a worry no longer.

“What have we got?” Revell had sent through a brief appraisal of the situation as he saw it and for once some one appeared to be listening. The response he had was from their C.O., Colonel Lippincott.

Ol’ Foul Mouth had certainly been less than happy at one of his precious hover APCs being sent on such a suicidal mission as to find, neutralise and try to return with a nuclear weapon from behind enemy lines. Though his message didn’t say as much, Revell could read what he was really saying.

“He’s found a way for us to get rid of the bomb.” Revell knew the squad would greet that with relief, but also with suspicion. The colonel was a great one for extracting his units from tricky situations by making them take on another. “We have to get ahead of this Russian advance, pick a bottle neck and dump the damned thing in their laps.”

“Can you make this bomb work?” Libby eyed the pack, now able to rock slightly on the floor where its securing straps had stretched. “After spending the last day or so from stopping it doing so.”

Carson and Lieutenant Andy exchanged glances. “That has never been a problem. Only one fail safe is still functioning.” Carson patted the pack. “We by- pass that and you just have to chose where and when. And as far as the yield goes, how much.”

From a flank position on a hilltop they watched the Russian vehicles shaking themselves out in to order. They were doing so under sporadic and largely ineffective NATO artillery fire. A bombardment of heavy missiles commenced and vast craters formed where the one-ton warheads impacted, detonating when they had plunged twenty feet into the farmland. Their effect was dramatic but rarely anywhere near their targets. Two arrived only minutes apart, bracketing a large farm complex and between them utterly destroying it. By chance a Russian supply column had been forming up among the buildings and barns and several fuel tankers dissolved in a sea of fire when their tanks were puncture, torn from their rugged chassis and hurled into the collapsing buildings. On the far side of the land just within the Majors range of vision another missile came down, a huge one.

Only a lone Russian APC was smashed, being left a hulk devoid of any fittings. Moments after the impact came the sonic boom of its passage.

“If they could do that twenty or thirty times, with a bit more accuracy, then we could just go home, after dumping
our parcel with some appreciative boffins.” Dooley had thought for a moment they had witness an atomic explosion, judging by the fast climbing tall slim mushroom cloud that erupted. Shortly after two more fell, delivering their payloads further off and both flattening wide circles of firs when they landed in woodland and exploded as airbursts, before penetrating.

“Better make that a couple of hundred.” Clarence shrugged. He was not impressed by the accuracy or effectiveness of the missile artillery. With no terminal guidance the long range projectiles were simply an expensive way of remodelling the countryside, or of knocking down towns.

The mass of light armour was moving, the lead vehicles disappearing in to the distance rapidly. The rest began to follow, forming in to a huge and widely spaced column protected on its flanks by the flak vehicles. The monstrous self-propelled guns clanked along in the middle of the formation.

“Those great things are going to kick the crap out of the defences at Nurnberg.” Libby knew that the distance of four thousand metres was beyond the effective range of the anti-tank missiles they carried and the swarming light armour was going to prevent them getting significantly closer. Already a cannon and missile armed APC had spent several minutes watching them from the base of the ridge. A single wire guided anti-tank missile it had launched had failed in mid flight when the filament had broken, ploughing in to the hillside, burying its nose in the turf and its rocket motor, burning until it fuel was exhausted, starting a small fire among leaf litter.

After manoeuvring for a while the APC had got itself in to a position where it could elevate its low velocity gun sufficiently to engage them, but at extreme range Libby had been faster and had driven it away before it could fire, bouncing two cannon shells off its frontal armour.

“A squadron of Chieftains or M60s would stop them and make mince meat of the whole lot if they picked the right spot.” Hyde witnessed another missiles arrival. Its warhead erupted as an airburst and a wide circle of ground was churned. But only one APC was caught within its lethal radius, a vehicle that had failed to start and was receiving attention from its crew.

Dust rose to head height about it and then subsided to reveal the men were no more than a red smear upon the ground and the roof of their transport had been crushed and its tracks broken into its component pieces.

“The whole point is there are no M60s or Chieftains to block their path.” Revell elevated the command chair and sat with his head and shoulders above the cupola roof. He donned goggles and wrapped a scarf about his face to shield his nose and mouth. He could still speak through his throat microphone. “There is nothing between them and Nurnberg. They’ll arrive at the back door of that place and take the west bank of the river, letting the main Russian forces cross unopposed and create havoc. It won’t matter that they haven’t any heavy tanks. The direction they’ll be coming from there will be no meaningful defences to block them. And anything that is scraped together those assault guns will brush aside in no time.”

“If Nurnberg falls then Regensburg will be next.” Hyde knew the area well, had holidayed there before the war. “At a stroke they’ll have stretched the Zone a long way towards Wurzburg and even Schweinfurt. Taking Wurzburg gives them a straight run to Frankfurt. I can’t see the West German coalition government being able to stand up to that. They will throw in the towel, try to negotiate rather than fight on. They’ve been on the verge of that a couple of times already.”

“So this swarm of light stuff might just be what tips the balance.” Carson had taken out a knife and with it was cutting away those straps on the bomb that just hung down, with no function.

“Not if we can find a good use for that thing.” Revell indicated the bomb. “Not if we can find the right place to set it.”

* * *

To get ahead of the Soviet forces Burke had to drive flat out, taking incredible risks as they made a wide sweeping detour far out in to the countryside to avoid Soviet patrols. They crossed and recrossed railway lines and rivers, tearing through fences and every manner of obstruction. Twice they had to pull up and jump out to free the
hovercraft from long ribbons of woven wire mesh fencing that even their speed had been unable to punch through. The second time they dismounted to find they were towing about a ton of two metre wire mesh fencing, countless posts and caught up in it several dead cattle and the remains of a Ford tractor.

“Hell,” Burke had got out to supervise the work.” I thought we were slowing. The wonder is we kept going at all. No other machine would.”

High overhead a pair of fighter-bombers began a steep banking turn.

“You sure our IFF functioning OK.” Watching the aircraft, Revell knew that there always existed the risk of their being attacked by their own side. He had seen it happen, and experienced the bitter frustration at such an event, when everything in you screamed for retaliatory fire and yet you knew you couldn’t.

The aircraft rolled in to a dive and spawned a scattering of decoy flares as they lanced down towards distant targets. As they pulled out of their dive one dissolved into several fire and smoke towing fragments.

The destruction was complete and sudden. It was unlikely anyone baled out. Certainly no parachutes blossomed but at the distance they might not have been visible.

“That could have been expensive if they only whacked an APC or two. Not a good exchange rate at all.” Tugging aside the last of the wire mesh Sergeant Hyde scanned the sky for any more evidence of the NATO air force. He didn’t really expect to see any. The sector had long suffered a paucity of air support. It must have been a significant contributory factor to the Russian decision to plough on with only close range anti-aircraft cover.

Usually a Russian advance would be sheltered under stepped anti-aircraft defences from a range of missiles and radar, from hand held weapons that could do no more than chip pieces off jets tailpipes to huge mobile rocket batteries quite capable of bringing down the biggest bombers from their maximum ceiling.

Again the countryside they were passing through was untouched by the war, had yet to become enclosed within the hell that was the Zone. Perhaps it would stay that way even when it was. Strangely some places survived in their natural condition even after adjustments of the front lines had enveloped them. Within the giant no-mans land of the Zone, an ugly swath of territory from the Baltic coast down to southern Germany some of the ground even continued being farmed, though any produce had to be disposed of within the Zone. No supermarket would even stock produce that originated from the chemical poison and atomic weapon contaminated land.

Gradually though the influence of the Zone pervaded all the land between the main belligerents and affected the people trapped within it. The farms were neglected and then abandoned. The villages became more derelict, more over crowded.

Even now, not far away a mass of deep treaded tyres and churning tacks were starting the process that would spoil this beautiful Bavarian scenery.

“Do you reckon they’ll continue the advance at night?” Hyde had been watching from an opened hatch as the clouds began to build up, tall thunderheads boiling high into the sky and threatening more rain. He had to hold on tight to the rim of the opening as the vehicle bucked and skidded across a deeply ploughed field.

“Yes, I think they will, but at some stage they will have to stop and refuel those self propelled guns. The scout cars and APCs have a decent range but those big lumps are thirsty brutes. I saw some gas tankers among their supply column but I recon they will want to hang on to them for emergencies, when no captured stocks are available. I should think they will have earmarked some civilian facilities for that and that will be best done under the cover of darkness. An autobahn service centre will be their most likely place. They’ll have the capacity to take care of the SPGs and to top up the other vehicles. Boris, is there anywhere between here and Nurnberg that is obvious.”

“There are two locations major.” Boris had been scanning the route ahead. “One not far from here, the other another thirty five kilometres further on.”

Revell tried to put himself in to the mind of the Soviet officers leading the reconnaissance element of the advance, and the main body. Enemy doctrine was to keep moving, avoid fighting in built up areas where possible but above
all to maintain momentum. It was likely that they would use both service centres, half refuelling at one and the rest at the second. Those who were assigned to wait until reaching the second would be getting short by the time they got to it. And that would be just after dark, early evening.

“We’ll take out the first one, force them to go on to the second. They can’t turn back, they’re over half way.”

“You want to leave them a gift for when they bunch up at the second.” Carson was anticipating what the major had in mind.

“We’ll have to use this stuff to deny them the use of the first service area” Thorne indicated the thermite. “The cannon won’t knock out a gas station the size of an autobahn halt. There must be safety valves and all sorts of devices to prevent any fires we start at the pumps spreading to the underground storage tanks. “We’ll have to move fast. The commies won’t be that far behind us by the time we finish rigging the place for destruction. I don’t fancy getting caught between a bunch of thermite and tens of thousands of gallons of gas, not with tracer firing scout cars and APCs taking an interest in our actions.”

* * *

The service centre was duplicated on both sides of the multiple carriageways. There was no civilian traffic, no staff. Doors hung open. Cash desks were unguarded. Word had travelled far faster than the Russian column “Heck, it’s the Marie Celeste of the motorway world.”

They drove in under the high canopy sheltering the many clusters of pumps. All of the lights were out. Thorne selected and passed out thermite blocks as the squad climbed out. He sent them off in pairs to put them in place. As instructed they ignored the pumps and made for the steel covers set in to the road at the side of the self-service store. By some freak of chance a circuit remained live and the automatic opening door kept doing just that. The noise of its motor and the scrape and thump as it opened and closed were the only sound until a single vehicle, a silver BMW saloon hurtled past on the carriageway.

“Some one has ignored the barricades and police warnings and thinks the Russians won’t bother them.” Simmons watched the car until its lights were lost from site. “He’s in for a shock.”

“Serves him right, arrogant bastard.” Libby levered at an inspection cover with a bayonet and slowly the heavy metal slab rose up. “You can just see him zig- zagging around the barricades, can’t you.”

“It’ll make a nice bit of target practise for the Reds, if he doesn’t pile in to the front of one of them.” Clarence looked in to the hole, trying to find somewhere to put the incendiary device among all the brass valves and connections. Finally he tucked it tight up against a pipe whose open end revealed glistening brass threads.

In the far distance, only audible because all around them was so quiet, there came the sound of machine gun fire.

“He found them then.” For good measure Clarence unscrew the chain-retained caps on a couple of pipes. “Handy of him to let us know how close they are.” Thorne visited each of the sites where they had put the thermite and set the fuses. Each of the blocks would blaze at furnace heat for five minutes. More than enough time for them to burn through the tops of the tanks and fall in to the fuel below. The gasoline would instantly boil at far beyond its flash point and result in a huge explosion.

It was too much to hope it would catch any of the Russian advance guard. The most they might hope for was that even with the tanks a full hundred and fifty metres from the carriageways, the results might be so violent that the Russians would be forced in to a short detour.

Dodging the sliding door Dooley nipped in to the store and grabbed up a handful of chocolate bars. The selection was sparse, as it was everywhere in West Germany now and in any event he didn’t have the time to be choosy but just took what fell to hand. He rushed back to the APC, jumping aboard as the rear door hydraulics were just taking the strain and about to lift the heavy slab of armour.

“That’s nice, nearly closing me out. Here... “ He handed the bars around, even offering one to their prisoner... “Have a snack.”
The Russian only groaned and closed his eyes at the offering.

After treating the tanks on the other side of the autobahn in the same fashion they pulled out. The first section was a long steep climb. The Iron Cow made light work of it but it gave Revell a chance to watch behind them. They were just about at the top when he saw a motorcycle and sidecar pull up under the canopy, followed by a missile armed BRDM scout car, then it was all gone from sight as they started down the far side of the climb.

They had travelled no more than a few hundred metres further when a pale glow flickered in the sky behind them. Almost instantly it changed to a small but brilliant white light, then without sound it transformed in to a giant mushroom of flame. A second rose beside it, then a third and then a succession. As they flared up into the dark sky they were replaced by vivid pillars of light, great glaring fingers of fire that rose to a great height.

“You think we caught many?” Simmons listened to the officer’s report with satisfaction. “We must’ve caught some, they were right on our tail.”

“Maybe, but very likely not.” Samson had been looking at their prisoner, taking his temperature, checking his pulse. He turned and made a slight negative move of his head to the Major. “They would have checked for booby traps first, that’s why Thorne set the timers so fine everything would have gone up almost before they started checking. But I tell you one thing, I bet they are real pissed off. Now everything depends on them getting to the next service centre and finding it safe and sound. They are going to be in desperate need of gas for their big guns by the time they get there.”

“Let us hope they are so desperate by that time that they throw caution to the wind.” There was satisfaction in Andrea’s voice. “It would be nice to catch a lot of them.” She pushed deeper in to her bench to get further from the demolition bomb. “I know I shall be glad to get away from that thing. But I shall be happier still if we can catch the Russian spearhead with it.”

Carson patted the bulky pack. “Actually I have been kind of getting attached to the little fellow. But I know what you mean, he’s been threatening to take us with him for so long it would be good if in fact somebody else gets dusted over the landscape.”

Lieutenant Andy took a swig from a can of coke and elevated it in a toast. “Amen to that, Amen indeed.”

* * *

“And what do you hope to gain?” General Zucharnin could not keep the snarl out of his voice, and didn’t try. He hoped his voice conveyed the venom he wanted. He had expected his Second-in-Command to gloat, but that there was a hint of doubt, a lack of confidence in his manner that suggested events had not gone entirely the way he had wanted or expected.

Although he was the one who had made the arrest, Lieutenant General Gregori did not feel the overwhelming satisfaction he thought he should have done. There was still no elaboration on that first instruction from Moscow. At the very least he would have expected that by now the place would swarm with KGB investigators and political officers, confiscating papers and computers, rounding up officers, clerks and signallers of every grade. Anyone who might have by the furthest stretch of the imagination been involved in whatever Zucharnin was plotting.

“How long had you been scheming, how long had you been sucking dry that dolt of a stepson of mine? Oh yes, I know what you have been up to.” Zucharnins’ tone was contemptuous. “Did you think I did not know what you were doing? I was well aware of your conniving but never thought you would be so stupid as to make a move with out knowing all the facts. Your precipitation could cost you dear. I think you will be in for a disappointment if you hope to step straight in to my shoes.”

Gregori found himself irritated by Zucharnins confidence. He was not acting like a man on whom an axe could be about to fall, on whom it had already started to descend. Could his confidence stem from knowledge of the success his unconventional assault was having. If indeed it was successful.

Gregori had his own staff moving heaven and earth to find out what was going on. The first step had been to order Zucharnins people to reveal what they knew, but the line of questioning had puzzled them all. None appeared to
have any knowledge of what was happening, share any degree of responsibility for it. But how could they not know. The general could not have organised the whole thing on his own. Especially not with the time he had available, not when he was spending so much time away, on fishing holidays.

He looked at his prisoner again. If anything he was smiling more. What did he have to smile about? There would be no more cosy little fishing trips…Oh, no. That was how he had done it. Gregori could have pulled his hair out. What he had seen as a weakness had been the general taking the opportunity to organise the whole affair. If he could scrape together a couple of dozen decent staff men from among the drags he had siphoned off then licking a division in to shape would have not been difficult. A brutal regime, an iron fist and it could be done. That was how it had been done. The men under command would never have suspected anything, would never have dared question anything and officers he selected for senior positions would be too scared of losing the chance to escape the horrors of penal battalions to rock the boat. The whole thing would have policed itself, established by fear and maintained ignorance.

But still, he seemed so sure of himself. For all he knew the attack could have failed, Zucharnin could have no way of knowing.

Outside the door Gregori heard the guard being changed. Ah, of course, the men of the commandants service, the military police, they where just as open to persuasion. There were a thousand ways a senior officer could get a man in to his pocket, outside of regular orders. Every man wanted something, sometime. Compassionate leave, promotion, a posting. There were so many ways to get people to do what you wanted them to do, and doubtless, despite appearances one or more of the guards must be in his private employ.

“The only way you can do yourself any good is to talk. I need to know everything about the attack you have launched.” Grigori would have liked to make a threat but he strongly suspected it would do no good. “Your staff here are being interrogated but they appear to know nothing. As far as your assault division is concerned I can find no chain of command.” It was a severe temptation to strike the general, wipe that self-satisfied smirk off his face. But Zucharnin was not scared, and in any case there were things to be said and heard that should not be spread about.

He had declined to have a guard in the room. Now Grigori wished one of the burly police NCO’s was present. The General was several years older but he was heavier and still a very fit man. He exercised every day and would likely hold his own in any exchange of blows. A fight between them might not necessarily end to Gregori’s advantage. It would take a couple of minutes for the guards to unlock and come in to separate them.

“I will only tell you that the troops have their orders and will carry on until they are stopped by the enemy or until they have achieved their objectives. They have been trained to keep going, whatever the cost.”

“Are you insane?” Gregori could hardly believe what he was hearing. “You just push men in to battle with no control over them? You must be mad. And did you not think the Kremlin would object to your creating a private army, setting it a mission without having in place an accountable command structure.” It was wildly infuriating but Zucharnin maintained his satisfied expression He had, unusually, been allowed to keep cigarettes and he lit one now, blowing smoke up at the naked bulb overhead. Further evidence that at least one of the MPs was subservient to him.

“A private Army? Is that what you have told them, were those the words you used?” Zucharnin’s smile broadened a fraction. He was enjoying its effect on his second in command. But perhaps best not to employ its full effect immediately. “I should not be surprised. As you knew little, I suppose your signal was in the broadest of terms. It was a signal, wasn’t it? Some how I cannot imagine you having the courage to use the telephone. That is an indication of the difference between us, I would have done. But I have to admit, not yet. It does not do to be precipitate in such weighty matters.”

“If you think to make trouble for me by with-holding information about the attack you secretly arranged then you could not be more wrong.” Gregori would have liked to adopt the threatening tone he felt appropriate to the situation, but something about his superior was jarring with him. “I shall soon discover the true situation and you will not be smiling then.”

“If I was you Gregori, I would be a worried man. Not because you have not kept track of activity within your own
head quarters, not because you have spent more time trying to lick boots than doing your job properly but because…

There was a long pause. Zucharnin lit another cigarette, stubbing out the first before it was finished.

“Because of what?” Gregori ignored the knock at the door.

Finally Zucharnin got up from his chair and smoothed his jacket straight, brushing away ash. “Because you are not as well connected, because your wife’s father is not a Marshal of the Soviet Union. Mine is and without detailing any charges against me you have presented the Kremlin with nothing more than a snippet of gossip. You were so eager to usurp me that you grabbed at the first straw my stepson seemed to offer you.”

“But you have formed a strike force of your own and initiated an assault without advising higher command.” Gregori knew his voice was too high, that he was almost screaming.

“So it may appear, but things are not always what they seem.” Zucharnin shouted for the clerk to come in and snatched the sheet of signal pad paper when the men looked undecided to whom he should give it. He read it, then put it on the table, not even offering it to the Lieutenant Colonel. “While those men have been grouped together for an operation all are still technically on the strength of their original penal battalions. Far from being a private army they could be regarded as a piece of neat administrative tidying.”

“This is just playing with words.” Gregori did not reach for the paper. He put off picking it up. “You sent them in to action without official sanction.”

“I told you, you spent too much time plotting and not enough doing your job. There is a sentence, buried deep within the original battle plan for the assault on Nurnberg that a flank attack would be required to distract the NATO forces from their defence of the river crossing. Just small print I know. But it is there, some where in among the need for troop hygiene and sanitation arrangements.”

Gregori lifted the message and read it. Almost as cryptic as the first, it ordered the correction of an administrative error, Zucharnin’s release. It told Gregori nothing more, but it didn’t have to. The general was about to commence making his life a misery. There might be one tiny glimmer to be extracted. “What about Captain Pritkov. Surely the fault lies with him, the information he gave me…”

“Was quite good in what it was, not his fault you jumped to conclusions.”

“But it was his fault. You know he is a fool, no use to anyone. And it was he who tried to ruin you.” Shit, if he could bring down the boy with him he would almost suffer willingly.

“Possibly quite true but do you seriously think I would make trouble for a grandson of a Marshal of the Soviet Union. Do you?” Zucharnin looked about the little office. “There will be matters that will require rearranging. Before I give consideration to how best to employ you in the future, and at what rank, perhaps you might move in to here. It will be more than adequate for the level of responsibility you can expect, the amount and type of furniture you will be allowed to have.”

When the door closed behind the general, Gregori looked about. There was not even a telephone. The single bulb was weak, its faint illumination barely reaching to the corners of the room. The desk and chair, the only furnishings, were of the cheapest utilitarian quality. There was no floor covering, only the bare board and those heavily pitted and splashed with paint. Everything was gone, all the trappings, all the comforts. Doubtless there would be a cut in pay. That would make it impossible for him to hide events from his wife. She’s find out anyway, the officers wives had a grapevine as effective as any KGB network.

He sat at the desk and put his head in his hands. There was nothing left to hope for, beyond at best marking time until retirement. Even that possibility must be precarious now. Would his wife stay with him as their home standards dropped? It wasn’t likely. Dam her; her hen-pecking ambition was as much to blame for this situation as anything he had ever done.

There was only one thing left to hope for. That Zucharnins assault would fail, that somehow the weight of blame would do him harm. After all, the man who threw away a division would not be looked on favourably by the powers
in the Kremlin. It was a straw but in his heart he dared to hope.

* * *

“Easy, we don’t want an accident now.” Carson supervised the removal of the nuclear device from the interior of the hovercraft.

“Like you really need to tell us that?” Dooley set the pack down and kept one hand on it for a moment to make sure it was not going to topple over.

“Chuck out that thermite as well.” Revell looked around the vehicle park. Apart from a couple of abandoned low-loader trailers it was empty.” So where do you want to set it up.”

The autobahn service centre covered a vast area. All of the fuel pumps were on one side of the carriageways. Crossover ramps and bridges brought the vehicles from the far carriageway.

“Just there will do fine. We can certainly be sure it will not be a place the Reds will poke about. They’ll be more interested in grabbing goods from the gift shops and restaurants.” Indicating a compound close by, Carson took one side of the pack and waited for some one else to take the other. “Come on you guys, it won’t bite you.”

“No, it’ll bloody vaporise you.”

“Stop complaining Simmons. You’ll never know about it.”

“Thank you Sarg’, from that I am supposed to draw comfort.”

“Grab it and move.” Sergeant Hyde walked behind them as the two men struggled with the load and stopped before a locked gate.

“Can’t we just dump it here? No one is going to see it.”

Pushing Simmons aside Sergeant Hyde broke the gates small padlock with a couple of blows from his rifle butt. “I don’t want any Commie discovering it when he strolls off for a pee. They’d never disarm it but they could drive on and hope for fuel elsewhere. We’d only knock out that part of the column passing by. Not good enough.”

The compound held perhaps thirty vehicles of every make and type, but many were totally unrecognisable. All were wrecks recovered from accidents on this stretch of the autobahn. Some had burnt out; some were roofless where bodies had been removed. All were severally damaged.

“We’ll put it in the cab of that tractor unit.” Carson had to stand on a piece of wreckage to reach the door and tug it open. “A few feet off the ground will do a lot to enhance the effect.”

“We’re going to search the column. Chimneys, that’s the key.” Sergeant Hyde walked behind them as the two men struggled with the load and stopped before a locked gate.

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“Bugger the theory, lets just get it in place.” Simmons needed help from the other two in order to lift the bomb on to a burnt-out seat frame.

Lieutenant Andy had joined them and with Carson climbed in to the cab.

“Will this take long?” Far away in the night sky there was the faintest of glows. Hyde wondered if it was the first gas station they had burned. It was in the right direction.

“Five minutes, less if you stop interrupting.”

“What yield do we want?” Lifting a plate Carson shone a torch down in to the bomb’s interior. He could see a punctured and buckled bulkhead where a bullet had passed through.

Andy looked round. The site was several hundred metres across and right in the centre was row upon row of islands each holding four pumps. Between each pair was a steel beam that rose high to support a wide canopy. “There’s fifty pumps at least, I guess we can reckon on their being a queue lining up within thirty minutes and there will be a
load more on the approach road and coming along”

“So how hard do we hit them. We going to try and get them all?” Hand poised over an open-faced dial, Carson’s finger rested on the red pointer that stood out against the white face and black division of the surround.

“Let’s do a thorough job, make sure the gas station owners can put in a real good insurance claim. Let’s go for point two of a kiloton. That should chuck the commies all over the landscape.”

“Point two it is.” Applying slight pressure to the arrow on the dial Carson moved it around until it indicated the intended setting, and then nudged it further. “If you’re going to do a job...” He muttered to himself.

“OK, check list.” Producing a clipboard Lieutenant Andy went down a page of single line instructions.

To each as they were uttered Carson muttered “Check.” He opened another plate, dropping and losing the fastening as it fell open. “So, just the timer to do, what do you reckon.”

“The Major wants forty five minutes.” Sergeant Hyde had stood and sweated with Simmons as the device had been worked on. “Will that get us far enough away from here?”

“That’s for sure, as long as we don’t have a break down.” Twice dropping the torch in the confines of the cab and having both times to retrieve it from among the exposed and soot covered springs of the seat Carson finally confirmed everything was done. “I gave it just forty. Ample if we shift and we’ve wasted at least five here anyway.”

“Then let’s not waste any more. Hyde thought he heard a vehicle approaching, but it was too soon for it to be the enemy. It had to be another idiot ignoring the ban on motorway traffic.

“Initiate sequence, now.”

“Doing it Lieutenant. We’re all set to spoil the Commies party. I bet that pretty little Andrea will be pleased we’ve got rid of the thing.”

“I reckon they all will.”

Carson still had his hand inside the panel, He looked up at Andy. “We have a problem. The trigger switch depresses but doesn’t engage. I can’t turn the bugger on.”

“How long will it take to fix it?” Hyde had been about to lead the way back to their transport. He could hear the engines already running up to speed and feel a waft of hot air from the exhausts drifting past them.

“No way of knowing until I lift it out and then I don’t carry any spares. To improvise a spring and put it back... maybe a half hour.” Carson was already unscrewing the switch housing.

Hyde calculated times and distances. “That’s about how long before the Commie advance guard arrives.”

* * *

“OK, no one gone off for a leak?” Revell looked about the interior to make a last check that every one was back on board. As he did the vehicle took a pounding hit from a cannon shell.

Equipment flew about and the craft went over at an acute angle before Burke managed to get it back on the level. Even as he did heavy machine gun fire smacked across the ride skirt at an acute angle, slashing holes in it.

The first of the Soviet reconnaissance armour had arrived. An APC clanked across the concrete surface of the gas station and its stubby gun barrel belched a long jet of fire as it snapped off a high explosive squash head round. Had the anti- tank round hit them square on it would have destroyed them, the concussion of its detonation pounding great scabs of metal from the hulls interior and killing them all.

Instead it struck at the joint between two reactive armour blocks, setting off both. Inside the Iron Cow the noise was
colossal and again the craft was thrown sideways, almost turning through a hundred and eighty degrees.

From the turret Libby unleashed a stream of cannon shells and sent them in to the side plates of the Russian armoured personnel carrier. The turret had been swinging to bear on them again but now it stopped and the barrel drooped to a useless maximum depression.

From their co-axial machine gun came a long stream of armour piercing rounds and Russian infantry staggering from the Rardens victim were chopped down. Libby switched his aim and concentrated another burst from the cannon on a patch of armour just below the rocket launcher of a scout car that had rocked to a stop at the side of the buildings.

For an instant the metal glowed under the stream of impacts and then from inside came a muted explosion that burst up through the top of the vehicle to dismount the loaded launch rails and out of the front through the driver’s vision port.

“The buggers are all around us.”

The turret guns continuous fire was matched by the storm of tracer that hosed from the gun ports along the sides. Two motorcycle combinations raced into the area and both spun and fell over as machine gun fire slashed their tyres and killed their drivers. The shaft drive machines bucked as the spinning wheels of bike and sidecar came down on the hard surface, throwing out the passengers.

Getting in behind the two low-loader trailers the weapons on the Iron Cow slugged it out with the increasing numbers of Soviet vehicles. Twice shells struck fuel pumps on the forecourt. Both times there were spurts of flame but no fire followed. A tungsten cored round from the hovercraft missed its intended APC target and went on to strike a scout car that drove around the side of a building straight in to it. Flame spurted from every hatch and an internal explosion sent its four missiles and their launch rails spinning away.

Tracer lodging in a huge spare wheel attached to the front of the closest trailer set it alight and illuminated the Iron Cow. Revell ordered their driver to back away in to the darkness. Shot and shell followed them and external fitting were smashed and torn away. Unequal from almost the first moment it was now becoming more so. Had they been a conventional vehicle with wheels or tracks they would already have been immobilised.

“Get us out of here.” Revell could see even more enemy vehicles arriving and fanning out to face them.

By the light of a blazing APC a line of trucks could be seen crossing the overpass from the far carriageway. Troops, many armed with rocket propelled grenades, were jumping down and being sorted into lines by their officers. It was Boris who had drawn the officer’s attention to the time. “Major, only eight minutes before detonation.”

“We need every ounce of speed, now.” Burke heard the officer’s urgent voice through his head set. For the duration of the fire-fight he had crouched in his seat, watching the enemy tracer coming straight at him, so it had seemed. All the time he was able to do nothing, except call out when he saw a target he imagined their turret gunner might have missed.

Burke had the hovercraft in motion bare seconds later, was racing for the covering darkness of the autobahn beyond the service area. Machine gun and cannon fire followed them. A single round penetrated the thinner rear plates beside the door and zipped across the interior before flattening itself on the floor of the turret basket. Smoke from the unburned tracer element when it finally came to rest.

The fleeing machine was bracketed by explosions as more low velocity guns aboard armoured personnel carriers sent high explosive at them. Again it was the Kevlar ride skirts that absorbed most damage and the hovercraft took on a list.

“If we keep up this speed the panels will rip away.” Burke was having to wrestle with the controls to keep direction as air spilling out made the craft pull to one side.

“Then let them. Just keep us going as long as we hang together.” Revell could hear a panel drumming as the slipstream threatened to curl it back and rip it from it securing strips.
They reached the top of a long climb. The countryside was invisible around them but they knew they were climbing, through the straining of the motors and the continual presence along side them of a lane marked for heavy vehicles. They passed under a road bridge and then began to ride down the far side of the hill.

“If we keep going, in a few minutes we could be back on a hill top, in line of sight of ground zero.”

Revell knew that Carson was right. For another minute he sensed the hovercraft was motoring downwards, then it levelled out. “OK, find us some shelter around here.”

“Two minutes Major.”

Boris’s voice came over the headset, cracking with fear.

“Turn off all the electrics, everything. Secure all gun ports” The interior became jet black as the faint illumination from the panel and the dull red glow from the single small bulb behind the turret basket died.

Burke tried to use the headlights but nothing happened, they had been destroyed along with every other external fitting. They were on a rough track he had found after turning off the autobahn and driving through a tough over-grown hedge that plucked hard at the torn sections of the skirts thick material. Something big and showing only as a jet-black structure against the dark sky loomed ahead and they drove into a farmyard. A hard right turn and he took the doors off a modern barn as they drove in to the cavernous interior. A storm of grain and chaff arose from the floor and made a storm of particles about the interior.

“That’s about the best I can…”

Pure white light lanced through the interior and lit it like day as it found a way in past a buckled gun port and a pinprick hole in the armour where a round had just failed to penetrate. Instinctively they ducked and huddled together, covering their heads with their hands. There was a sound like an approaching express-train multiplied ten fold and then a blast wave struck the farmyard. The building they were in leaned over and the ribbed metal panels of its covering squealed and cracked under the pressure. Several of the curved roof sections whirled away in to the night. There was a continuous rumble for a long moment as the roof of the half-timbered farmhouse near by collapsed into ruin, unable to withstand the blast wave. There was a moment of silence, just the sound of the over pressure diminishing in the distance and then the back wave struck and the panels about them were punished again, several more being torn off and others partially removed, being left ripped and hanging by corners. They flapped back and forth crashing and grinding together and against the steel beams to which they were now only partially secured.

Outside there was the noise of other loose items being thrown about. The sheet steel shelter became almost a stark girder frame with only a fraction of its corrugated panels remaining. The Iron Cow, its skirt fully deflated, letting the hull rest hard on the ground, was moved bodily sideways. A long ripping sound signalled the loss of a complete skirt panel and the stripping away of at least one securing strip of spring steel.

Outside objects finally stopped moving about. The only sound was the last fragments of debris falling from shattered roof into the heaps of ruin below.

In a corner, holding tight to their prisoner Andrea was sobbing. Boris tried the electrics and some of them functioned. He groped in the darkness for a spare bulb and screwed it in to the socket. Faint red light lit them. It felt strange after the momentary flash of pure white light that had washed darkness from every corner, even though it had found only two tiny holes by which to enter.

Dooley put his arm around Andrea and pulled her away from the body. She was shaking violently. No one had noticed when the Russian had died. His eyes were open, slightly hooded and there was a bead of blood in the corner of his mouth. Lieutenant Andy was bent double on his bench, not moving.

“Hey buddy, it’s all over now. No need to assume the position.” Carson reached out to shake his officer, then carefully lifted his head instead. He was dead. “When, how…”

“Nothing you can do. Samson stood, having to bow his head to do so. He took the corpse by both shoulders and
pulled it forward. There was an ugly sound and the remains slid off of the jagged point of broken steel that had been sent spearing through the hovercrafts side.

“I was sure I set it to only point two.” Carson stared uncomprehendingly at the body, now laid out on the floor of the vehicle, the face covered with a spare jacket.

“You know what freaks those pressure waves are. They do the most weird things” Samson had removed the mans dog tags and was now entering the details in a little notebook. “I thought we were going to hang onto our Russian though. Lonely way to go, among strangers. I never even got his name.”

It could have been a lot worse.” Burke started up the engines, previously stopped so they would be less likely to ingest flying rubbish that would damage the blades. “We were only on forty-five percent power coming up that long drag. The damage to the skirts must be pretty bad to be spilling that much air.”

“Good job we made it over the top, or we’d have got an almighty shove that would have dropped us right down in this valley.” Revell used the cupola to view outside. It was starkly black. A long way off, across the far side of the farmyard something was burning but the flames were small and lit only their immediate area. Looking back above the hill that had sheltered them though the whole sky was illuminated. The detonation had opened the many fuel tanks at the gas station, like slicing the tops of eggs and their contents were blazing.

“I reckon we stopped them.” Libby had obtained the same impression through the turret sights.

“Between what we’ve knocked out and the fact that the remaining armour is going to run out of fuel I think there is a fair chance we have.” Dropping down from the cupola Revell rummaged for a bottle of water and took a swig. “A pity it could not have been stopped before those refugees were driven on a death march across the minefields and on to the guns of the NATO line. I wonder what happened to that woman, the dark haired one we met in the underground service area.

Corporal Thorne looked vague. “Don’t remember her. I was wondering what will happen to the Russian commander who sent those poor sods in to battle. He spent a lot of lives to get no-where.”

* * *

General Zucharnin. listened on the white telephone. He made no comment as he paid rapt attention and his thoughts could not have been judged from his expression or stance. Finally he put it down, perhaps just a touch harder than was necessary.

So the gamble had not worked. An entire reconnaissance battalion had been utterly destroyed, down to the last man and vehicle. Along with it more than a third of the division had become casualties, mostly with damaged vision and lung injuries from the over-pressure. Many armoured vehicles were immobilised by ruined electrics and blocked engine filters. Seven of the precious self-propelled guns had been wrecked and others partially buried or overturned. The remaining troops were going nowhere. A few might trickle back but most could only wait until they were mopped up by NATO forces or if they held out, eventually destroyed by air strikes or artillery fire.

No provision had been made for recovery of battle damaged vehicles or wounded men. They were as much a loss as though they had been killed or burned out. Many of the survivors would die over the next few weeks, from the massive doses of radiation they had absorbed. Better the British, Americans and West Germans should nurse them rather than clutter his resources. But overall the cost was not too high. The men had been quite expendable and their equipment was just a drop in the ocean. The refugees, he hardly gave them a thought. They had served a slight purpose in the opening moves of the assault but beyond that they had no value.

Without further thought he ticked boxes and scrawled a signature on the returns his clerk had left for him. The figure for the losses among the infantry were likely about right. The number of armoured vehicles was more exact but that could eventually be modified if an effort was made to bring in crocks from the battlefield.

There was no figure for the dead among the refugees, it didn’t matter. They were of no consequence. There would always be more when he needed them.
A dark haired woman carrying a child limped into Bayreuth, making her way towards an aid station that flew a large Red Cross flag. She paused on the bridge to move the child to a more comfortable position before going on. As she did she felt the bulk of the mobile phone in her pocket.

She took it out and looked at it. Stepping between two corpses and avoiding the debris littering the road surface around a gutted armoured car she crossed to the parapet. Slowly, deliberately, she dropped it in to the water.

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**THE ZONE Series by James Rouch.**
The Zone Series are nine novels, set in a near (alternative) future Europe. The scenario is that the Berlin wall did not fall, the Cold War turned hot and the Soviets launched a broad-front attack on Western Europe.

Due to a certain 'lack of enthusiasm' by some units of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet assault faltered and NATO were just able to stall their advance. The fighting continues...

A giant re-eman land cuts a broad swathe across the continent. Contaminated by chemical, radioactive and biological weapons, THE ZONE is literally a hell on earth.

The books follow a group of NATO troops, their relationships, the fighting and sometimes looks at life beyond THE ZONE. — James Rouch
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