Cover illustration: M60A2 Main Battle Tank. Armament: 152mm gun/launcher. 7.62mm coaxial machine gun. 0.5in AA machine gun in commander's cupola.
Armour: Maximum 120mm, though increased on hull front and turret by local modifications.

Although with its high silhouette and conventional steel armour it is out-dated by the latest trends in tank design, the M60A2 has proved itself a valuable battlefield weapon. Protracted development problems with the main weapon and its ammunition meant it didn’t go into operational service until 1975, eight years after production commenced.

More vulnerable than modern tanks constructed of laminate armour, in the hands of a well trained and experienced crew it is still a formidable match for any opponent. The gun fires a large calibre conventional round that can defeat virtually any type of defences, and the close support provided by M60A2s has many times been the decisive factor in successful NATO infantry-assaults on prepared Warsaw Pact positions. Against enemy armour the long range, high accuracy and killing power of the Shillelagh missile has earned it a feared reputation. The total of Russian tanks knocked out by M60A2s now numbers over two thousand. Many were destroyed at ranges out to 5,000 yards.
Germany has been wounded, gravely wounded, but those wounds have been bound and she has carried on, but there is one wound that may never heal, that even now bleeds and threatens to sap the last strength from the
country. That wound is Hamburg. If it is not cured before the end of the summer, if the siege has not been lifted by that time, then the poison that spreads from it will be fatal and the German people will demand the right to sue for a separate peace, rather than see their country die.

Extract from a speech by the West German Chancellor to a meeting of the heads of the NATO nations on the anniversary of the encirclement of Hamburg by Russian forces.

Memo from the Chief of Staff, NATO High Command, to Major General ‘Tim’ Maitland, Commander Combined Forces, Northern Sector, Zone.

My dear Tim, Thought I had better get in a word about that meeting on the 10th. I think the Joint Chiefs may have slightly coloured the picture. Of course, the push to get through to Hamburg is a major effort, but resources are stretched, and I’m afraid there won’t be that much extra equipment available. To keep the politicians happy, of course, we’ll want the maximum possible show, so do your best with what you’ve got. So long as your chaps get through that should be sufficient. They can sit on their duffs in the city until we can get round to mounting a proper show in our own time. Destroy this, won’t you. Best regards.
David.

ONE

Some of the Russian guns were still firing; the salvo of long-range bombardment missiles had failed to find them among the ruins of the riverside warehouses. Now the infantry and assault engineers would have to do a job that had defeated the devastating power of the plummeting one-ton warheads. The Iron Cow closed to the bank and added the rapid fire of its 30mm Rarden cannon to the supporting barrage from the guns and launchers aboard the transports and armoured barges in midstream. In a day made dark by dense smoke from the raging fires ashore, and suspended dust and water spray thrown up by the deluge of shot and shell, the tracer and missile flame-tails made a lethal firework display. Little of it was reflected by the churned and turbulent muddy water of the Elbe.

From the command cupola of the Hover-APC, Major Revell watched the flimsy outboard-driven inflatables bucking towards the enemy positions until the background of firestorms made the imaging equipment ineffective.

A heavy solid shot glanced from the Chobham armour of the turret front, pushing the air-cushion vehicle bodily aside, despite the surge of power from its twin Allison turbofans as their driver tried to compensate.

‘Some mad sod is getting careless. That was one of ours, I saw it bouncing towards us.’ Burke let the craft drift downstream to get out of the line of fire, while reducing the ride height as much as he dared in wake-ridged water carrying great masses of wreckage of every description.

A self-propelled raft ploughed past, looking as though it must founder any moment as the high bow wave it pushed before its slab front kept water surging and swirling across its deck and around the tracks of the pair of lashed-down Challenger main battle tanks that were its cargo.

The loud rumble of heavy demolition charges rolled across the Elbe and the Russian resistance slackened and fell to the intermittent bark of a single field piece. A few seconds later that too was silenced, but not before it had unleashed, at point blank range, a last deadly accurate shot.

Striking the rear of the fast-moving raft, its detonation ripped open the craft’s tiny wheelhouse, effortlessly defeating its steel plate protection and hurling chunks of that and the remains of its occupant over the side into the fragment-lashed water.

Still under power, but out of control, the raft made a rapid series of erratic turns, narrowly missing several collisions, before its engine stopped and it was caught by the current and whirled away with its precious and irreplaceable cargo.

As the order came through to press on upstream, and Revell passed it to their driver, he saw the assault boats
returning to their transports. There weren’t many. He counted six before a bend took them out of sight. Perhaps the
other fourteen would follow, but he doubted it. That was about the average casualty rate for every attack they’d
mounted during the last two days.

The troop of armoured air-cushion vehicles had led the convoy all the way, and had taken the full weight of every
furious attempt the Russians had made to stop it. One of their number had disappeared in the night. Revell had been
speaking to its officer on the radio when without hint of warning or danger it had simply vanished from their
screens. He’d looked out to see nothing more than patches of burning kerosene where it had been, and then they too
had gone.

That left just two craft for a task that would have taxed six. He read the list of stores Sergeant Hyde had just passed
him and his eyes flickered down the rows of figures. Ammunition was OK, they’d used little small arms fire as yet,
and had managed to replace most of the cannon rounds expended the previous day: it was the specialised stores that
were the problem, the stuff that few others in the convoy used, or if they did were not prepared to part with.

Only a third of their decoy devices remained, the rest had been used to defeat the guidance systems of the showers
of shells, rockets and terminally homing cluster munitions that had been sent against them. If the Russians
maintained their current prodigious expenditure of ammunition then the stock would be exhausted and they would
become sitting targets before they broke through to Hamburg.

From somewhere behind came a huge explosion that for an instant disrupted every instrument on board. As though a
giant fist had given it a shove the HAPC was sent racing forward. When he regained his place in the cupola, Revell
didn’t have to search hard for the source.

The middle section of the convoy was hidden inside a billowing cloud of black smoke and soaring flame. From it
was emerging the shattered hulk of a small tanker, all of its superstructure gone and its hull paint blistered off to the
water line. Two of the barges and a tug had also been engulfed and were burning from end to end.
‘Shit, now how in the hell did they do that?’ Ripper kept the turret rotating, searching for a target, but there was
none.

Another explosion blew the bows from a patrol boat, and it immediately stopped dead in the water and began to
sink.

‘What have we got on the screen?’ From his perch in the top of the hull Revell couldn’t see their Russian deserter
sat at the radio and radar consul at the rear of the hull but knew he would be continually monitoring the hostile fire
locator to identify and track the cause of the losses back to their source.

‘Nothing, Major. All systems check. Whatever it was, is,’ Boris corrected himself as a transport took on a sudden
list after an explosion ripped a huge rent in its side, ‘is not artillery fire of any sort.’

‘Maybe it’s a sub.’ Dooley opened the armoured shutter over his own image intensifying vision block and
scrutinised the river for a periscope. He nudged Clarence beside him as encouragement to do the same but was
ignored. ‘Well, it could be.’ Undeterred he returned to his lone and self-appointed vigil.

Revell wasn’t looking for a periscope, but he was watching the surface of the water just as hard. Almost at once he
saw what it was he was searching for, and had hoped not to see. He grabbed at the radio tuner to broadcast a general
warning but for at least another of their number it came too late.

So intent was he on tracking the driftwood-surrounded half-submerged oil drum as it bobbed towards them that it
wasn’t until it was too late that he saw their companion craft cutting across their front.

Perhaps it was going to investigate a similar object it had spotted further away. Revell never knew. Even as he
shouted the warning the other HAPC skimmed over the innocuous flotsam, striking the slim aerial-like spine
projecting from it.

The mine must have contained over two hundred pounds of explosive, and it detonated immediately beneath the
vehicle. Foaming water streaked with flame and smoke rose high, its top feathering like a wind-blown fountain in
the breeze, then fell back to make a short-lived circle of white water about the broken turretless hull. Both engines
had gone, but even without that burden to hurry it, it went down fast, leaving no sign of its ever having existed, save for a single limbless torso that, as if unhappy to be left in the world in that state, followed seconds after.

‘All of you. Hit anything that looks even remotely like an oil-drum.’

Anticipating the major’s order, Ripper already had his sights on a cluster of three, and each round of the clip he put in found its mark. ‘Aw, I got a bunch of duds.’

Using rifles and light automatics the others aboard had also selected targets, but it wasn’t until Andrea chose her second that they achieved the result they’d all been expecting.

A geyser of mud and river went up a hundred feet, and four more oil-drums later Clarence found another.

Sergeant Hyde had kept a tally, as accurately as he could when some of them were obviously selecting the same target. ‘I don’t think even the Commies could make that many duds. By my reckoning about one in five is live. The rest must just be weighted dummies, to make life harder for us.’

‘They’re bloody succeeding.’ Burke gripped the controls tighter and hunched himself into the smallest shape possible as he saw an oil-drum that had been riddled with small arms fire and stubbornly refused to sink, bear down on them and, still only partially submerged, pass under the front of the ride skirt.

‘What’s the old guy beefing about now?’ Ripper swore under his breath to conceal his annoyance as a shot he fired almost missed and succeeded only in pounding in the top of a hooped metal barrel, without piercing it. ‘He’s only got to die the once, ain’t like being wounded. And sure as hell if we hit one of those lil’ ol’ parcels, he’s gonna die.’

‘I bloody know that, you thick hick. ‘Course I’ve got to bloody die. It’s the fucking where and how I’d like to have some say in.’

Hyde came on the intercom to put a stop to the chatter. He was tempted to use his own rifle from one of the ports, but those to which there was easy access were already in use. The heaps of ammunition boxes and various other stores in the middle of the floor restricted movement and would have made it virtually impossible to take up a firing position at another. Instead he squeezed through to the back to check on Boris.

He wasn’t happy at having the Russian in so sensitive a job. Maybe he was alright now, at this very moment, in action; he had to do a good job or he’d perish with the rest of them, but they were well inside the Zone now and there was much in these craft that the Communists would have loved to get their hands on. With so few having been made, every one lost in action could be accounted for, and so far they could be certain that not one had fallen into enemy hands in any condition other than that of a maniac’s jigsaw scattered over several acres. So far Boris had played it straight, passed all the tests, but they were a devious and poisonous bunch, the Commies, maybe he was just biding his time, waiting his chance...

Their miniature teleprinter chattered a slim white ribbon of neatly typed gibberish. Tearing it off, Boris fed the strip into the decoder.

Watching, Hyde wondered what ‘I’ Corp would do to Revell if they found out he’d put the renegade in this position. He’d seen the standing orders regarding the do’s and don’ts of having Russian deserters in your unit. Although a handful were now finding their way into combat units, none that he knew of were ever given anything other than pioneer, pick and shovel, work to do. Most of the Commies who had come over were employed in the rear areas in labour battalions, and even there they were watched very carefully.

‘Will you give this to the major?’ Hyde looked at the offered message, and was tempted to tell the Russian what to do with it, but resisted the temptation. ‘You take it, I’ll watch the screens.’

It was impossible for Boris to tell the NCO’s mood by reading anything from his horror-mask face, or what had been his face; but in the sergeant’s voice he could detect mistrust, and didn’t offer argument. ‘Of course,’ He was aware that Hyde had read the message as it came out of the decoder, and knew why he did not trust him alone with the radio.
Terse to the point of being cryptic, the order ran to only ten words. Revell read them through several times, before instructing Boris to take it to each member of the crew in turn. He had no way of knowing if the Russians had them under electronic surveillance, but it was more than likely, and if the equipment in use was good enough, then use of the intercom would be as much of a giveaway as if they broadcast the message in-clear.

As it was passed around the only reaction from any of the crew was a long low whistle from Dooley, otherwise it was received in absolute silence. Revell accepted it back from their radio-man and read it through once more before rolling it into a ball and dropping it onto the floor. The word stayed in his mind when they were no longer before his eyes: ‘Seek and destroy source of mines. Radio silence until completion.’ Looking back along the interior he saw the sergeant was ostentatiously securing the radio.

Vibration rippled through the hull as the Allisons were run up to full power and the ride height was increased to the maximum. As speed picked up they began rapidly to draw away from the body of the convoy. Over the intercom came Burke’s voice, raised, as much as his gruff tones would allow, in song. As they sped towards the next belt of enemy defences he worked his way through ‘A-Hunting We Will Go ...’ to ‘Run Rabbit, Run Rabbit, Run, Run, Run ...’ but Hyde put a stop to the impromptu concert when their driver reached the chorus of ‘Oranges and Lemons say the bells of Saint Clements ... chop, chop, chop off their heads ...’

Shells and tracer rounds of every calibre flashed past them, but only a few rounds of machine gun fire actually found their target, rapping on the sides of hull and turret without noticeable effect.

‘We’ve caught the buggers on the hop.’ Burke was enjoying himself. For the first time since they had started out he was able to use the machine’s remarkable performance to the full, now that he no longer had to pace himself by the slow-moving transports and rafts of the convoy.

Their turret gunner was not enjoying himself. For Ripper it was bitterly frustrating. He’d done plenty of shooting, but not once had he seen the target. Usually he’d been firing in support of a landing, firing into a cloud of smoke or at a spray-shrouded bank. He didn’t count the barrels, that was no different from popping off at tin cans in his own back yard. So the Rarden cannon was a mite more interesting than a BB rifle, it still wasn’t war, not the sort he’d expected. ‘Major, just what the hell are we looking for?’

For the fourth time in as many minutes he had to hold his fire and let the chance of engaging juicy soft targets go. Mostly it was just trucks unloading ammunition, but Revell even refused him permission to open up on a pair of field cars surrounded by a crowd of gaping Soviet officers.

‘We’ll know it when we see it.’

They rounded a bend in the river, and for the first time, in the extreme distance, Revell could just make out the skyline of Hamburg. It had a jagged, uneven look. He wondered what it would be like closer to, after a year or more of siege by the Warsaw Pact forces. Only for an instant did it hold his attention. There was something closer to hand of much more immediate interest.

Ahead lay a long wharf, and towering over it the rusting skeletons of conveyors and cranes and other coal-handling equipment. They in their turn were dwarfed by the stained sheer concrete walls of a derelict power station.

But it wasn’t the ugliness of the abandoned industrial scene that had caught Revell’s eye. He was watching the activities of Russian pioneers as, closely supervised by stick-wielding officers, they manhandled heavy loads from the wharf, across a precarious plank walkway constructed over barges moored out into the river and on to a floating platform at their end.

The loads were barrels and oil-drums, and even as the Iron Cow closed the range fast a dozen were pushed from the platform to start their havoc-creating journey downstream.

‘Oh boy, sitting targets.’ Ripper’s rebel yell died away as a multiple-barrelled Russian flak gun opened fire on them from the flat roof of the power station.

A torrent of fast-moving tungsten-tipped steel tore the river surface into a wild cauldron of spray all about them.
‘Take us in closer.’
Burke didn’t question the officer’s order, just corrected the turn he’d been starting to make and put the Iron Cow back on course for the wharf.

Their turret gunner had also been fast to identify the potential advantage and held his fire.

Hastily reloaded, the flak mount sent another hurricane of shells towards the hovercraft, but this time they all struck the river well behind it.

The compact design of the Rarden cannon enabled Ripper to elevate it to engage the flak gun when it was no longer able to depress sufficiently to reach them.

His first clip punched a line of holes in the concrete lip at the edge of the roof, the second group of three rounds tore into the four-barrel weapon and its crew.

A limp body flopped over the side of the building to be impaled on the projecting ironwork of a crane-cab, a hundred feet below, and no other member of the gun’s crew returned to it to tackle the spectacular blaze in one of its big magazines.

The pioneers, oblivious to the threats and blows being aimed at them by their officers, were streaming back across the walkway; an officer who tried physically to stem their panic, stepping into their path and waving his revolver, was brushed aside by the stampede, falling, with the two men he had shot, into the water.

Ripper helped them along by firing at a stack of drums on the platform, setting off an explosion that had an effect beyond that he’d intended or expected.

Thrown about by the blast, the barges strained at their moorings, and as one anchor chain gave, the walkways commenced a fast progressive collapse. Many of the Russians fell even before the planks beneath them gave as they were pushed aside by stronger or more determined men. Some managed to jump into the barges, but more tumbled into the water between them and were smeared from existence as the walls of steel came together.

Switching his fire to the wharf, Ripper used three clips of mixed armour-piercing and incendiary rounds against the stacks of drums, without doing more than smash them down and cause showers of sparks.

‘Maybe they’ve used up all the ones that go ‘boom’.’ Using a Colt Commando sub-machine gun, Dooley sprayed a cluster of drums that had rolled from the dock. Two began to sink, others spun lazily, fans of droplets rising from hoops and projecting end seams.

‘Try the pile by the shutter door.’ Making a fresh appraisal of the boxlike main building of the power station, Revell had noticed that several broken windows had been patchily repaired, and all of them covered in a thick coat of dark paint.

It was a difficult angle. Ripper could see the barrels referred to, but they were only partially visible behind a forest of crane legs and conveyor supports. When he did fire off a whole clip he thought he’d done pretty well to get a single shot past the tangle of struts and girders. He saw the tracer hit square on the top container, saw it jump and start to fall backwards, and then the whole side of the building was drenched in brilliant white light that sent spikes of smoke-tinged flame higher than the roof of the structure.

‘Hey, I got the jackpot.’
‘Very clever.’ Poising his hand over the throttle, Burke waited for the order to turn about and rejoin the comparative security of the convoy. It didn’t come; he gave the officer a moment longer. ‘Right, we’ve done the job, how about going home then?’ His fingers hovered above the control, almost touching it.

‘The major is wondering if we really have.’ Damn it, Andrea seemed to be reading his mind again. But she was
right, that was exactly what he was wondering.

Now the smoke had drifted clear the power station appeared hardly to have been damaged at all. The doorway was a larger and less neat opening than it had been before, and the walls right to the top of the building were streaked with soot. Not more than a thousand pounds of explosives had been consumed by that single blast; he just couldn’t believe they’d come on the place at the very moment the Russians had exhausted their stocks of real mines, not when there were still so many of the bogus examples littering the area.

‘Take us in. We’re going to check.’
For Burke, it was a revenge of sorts to see the officer have to grab for a secure hold as the Iron Cow leapt forward under maximum acceleration.

There was a flight of concrete steps set into the wall of the dock. Burke set course for those, settling the craft onto the water just short of them and letting it drift in the last few feet until the front edge of the hull bumped gently against the cabin roof of a submerged launch. ‘Close as I can get.’

‘Right, soon as we’re off, take her back into midstream and wait for our signal. Keep zig-zagging. We don’t know who’s watching.’

‘Go teach your grandmother to suck eggs.’ Saying it under his breath, Burke hardly waited until Revell, Dooley, Andrea and Clarence were out before hitting the switch to actuate the closing of the front ramp and turning the HAPC in its own length to regain the centre of the river.

They could feel the heat radiating from the shattered surface of the wharf. Long cracks ran up and across the wall of the power station, and closest to the site of the blast it was bowed inward and shattered into hundreds of pieces held together only by the web of reinforcement rods inside it.

There was a mass of twisted ironwork to negotiate before they reached the opening, and in places the ground and some of the fallen cranes’ girders were made slippery by dripping human remains. The smouldering insulation on crushed and broken electric motors and wiring filled the air with the stench of burning rubber.

Little of the blast had passed into the vast building. Much of the generating equipment had been stripped out long ago, and walking was made more difficult in the gloom by the many projecting bolts in the floor, where machinery had been.

A heap of bodies lay against a wall. Revell glanced at them. They showed no external sign of injury, but he could tell by their blue-tinged lips, and bulging eyes that they had been killed by the wave of super-compressed air from the explosion. Beside them was a large beer cask, crushed and split open by its impact against a stanchion. It looked like no explosive he was familiar with.

Clarence bent down and rubbed some powder between his fingers. ‘I know what this is...’

Cautiously peering around an angle of the wall, Dooley beckoned the others to join him. ‘What’s this, the cook house?’

Lining either side of a wide aisle were stack after stack of plastic sacks. A few had split and from them a white powder had spilt to the floor. Every few yards stood an open barrel; some were partially filled, others were empty with more of the sacks stood beside.

‘This what I think it is?’ Revell had seen Clarence testing the contents of some of the split sacks.

‘In Northern Ireland we called it Co-op Mix. Usually it’s fertiliser and sugar, only the Reds don’t have sugar in these sort of quantities, or if they had it’d all be on their black market by now, so they must have found a substitute. Whatever it is, this certainly takes home-made bombs out of the kitchen industry league.’

‘Looks fucking dodgy tome.’ Having picked up a fuse all ready for attachment to a completed mine, Dooley very carefully set it down again when his examination revealed a chunk of plastic explosive moulded around its base.
‘It can be. The IRA have had a few own-goals with this stuff, but I’ve never seen this much being mixed before, not all at once. There must be tons of it.’

‘Not for long.’ Revell slipped off his pack and began to take out the compact demolition charges. ‘Set these for ten, no better make that fifteen minutes. Bury them in the barrels that are already filled and among the sacks. I don’t want the Commies rushing back in after we’re gone and undoing all this.’

Taking six of the one-pound charges Revell went to the far end of the assembly line and began to place them among a group of finished mines, heaping loose powder about to conceal them. Out the corner of his eye he thought he saw a movement close to where Andrea was working. He casually edged that way, pretending to hitch his slung assault shotgun to a more comfortable position, then as he reached her side unslung it and pumped three rapid shots into a huge pile of empty sacks.

Echoes boomed about the cavernous interior, turning the three shots into a wild continuing fusillade.

While Andrea covered him, Revell ploughed through the punctured plastic and hauled out two Russians. One of them, an officer, died even as he was laid on the open floor. The pioneer who was with him was in a bad way, he’d taken a full charge in his back but he was still alive.

Swooping on the corpse, Dooley stripped it of pistol and insignia and everything else he considered of value.

‘What about this one, or are you going to have the decency to wait for him to die.’ Clarence watched the process with distaste.

With a sharp knife Dooley removed the officer’s buttons and ornate belt buckle. He didn’t even spare a glance for the dying man. ‘You’ve got to be joking. A Ruskie pioneer? A fucking cannon fodder conscript they haven’t even bothered to give a rifle. You got to be joking.’

Andrea looked from the officer’s dusty but mostly correct uniform, to the pioneer’s rags and tattered boots. ‘Another fine example of Communist equality; and that they would teach the world.’

The wounded man was moving, trying with movements he could hardly control to reach the mangled centre of his back. His questing fingers touched the area and dipped into the pulped flesh and oozing blood. He gave a despairing cry that turned to a choking cough and then an ugly rattle, as the terror of the extent of his injuries and his situation struck him, and died.

‘Eleven minutes, Major.’ Clarence had to duck back inside as he called from the doorway, on coming under fire from one of the barges. As he levelled his sniper rifle waiting for the Russian officer to pop up again, he heard the sharp crack of the Iron Cow’s Rarden and the shouts and screams that came from the barge as two shells passed through it from side to side. Above the cries of wounded he heard another commotion, and then a pistol was thrown over the side, followed by the limp and bloody body of an officer. A selection of off-white rags were waved from the craft.

They didn’t have to wait. Burke had the HAPC ready for them when they reached the steps. As they boarded, one of the charges they’d left behind went off prematurely. It was very muted, producing only billowing clouds of white powder that fountained from every vent and opening in the building.

The girl had said nothing to him about the incident in the power station. At the time Revell had thought he was saving her life. Alright, so the reality wasn’t as dramatic as that, but she must have known what was in his mind, and still she’d said nothing. She never spoke to him, she answered when he spoke to her, but she never initiated conversation. Sometimes being around her became so difficult for him, so frustrating, he felt he could almost lash out at her. If he did though she’d hit back, and despite her slighter build would probably manage to hurt him before he could pin her down. He could imagine a wrestle with her being exciting, the thought of it was rousing him ...

All of the remaining charges blew together. Every door and window and ventilator was blasted from the power station as the whole structure swayed and bulged. For an instant it seemed as if it would remain intact, and then the wall facing on to the wharf, already weakened by the earlier explosion, crumpled away from the rest of the building and a thousand tons of razor-sharp rubble collapsed into the river and across the barges.
'Tell them the job’s done, there won’t be any more mines.’ As their radio-man, watched by Sergeant Hyde, transmitted the message, Revell reached for his water bottle. It was empty. As he bent down for it, the letter fell from his pocket. He snatched it up and crumpled it into another whose zipper still worked. Now he was wishing he hadn’t brought it with him, what the hell, he wasn’t interested in what the bitch got up to now. When she’d remarried it was for more than mercenary reasons—he’d been happy to hear that she didn’t want any more money out of him. That, he’d thought, had severed the last link between them. There’d been no children, and now there wasn’t even alimony to bind them. But she’d kept writing and he’d kept on reading, and re-reading. He’d never yet had the willpower to throw one of them away unopened, and every time he wished he had. He could feel the bulk of the screwed-up letter in his jacket; if only it was that easy to crumple and put from sight his memories.

On his screen he could see the convoy was catching up to them. It was time to push on, before they were called back to assist with any more close fire-support missions. He used the internal communication system to talk to the crew.

‘According to Intelligence reports,’ Revell allowed a brief pause for the inevitable groan from Burke and sardonic laugh from Ripper, ‘we should be approaching the last ring of positions the Ruskies have around Hamburg. The fighting’s been fluid in the last few days, so things might have changed, but it shouldn’t amount to much ...’

‘You inclined to put any money on that, Major? If you are I’d kinda like a piece of the action. The Sarge has got a stack of markers of mine I’d rather like to have settled before I go to meet my maker...’

‘Hey, Ripper, when is your appointment to see Franken Stein?’

‘Shut it, Dooley.’ Revell let their gunner work off his irritation at the interruption by firing on a four-wheeled Gaz armoured car trying to reverse into a firing position on the bank. A single shot started it burning.

Sitting with his back against the hull, Clarence didn’t bother to look out. There was nothing to be gained by knowing where they were, not for him. He didn’t give the orders, couldn’t fire with effect on any target he might glimpse. His rifle had the range, but not the hitting power. The handful of special rounds he had, those with the armour-defeating depleted uranium core, he’d save until he could be sure they weren’t being wasted. Some of the others always wanted to know what was happening, where the current danger lay, he didn’t. If he couldn’t influence what was going on, why concern himself with it.

If a shell or missile was coming at them they’d all know about it soon enough, for a brief pain-filled moment; and if the round missed then any worrying would have been for nothing. Clarence knew just about all there was to know about death, except what it was actually like, but he’d sent more than two hundred others to find out. The prospect of meeting it himself didn’t bother him. For ages now he’d been living on borrowed time. Some day, maybe today, he was going to have to pay back.

Sporadic mortar fire was sending geysers of water high into the air, and then it became suddenly heavier, until spray was continually drenching the Iron Cow. It was like motoring through torrential rain.

A light cannon joined in and the hull rang as rounds bounced from the armour. Machine gun fire was added, but only the speckled traces of light on the hostile fire locater betrayed the fact. Their flight was unseen, their impact unheard.

‘Where’s the heavy stuff?’ It was an involuntary reaction for Revel 1 to duck when the tracer shell ricocheted from the dome of the cupola hatch. Damn it, if this was another of the Russian main positions then they should have run into opposition from weapons of far bigger calibre by now. Where the hell were they? Were the Commies keeping them concealed, saving them for the convoy? It was hard to believe, the lone HAPC was a tempting target for any enemy gunner. There were few who could resist the temptation to try and disable it, to earn the big bounty the Soviet High Command offered for one captured intact.

‘Something on the screen, Major. Dead ahead.’ Boris tried to make sense of the radar image. ‘I can’t make it out, it looks ... it looks like they’ve built a wall across the river.’

‘Here, let me see.’ Hyde looked over the operator’s shoulder, and saw the same incomprehensible picture. ‘It’s bloody impossible.’ He tried the thermal imager, and all he got was a view of a great grey cliff that stretched almost
from bank to bank.

‘Yeah, and why not a wall. Great at building walls the Commies.’ The three rounds he put into it made no impression. On his screen Ripper saw them impact, and then nothing. ‘Usually though they put ‘em up to keep their people in…’

‘That’s not a wall.’ Revell went for a wider view, and suddenly could see that the ‘wall’ was topped by superstructures and derricks. The Russians didn’t need heavy weapons, the convoy would be going no further.

The many block ships they’d encountered downstream, found in groups of two and three, paled before this. Across the full width of the Elbe thirty or more merchantmen had been scuttled to form an impassable barrier of steel.

‘So much for bloody satellite reconnaissance.’ Through the mist of water kept in permanent suspension by the deluge of bombs, Burke could see the overlapping hulls. ‘I wonder when they’ll get round to spotting this lot.’

‘It hasn’t been here long.’ Movement caught his attention, and Revell saw an ore carrier begin to take on a list. ‘They almost left it too late, it’s only just finished.’

‘That’s what we’ll be if we bloody stay here much longer. The Ruskies have got every bloody inch of this river zeroed.’ Burke swore.

‘Shut it, you miserable bugger …’ Hyde started to go forward, but never made it. A mortar shell scored a direct hit on the starboard engine and the craft staggered, throwing everyone about. Hauling himself to his knees, he looked down. The floor was awash. He turned to search for the damaged section of hull, and then the smell hit him and he shouted to countermand Revell’s order to their gunner to fire on a flak mount aboard a container ship settling by the bows in mid-stream.

‘No, hold your fire, hold it. A fuel line’s gone, we’re filling up with kerosene.’

THREE

Fighting the controls, Burke managed to bring the craft back on to an even keel, but even with the ride height reduced by half the demands being made on the remaining engine were almost too much, and one after another all but the most vital auxiliary systems had to be shut down.

The first was the air conditioning, and that left them with no alternative but to open the hermetically sealed ramp a fraction in an effort to dispel the dangerous accumulations of fumes from the spilt fuel. ‘Beach us.’

‘We’re OK, we’ve still got headway, I can get us back.’ Burke couldn’t understand the officer’s order. They had problems, big problems, but they weren’t on fire, and they weren’t sinking. ‘It’s OK, Major …’

‘Beach us. There’s an empty slipway ahead and to the left.’ Burke complied, juggling the controls to keep the fifty per cent power evenly distributed around the edges of the flexible ride curtain and battling to overcome the Iron Cow’s tendency to keep veering to the right.

Light litter flew from beneath the craft as it left the water and travelled on to the timber-strewn launching ramp. The enemy fire intensified, but the cannons could no longer be brought to bear and what mortar bombs came near had their effect smothered by the stacks of plate and mountains of drag chains among which they landed. A single machine gun continued to fire with results, peppering the hull at close range.

‘Get them out, Sergeant.’ Revell unfastened a locker and began to unpack the cased equipment he took from it. ‘I want a tight perimeter defence around this bus. Mutually supporting positions, all in good cover. I’ll leave the details to you. Boris stays with me.’

‘Me as well?’

The answer Burke got from the NCO was to be dragged from his seat and have his rifle thrust at him before being propelled through the exit.
‘Make this priority.’ Revell completed the assembly of the equipment as he called to the radioman. ‘Don’t route it through the command centre in the convoy, give it straight to GHQ. Be brief, use your own words and tell them the position, and then say they’ll have laser designation on the block-ships in two minutes. Better tell them we’re only half a mile from target. I hope they’ll bear that in mind when choosing warheads, otherwise we won’t be here to line up a second target for them.’

It was a tight squeeze working in the cramped confines of the turret. Revell pulled the co-axial machine gun from its mount, and with no time for finesse dropped its component parts on to the thinly padded bench below. The laser only just fitted into place, its power-pack actually nestling against the compact body of the Rarden.

Taking up position behind it, Revell aligned the sight on a tanker of about twelve thousand tons that formed the centrepiece of the obstruction, and waited. He was gambling that Command would have something in reserve capable of doing the job, and that the haste with which the Russians had been forced to complete their preparations meant they’d not had the time to install any sophisticated counter-designation equipment.

If they had, and they detected the invisible beam he was directing, then at any second they might retaliate and the eye he pressed to the rubber surround of the sight be boiled from his head. He had seen it happen, and it took conscious willpower to keep him there.

From beyond the ceramic and steel armour he heard the crash and clatter of the squad’s weapons going into action, and answering fire from Russian small arms. A grenade exploded, someone was screaming.

Without moving from the gunner’s set, Revell groped with his free hand for his assault shotgun in the rack below. His fingers found its barrel and he hauled it up to cradle its familiar bulk across his lap. Now he had two reasons for leaving the laser, but still he stayed, and waited.

Andrea saw her grenade blast the Russian’s body apart, and with careful deliberation put a second forty-millimetre shell into the chest of another. He went the same way, and took the men either side with him.

Trailing blue smoke from its burned-out rocket motor, an anti-tank missile flashed past to self-destruct over the river when it failed to find a target.

Another group of Russians charged from cover, shouting and yelling as they came. Once more they had to bunch to pass between piles of props and girders and once more they were slaughtered as they were channelled through those killing grounds.

From the top of a gantry walkway, Clarence took in the scene below. So far he had left the killing to the others, he was looking for different targets, and now he found them.

Behind a long brick-built workshop Russian military police and KGB troops were using sticks, boots and rifle butts to hurry soldiers being unloaded from packed trucks and field cars. Using the telescopic sight on his rifle the sniper panned across the new arrivals. Few of them carried weapons, some didn’t even have proper boots, and were wearing various types of footwear of obvious civilian origin. All of them were in rags, with the few insignia visible indicating that they were from all sorts of units: construction, pipeline and chemical, as well as artillerymen and radio-technical troops.

Some of them looked frightened, many bewildered; none of them looked happy. Weapons were being thrust at them, AKS-47s for the lucky ones, a couple of grenades for those less fortunate, lengths of angle-iron and chain for those not even that lucky.

Despite the rising dust clouds and scudding smoke from riverside fires, the sun was hot on Clarence’s back. If it brought him discomfort it didn’t register, when he was lining up on a target nothing ever did. Of more concern to him was the distortion caused by the heat haze shimmering from the piles of ships’ plates, and the confusing, near blinding, glint from heaps of swarf in bins outside the workshop.

It was not among the crowd of impressed Russian infantry that he sought a victim; he found his target standing a little to one side. The Russian officer might just that moment have come from the tailors. He was immaculate; jacket pressed, boots shined. At his side the wooden holster for his pistol had been polished until it almost glowed, and the
metal fittings at its end, that enabled it to be used as a stock for the weapon it held, had been burnished to a mirror finish.

The staff car parked close by was less showy, but with its neat camouflage paint and unmarked bodywork stood out among the rougher forms of transport surrounding it as much as the officer did from his none-too-willing men.

Taking a fraction longer, Clarence sighted and applied a steady and growing pressure to the trigger. At the last instant another head was interposed between him and that he was aiming at.

The field-police sergeant lunged forward into the officer’s arms as the file-nicked head of the bullet mushroomed on impact and burst chunks of skull-casing and brain matter from the back of his head.

Disentangling himself from the slumping corpse the officer dived for the open rear door of his car. He was half inside the already moving vehicle when a second single shot rang out.

Starred where the bullet had punched through, the windscreen was smeared with dark blood as the driver collapsed forward onto the steering wheel.

Leaping in fits and starts as the dying man’s foot slipped from the clutch pedal, the car collided with the side of a Gaz six-wheeler, crushing and trapping several soldiers.

Ignoring the pain and confusion of the distant scene, Clarence shifted his aim back to the officer. Dust and scuff marks obscured the shining black leather of his boots where the Russian had been dragged, and the sniper put his next shot into the metal panel of the door just forward of them.

Clutching his side the officer tumbled out, and fighting the agony of his smashed hip tried to crawl away. A fourth bullet tore off his lower jaw and went on to break his breastbone and drive the sharp ends of jagged ribs into his heart and lungs.

A smattering of shots came his way, but the fire was uncoordinated and seconds later Clarence judged it safe to look again. The immediate threat of the mass attack had evaporated. The Soviet field-police were having their work cut out just to stop many of the assault troops from making a run for it. Their methods were brutal, and though effective, did nothing to encourage enthusiasm among their victims.

Settling down again, Clarence waited to identify whoever it was who would take over. Experience had brought even more patience to the task he already tackled with such dedication. He knew that if no other officer appeared than sooner or later one of the field-police, or perhaps an NCO among the handful of KGB troops, would emerge as the one taking charge. He chambered a round, and waited.

Twenty-seven minutes. Revell had heard every second of each one tick loud in his mind. They’d had nothing beyond a bare acknowledgement of their signal. In three more minutes he’d have to try the radio again, and if no support was coming, if Command had nothing with which to try to blast a hole in the blockade, then he’d have no alternative but to call the squad back inside and try and nurse the crippled craft back to the protective umbrella of the convoy.

Damn it, and they’d been doing so well, had almost been through. Intermittent small arms fire was audible outside. The Russians were probing their positions again. Soon they would dispense with the piecemeal attacks and go for a knockout punch. It could only be an absence of firm leadership that had prevented them from doing so before now.

To a God he didn’t believe in anymore he said a silent thank you for the rigidity of the Communist system that made every man terrified of losing his own initiative for fear of the consequences of getting it wrong.

‘Aircraft. IFF doesn’t function.’

‘Where are they coming from, how many?’ Revell couldn’t leave the designator, was forced to constantly realign it as blast waves shifted them, or the pressure of the backed-up river moved the block ships; he had to rely on Boris’s interpretation of the information on the screens. If the Identification-Friend-or-Foe equipment really had failed then their radio-man’s alert and swift observation might be the only thing to provide warning of danger from the skies.
‘From the north west. There are two, no three. Approach speed is very fast, mach two, no, closer to mach four. The set must be at fault, the picture is all wrong, they have no wings.’

‘Better secure everything. Warn the others to keep down, forget the Russians.’ The set was working perfectly, but Revell couldn’t blame the man for thinking it must be on the blink. Those fast approaching ‘aircraft’ could only be cruise missiles. Wingless, they relied on body-lift at high supersonic speeds to carry their payloads.

He made a final slight adjustment to the laser’s point of aim, centring it on the mid-section of the tanker. A telltale white dot on the lens of the designator told him precisely the place on the hull being turned into a laser emitter whose coded frequency would bring the warhead of the first cruise exactly to it.

Already he had risked a hurried glance through the turret’s periscopes to determine which should be his second and third choices. The cramp in his arm and fingers was forgotten, he slowed his breathing so as not to cause any deviation in the beam.

The cruise came in low over their heads and dived on to the tanker, in vision for only a tiny fraction of time as no more than a blurred white flash.

A huge fireball hid the tanker and from it soared giant portions of fabricated steel. Bow and stern of the ship were propelled in either direction, and lifted by the blast from the mud, were caught by the heaving water and born downstream until they turned over and sank.

Identifying his second target as the obscuration cleared, Revell was only just fast enough in switching aim to it. A deck cargo of rusted freight containers was thrown high into the air as the second missile struck, but unaided by the pent-up forces of unflushed gases that had rendered the tanker’s destruction so complete, this same sized vessel was not destroyed utterly.

Bridge and superstructure gone, its hull torn open to the water line, the vessel wallowed sideways from the line and settled once more into the bed of the river, still almost on an even keel. Revell saw the implication even as he laid the white spot on the side of an ore carrier. One more missile, one more ship, but even if its destruction was as total as that of the tanker, there still remained the hulk of the container ship obstructing the channel.

The explosion of the last of the cruise missiles failed even to envelop the container ship as it broke the back of the ore carrier, then as the broken ship began to heel over, Revell saw it heave and shudder as though being attacked by massive forces.

A wall of water had been building up behind the blockade, and now the Elbe set about clearing a way for itself. What three swiftly delivered ship-killing blows had failed to do, millions upon millions of gallons of pent-up water set about, re-opening its route to the sea.

They might only have been plastic boats in a bathtub for all they mattered in the face of that irresistible onslaught. The crack of the cruises’ detonations, the booms of their following sonic waves, were nothing compared to the din of metal on metal as one after another the block ships were tossed aside and into each other. Bows were lifted by the surge and sent like monstrous spears through the sides of other vessels. A large tug that rolled over offered its propellers like a can-opener to the side of a ferry and sliced a fifty-foot gash in its plates.

‘Get them back on board. We’re in business again.’ Without stripping down the designator, Revell hand-cranked the turret round until the barrel of the Rarden faced the direction from which an increasing volume of Russian machine gun fire was coming. It was a temptation to stay, to use it, but he vacated the chair for Ripper as the others backed aboard, returning the enemy fire as they came.

Rockets scored near misses on the debris beside them, and the laser bucked and twisted on its mount as an armour-piercing machine gun round found the aperture from which it had been aimed and destroyed the glass prism protecting it, and its complex lens.

Difficult to manoeuvre in the confined space with the power of only one engine to tap, the Iron Cow was taking more and more punishment. An antitank rocket scored a direct hit on the disabled engine, and only its tough construction stopped the jet of white-hot plasma generated by the hollow-charge warhead from penetrating the hull
itself.

‘Cut in the air conditioning, clear these fumes.’ It was going to take them a couple of minutes more to get back on to
the water; at their reduced speed, a couple more after that before they were out of range of the intense fire. Revell
knew they didn’t have that much time. ‘Use the cannon.’

‘Now you’re talking, Major.’ Ripper pushed a clip of incendiary shells into the Rarden, and gave the pumps only a
few seconds to begin flushing the stink of fuel from the interior before firing them.

Egged and bullied on, giving half-hearted cheers in ragged time with the cue from a few field-police pushing them,
the ragbag assortment of Russian troops kept up their furious firing, as if they were eager to exhaust their
ammunition as quickly as possible. Grenades were thrown, often over the heads of the front ranks of the advancing
men, and they were the devices’ only victims.

‘Look at them go, you ever see anyone move that fast before?’ To complete the rout his first burst had started,
Ripper unleashed a second. It was hardly needed. Throwing down their weapons the Russians turned and ran,
trampling down the hardy few who tried to press on, and those foolish enough to try to stop them. Bodies
smouldered and burned where the burst had plunged into the packed ranks. Not all of them lay still.

The recoil forces added another difficulty as Burke tried to steer the now underpowered machine around the many
obstructions in its path. Jagged stacks of scrap metal plucked and tore at the reinforced rubberised fabric of the ride
skirt, and each tear meant air spilt and another slight reduction in their hover height.

A cloud of spray told him they were over the water as he fought to correct a dangerous sideslip towards a buckled
tower crane.

‘Take us straight through the middle. I think the Russians have just played their last card.’

Wrecked ships towered over the Iron Cow as they negotiated the channel between them. Masts and bows and
funnels stuck up from the water like so many bizarre tombstones, and some of the bodies whose graves they marked
floated beside them, those of the Russian scuttling crews and anti-aircraft artillerymen who had still been aboard
when the missile impacted.

‘We sure did show those Ruskies, did you see me make ’em run. I’ll beta few of them are halfway home to Moscow
already.’ Ripper’s feet did a little soft-shoe shuffle as they dangled in the centre of the cabin. ‘I just can’t wait to
sample the delights of Hamburg, I sure heard a lot about that place. I been given a few addresses.’

‘It will be interesting to see if you can find them.’ Through her periscope Andrea was watching the approaching
fringes of the city centre.

All along the water’s edge there was nothing but heaps of rubble, with here and there the stumps of legs of a crane
giving some reference point.

‘Doesn’t look like you’ll be needing a roadmap.’ Dooley had seen the same. ‘Looks like they haven’t got any roads.’

‘Aw, and I was looking forward to seeing the place. Hey, what the hell, I’m here, I’ll make the best of it. I’ll find
something when I get ashore.’

‘Don’t put any money on it.’ Burke was watching his bank of dials and gauges.

‘Course I will. Hell, I could find fun down a sewer.’

‘From the smell of you, you may have; but I didn’t mean that. I meant getting ashore.’ A dial that Burke had been
watching, and that had been hovering just above zero, quivered and dropped suddenly to register just that. As it did,
the remaining engine died and the craft settled gently on to the water and began to rock in time with its motion.
‘We’re out of gas. Unless someone has got a couple of paddles tucked away that I don’t know about, then the only
place we’re going is back downstream. Into the waiting arms of the Ruskies.’
FOUR

‘Here, Clarence. What was that word you used?’ Standing on the lowered ramp, Dooley watched the small motorboat struggling to tow them towards the dockside.
‘Ignominious.’

‘Yeah, that’s the word. That’s what this is, fucking ignominious.’ Dooley moved back inside to make way for the major and their NCO.

‘I wasn’t expecting masses of bunting and a band,’ Hyde surveyed the empty wharfs, ‘but even so, the welcoming committee is a bit thin on the ground.’

As the Iron Cow’s sharpened wraparound fender bumped the pockmarked stone, Revell reached for a set of steps and clambered up onto the dock. The motorboat crew cast off the towline and departed without a word or wave being exchanged, leaving the squad to make fast its own mooring lines.

Revell looked around. The only person in sight was a small boy, holding a cycle, and wearing a blue armband. Resting the machine against what was left of a railway wagon, he walked over.

‘You are in the wrong place. The convoy is to berth in the Zoll-kanal.’

‘We have no power, we can’t reach it, and we have no heavy cargo to unload. Here will have to do.’ He found it hard to believe, he was defending himself against what had the sound of criticism from a boy of twelve or thereabouts.

The lad thought a moment, then nodded sagely, as if conceding the argument and accepting the excuses. ‘It will do for the moment. I have been sent to guide you, but here, take these.’ He handed over a thin sheaf of pocketbook-sized flimsy pieces of paper. ‘In case you get lost, these are maps. You must avoid streets or areas marked in red.’
‘Why’s that?’ Dooley took a sheet.
‘You will find out. It need not concern you yet.’

‘We can’t leave our transport, she’s valuable, and there are some stores on board. ‘Revell was finding it hard to handle the situation. The obvious impulse was to swipe the arrogant little bastard across the side of the head and then find an adult to talk to, but there weren’t any about. The boy’s next remark increased the strength of the urge to knock the cockiness out of him.

Glancing over the edge of the door, the lad took a long slow look at the HAPC. ‘I think it unlikely you could carry sufficient of anything in there to be of material use to us, but I will summon a guard unit.’ From a deep pocket in the oversized sports jacket he wore, he took a compact walkie-talkie, and spoke into it. ‘They will be here soon. Be ready to leave when they arrive.’

‘You want me to knock his block off, Major?’ Burke’s hand itched with the urge to cuff the kid. ‘Better not.’ Hyde indicated an approaching group wearing similar armbands. ‘Here come some of his mates.’

‘Shit,’ Dooley rubbed his eyes in disbelief, ‘is Hamburg being held by a division of shitty little munchkins?’

The average age of the members of the guard who now posted themselves along the wharf and on the roof of the hovercraft was only a year or so more than that of their guide.

In their ill-fitting clothes it was difficult for Hyde to gauge just to what degree the members of the youthful unit were suffering from malnutrition, but some mark of it was in their faces. Their eyes were dark ringed, sunken into their young faces. Only their faces weren’t young. War had aged them, individual and collective experiences had contrived to make them men before they had hardly begun to be boys. The casual but competent way in which they held captured Russian weapons betrayed long familiarity with them.

‘Where will our wagon be taken for repair?’ Burke was loath to leave the Iron Cow, they’d only just got her back
after two long months in the workshops.

‘It will not be repaired.’ With undisguised disinterest the lad took another half-glance at the HAPC, hardly giving himself time to take in its battered appearance, the hundreds of bullet and shell scars on the scorched and mud-spattered armour. ‘If it has to be, then it will be taken to a secure place, but we’ve neither the manpower nor materials to repair it, or if it could be then the fuel to run it. We will strip it of its armament though, and put that to good use.’

The battle damaged remnant of the convoy was passing. Less than half the vessels that had started out had made it, and most that had were in sad condition. A fire blazed on the foredeck of a tug, and two of the five barges it still had in tow were riding low in the water. Several of the ships were listing, or down by the stern or bow, and nearly all had a row of sheet-draped forms on deck.

In the distance a high-pitched siren began to wail, and the sound was taken up by another close by.

‘We must be going. The Russians have not yet finished with the convoy.’ Pushing his cycle, the boy led Revel 1 and the squad away from the dockside.

As he shouldered his pack to follow, Hyde saw the youths left on guard tearing at the heaps of rubble with their bare hands as they fashioned improvised shelters against whatever it was that was coming.

Two minutes after they had left, as they picked their way between the raised rims of gaping craters, a pair of Soviet Su-20 ground attack jets screamed past overhead at a thousand feet, the clacking 30mm cannon in their wing roots leaving a row of smoke smudges in the sky behind them.

Immediately above the docks they released the entire load of their wing pylons and pulled up and away as the retarded cluster bombs split apart and disgorged and scattered a mass of individual bomb-lets.

There was no time to seek cover, the squad could only throw themselves to the ground and claw a hold on that against what they knew was coming.

The cluster munitions burst across the area. Those close enough for their seeker-heads to register the engine noises, exhaust emissions or movement of the convoy homed on that. Those that weren’t, or couldn’t manage the gross alteration in trajectory necessary, just fell and delivered their hollow-charge warheads on to whatever lay below.

Not even the still-shrieking sirens could blot out the whistling screech of the approaching bomb. Revell covered his head with his hands and willed his body, his every fibre, to pull in upon itself, to constrict and occupy the smallest possible space.

At the moment it seemed the rising shrill must bust their eardrums from their heads, the bomb impacted and the ground smacked up into their bodies and cradled faces. Fragments of concrete smashed down around them.

Beyond the line of warehouse roofs that hid it from them, thick smoke rose from the dock, but it was the fresh crater immediately in front of them that took Andrea’s attention. She knelt at its side and picked up a shred of metal, a part of the bomb’s miniature wings. ‘It did not go off.’

‘Just as bloody well. Any fucking closer and we’d be looking at holes that size in ourselves.’ Dooley stepped over the shallow depression. ‘I wonder what poor sod doing slave labour in a Commie munitions works we have to thank for that.’

‘Sure is going to be a lot of dodgy crap to clear up after this war is over, if it ever is.’ More cautiously than the big man, Ripper went around the new indent in the already heavily pockmarked surface.

‘Not as much as you might think.’ The boy rummaged among a precarious pile of debris. ‘We can find a use for this in Ivan’s Gift Shop.’

‘What the hell is Ivan’s Gift Shop?’ Burke watched the boy drive a length of angle-iron into a fissure, one of many, that radiated from the point of impact, and tie a piece of rag to its top.
'You will find out, it ...'

'Yeah, we know ... it need not concern us yet.' Ripper jabbed the boy in the chest with an oily finger. 'One more riddle, one more smart arse remark and I’ll hog tie you to the next dud that comes down. I’d rather have this map than your mouth.'

His fists opening and closing, the boy’s face flickered through a spectrum of emotion, and fixed on sullen anger. He picked up his bike and led them at a fast pace away from the docks.

'Bye now. You all come along and see us some time, y’hear?' Ripper waved a farewell to the boy’s back as he pedalled off.

It was a little cooler now as the sun set, and the glare was no longer reflected from the masses of broken glass filling every street. They might as well have been walking through a city of the invisible. They had seen no one on the streets, but ample evidence that there had been. The deep drifts and layers of dust were imprinted with the marks of many footprints and cart tracks.

Across the city rolled the sound of artillery fire, and once, only a few blocks away, the massive crash and roar of a long-range bombardment missile impacting, followed by the rumble of its sonic boom.

Weakened by the intervening buildings the blast wave arrived as a swirling wall of dust that scoured the flesh of their face and hands with stinging wind-whipped particles.

'This don’t seem to be too healthy a place.' Dooley spat ground mortar and plaster. 'How about we find somewhere with a spot of top cover. I’m getting the feeling that brat has dumped us in bomb alley.'

'We’ll try in here.'

Revell led them down a ramp into the artificial cavern of an underground car park. The collapse of the buildings above had brought much of the roof down, but a route of sorts appeared to have been cleared between some of the crumbling pillars, and he struck that way.

At long intervals sputtering oil lamps had been strung up, and they headed from one to another, frequently stumbling as they reached the near pitch black area halfway between each.

For a moment it seemed that their journey ended abruptly at a blank wall, then Hyde spotted a tunnel opening in it, partially hidden by the wrecks of flattened Volkswagens to either side. He ducked to enter, and the barrel of a Russian pistol was stuck into his face.

'I’ve been expecting you. Sorry I didn’t meet you up the top, but my telephone line has just been repaired for the first time in a week and I wanted to use it before it was put out of action again. I thought you’d manage to find your way here alright.'

The stench was almost overpowering. Raw sewage moved sluggishly past their boots, and every movement brought fat bubbles to its surface that burst and threw particles of the stinking effluent over them.

'You’ll have to forgive the pong. I think I must have grown rather immune to it, but I expect you find it a bit ripe.'

By the dim light from a single oil lamp, Revell looked at the speaker. His age, under caked filth and in a face deep-lined by hunger, was impossible to determine with any precision, but around thirty might have been about right. He sat on a plastic bottle-crate behind a table constructed of several planks supported by more of the brightly coloured compartmented mouldings.

'You’re British?'

'Oh yes, very.' His mouth opened in what might have been a smile, but the few teeth left that might have signalled it were no more than blackened stumps, rotted by disease. 'I was secretary to a trade mission that was over here when the Ruskies did their Red Indian imitation and circled us in the night. The others tried to get out, never saw them again. I thought I’d stay on and do my bit.'
‘What do you want us for?’ Holding a cloth over his nose and mouth didn’t help, but Boris kept it there anyway.

‘I issue identity papers. The Ruskies have got up to all sorts of tricks to try and infiltrate the city. People are suspicious. You’re Russian aren’t you?’

Boris looked to the major, before nodding. ‘Not now you’re not. I’ll put you down as Polish. You won’t get past the first security check if I put the truth. You’d be lucky if they just shot you, bit at a time.’ From a small stack he took eight pieces of thick card and on each filled in their name, rank and number. On the reverse he jotted their country of origin.

Clarence queried the last entry.

‘Quite simple really. Such a lot of bodies to bury, it was beginning to get complicated, especially as all the non-combatants such as priests and the like are busy full time at the hospitals. The living have to come first. Nobody was too keen on indiscriminate mass burial, we leave that sort of callousness to the Reds, so we eventually plumped for plots determined by nationality as the best we could do. Catholic, C of E, Buddhist; now they’re all the same. Death is a great leveller.’ He jerked his pen towards the ruined city-above, and laughed at his own little joke. It was a brittle laugh, of short duration.

‘Where do we go now?’ Revell didn’t join in, doing nothing that would force him to take deeper breaths of the fetid atmosphere.

‘Baptism of fire actually for you. You’re earmarked for our fire-brigade ... No, hold it, let me explain.’ He held up a hand to quell the sudden outbreak of argument. ‘That’s what we call our mobile squads. It helps confuse the Ruskies if they manage a radio intercept. It means you’ll be doing a lot of rushing about. In the next week or so you should see more of the city, what’s left of it, than I have in the last year. You’ll find yourselves rather in the thick of things I’m afraid. Hope you like fighting. Are you sure you want the woman with you, there’s plenty of other work for her…’

‘That is my work.’ Bending forward Andrea put her face close to the man’s. ‘You have no objection?’

‘No ... none ... I just thought I’d mention…’ He cleared his throat. ‘Yes, well, eh, that’s about it. If there’re no questions…’

‘The other troops from the convoy, what will they be doing?’ Not for the first time, Burke was getting the feeling that of all the jobs being handed round, they’d got the rough one.

‘Not really my province, I’m not really privy to the master plan, if there is such a thing. I suppose, though, the ships’ crews will be formed into labour battalions and the armour and infantry held for the big breakout, whenever that may be. I’m only processing units that don’t really fall into any definable category. If that answers your question…?’

‘It tells me we won’t be out of the shit when we leave here.’ The brittle laugh was of even shorter duration this time. ‘Very good, yes ... Do you have torches? No? Oh dear, I was going to say that you could use the sewers and the underground railway tunnels to get to where you’ve got to go, but you’d need flashlights...’

‘Just mark it on my map. We’ll take our chances on the overland route.’ Revell held out his already crumpled piece of paper.

‘Here, the university building on Bundes Strasse. Can’t imagine what they want you there for, the Reds have never tried anything from that direction. Still, whatever it is, good luck.’

Sergeant Hyde held back a moment as the others filed out. ‘You don’t take up much room, couldn’t you find somewhere else to work, somewhere healthier?’

‘I expect so, in fact I’m sure I could, after all there’s fewer of us each day. We’re down to less than half a million, plenty of elbow room now, but I’ve got my reasons.’ He stirred his foot in the filth and provoked a series of large bubbles that doubled the strength of the pungent odours filling the tunnel. ‘The Reds haven’t used gas yet, they know there’s still a lot of neutrals trapped in the city, embassy staff and the like. It wouldn’t look good if they started using chemicals. But they might, eventually they just might.’ Again he dragged his foot through the glutinous
stream. ‘If I really tried, I could generate a lot of gas of my own, I might be able to produce sufficient overpressure to keep the Commies’ muck out.’ The laugh came again.

He was quite mad. Sat here on his own he had gone quietly insane. Hyde left him to his wild theory. As he went, the man was taking a small piece of greyish bread from a dirty cloth and chewing on a corner of it. He splashed his feet in the sewage and watched the slow-motion rise of the bubbles about him. The laugh followed the NCO as he negotiated the route back to the car park and into the open street.

‘…No, honest, my great uncle Frank, he worked in the sewers most of his life, said it never did him any harm, even claimed it were good for him.’ Ripper took in all the disbelieving faces around him. ‘Hell, you guys don’t ever believe anything I tell you. I ain’t kidding, forty years he worked down the sewers, he’d still be working down there if he hadn’t broke his watch.’

There was suspicion written large in Dooley’s expression. ‘I’m going to regret this. What’s breaking his watch got to do with it?’

‘Everything. See, he were down there doing overtime on a Saturday night and he kinda lost track. He sorta got caught when the commercials came on.’

‘Leave him, Dooley.’ Revell stopped him from delivering a second pile driver blow to the top of Ripper’s helmet. ‘One day he’ll choke on his own lies.’ ‘Only if I don’t choke him first.’

‘I said forget it, Dooley.’

‘Forgotten, Major, whatever it was.’ Grinning, Dooley was very pleased with himself at having got in the last word, until the butt of an assault shotgun landed between his shoulder blades and sent him reeling forward to sprawl on his hands and knees.

‘Anything else to say?’

Dooley took the point, he shook his head. As they scrambled over a pile of masonry from a wall that had collapsed across the road, Revell saw that the girl was watching him. He would have given anything to be able to read what was in her mind, know what she thought of him. Andrea had not attached herself to anyone since Libby had deserted.* If she was going to, and on past form she would, he could only hope it would be him. He had never been able to determine what it was that guided her choice, so it was no good putting on an act, he could only be himself.

Be himself. That was a laugh, what commander in wartime could ever be himself. Everything he did was an act, for himself, for others. The war was his play, the Zone his scene, Hamburg the set. At times it all seemed unreal, but the danger and sometimes the pain helped bring reality.

A salvo of heavy mortar bombs blasted buildings away to their right, starting a fire among the upper floors of two. Molten metal and glass dripped in cascades down their facades as the evening breezes fanned the flames.

Caught by the draught a spark flew and landed on Revell’s cheek. The ember bleached a blister into his sunburnt skin, and reality was restored with a vengeance.

THE OTHER SIEGES.
WEST BERLIN

With the defection of General Shpagin, who was Commandant KGB Forces East Germany at the outbreak of war, a more accurate picture is emerging of the last days of the NATO troops in the city. Until now the only complete version of events has been the official Soviet account and that has conflicted on many points with information gained from radio intercepts at the time. The Soviet line has always been that mopping up was completed on the third day. General Shpagin states that elements of the American 3/6th Infantry, with a self-propelled howitzer of C Battery, 94th Artillery, and an M60 tank of the HQ platoon, 40th Armoured, were still tying down large numbers of Russian troops on the twenty-second day. In the British Sector men from 247 Provost Company and 229 Signals Company held out in the Olympic stadium until the afternoon of the twenty-eighth, after the British HQ nearby, in which they’d previously barricaded themselves, had been set on fire by an air attack. General Shpagin has told his British interrogators that all Allied prisoners, including wounded, were executed on the direct orders of the Soviet
President. Also that Allied civilians who were rounded up after the city fell were not sent to camps on the Black Sea, as the Soviet press announced, but to the closed city of Gorky where many have died of disease and malnutrition while working as slave labour. Large numbers were killed during, and executed after, an abortive rebellion in the camps, made in protest at the harsh treatment. At present General Shpagin is helping compile a list of Soviet officers, officials and Communist Party members who will later be tried for war crimes. It now appears that the stubborn resistance by the NATO forces in West Berlin was a major contributory factor in the breakdown of the Warsaw Pact advance into Western Europe at the outbreak of war. Outnumbered ten to one, the NATO garrison prevented the Russians from redeploying over 90,000 troops, with armour, who could have been used to fill the gaps left by mutinies among the front-line East German and Polish units. Only the abandonment of their neutrality by the French, allowing Russian troops to pass through their sector and attack the lightly defended British flank, prevented the NATO Berlin Field Force from holding out much longer and possibly changing the whole course of the war. Attempts by the French government to suppress, and by the French press to discredit, the general’s statements, have failed to stem the rising tide of anger in that country, and across the world, at the betrayal. Allegations that the decision was made by the French commander in Berlin have been strenuously denied by the officer concerned, and cabinet papers that have been ‘leaked’ strongly suggest that in fact the course was decided on at the very highest level.

FIVE

‘Fucking students are a pain in the arse.’ Burke unslung his rifle and took a pick-handle in its place. ‘Naive lot of silly sods. Like bloody sponges they are, soak ‘em in a silly idea like Marxism and they suck it in without thinking, then they keep dribbling it over everyone else.’

‘You finished?’ Revell gave his assault shotgun into the care of a civilian police officer, but declined to take one of the clubs. ‘Right, they’ve planted the flag on the roof. The police want it down before it gets light and the city wakes up and thinks it’s been taken.’

‘Are any of the shits still up there?’ Ripper twirled the pick-handle like a baton.

‘Could be. We’ll know soon enough.’

As they walked towards the entrance Revell noticed a tall blonde standing half in the shadows across the street. She wore a light-meter slung from a cord around her neck and held a complex long-lensed camera. Revell swore to himself as an electronic flash ruined the night vision he’d been so careful to preserve. Everywhere he looked all he could see was a milky echo of that searing white light.

The main door was barricaded, and the major led the squad round the side of the building to an emergency exit. It was locked, but two ounces of plastic explosive dealt with that and it swung open at a touch when Revell tried it.

A service stairway took them up two floors before they came upon the obstruction. Filling the whole of a landing were Formica-covered dining-room tables and metal-framed chairs. Tight packed together they were a more complete barrier than a tangle of barbed wire.

‘It would be easier to find another way.’ Giving a chair leg an exploratory tug, Boris succeeded only in wedging the whole mass more firmly together.

‘He’s right.’ Clarence had already come to that conclusion. ‘Use a small charge and the heap will settle back pretty much as it is. Tackle it with sufficient to tear the stuff apart and there’s a fair chance we’ll bring down this whole wing.’

Ripper made his contribution while the major was making his own inspection. ‘I guess what we really need is a bulldozer.’ ‘Or a dozy bull.’ Revell beckoned Dooley forward. ‘Get at it.’

Without pausing to survey the jam of canteen furniture, Dooley swung his pick-handle and brought it down on a green-flecked white table top. Shards of laminate struck the walls of the stairway and at that single pounding blow the table folded almost in half. A dozen more attacks of similar ferocity and whole chairs and broken pieces of
enamelled steel tubing were clattering back down on the others.

He didn’t stop until he had smashed a track through the debris to the next flight of stairs, then, using the pick-handle like a stick, leant on it while he regained his breath. ‘What you waiting for?’

They had reached the fourth floor without further problem when they encountered the first resistance. A bottle fell from above and, missing them, went on to shatter on a lower flight. Fluid that burst and splattered from it gave off clouds of fumes as it ate into the concrete.

‘Here we go again, playing by the bloody rules while Commie-loving shit breaks them and then screams brutality at us.’ Burke was beginning to lose his temper. It was bad enough to make it to Hamburg and not get a word of thanks, but this was adding bloody insult to injury.

‘You fancy doing something about it?’ Hyde was taking his gas mask out.

‘Too fucking true. I had enough of fucking acid bombs in the Bogside without being able to do a ruddy thing about it. I’m not bloody standing for it here.’

‘Just two of us can clear the stairs, Major, so long as we can count on back-up the second we hit the roof or wherever the buggers are going to make their last stand.’

‘You’ve got it.’ Revell had too much respect for the British sergeant’s ability to even consider rejecting his plan. The NCO had been chomping at the bit for some time now. This slice of independent action might settle him for a while.

‘We’ll come when you call.’

‘Right, stay a flight behind us.’

It felt good to be running his own show again, even if it was only for a few minutes and against nothing more than a bunch of ignorant, arrogant students. Hyde pulled on his mask and fastened the straps tightly. He nudged Burke.

‘Gloves.’ His voice was muffled and came back at him inside the rubberised micro-particle-proof respirator. Again he nudged the driver, and this time just jerked his hefty club upwards.

Side by side they started up, and immediately came under a deluge of missiles and devices. With his hand Burke warded off another of the acid containers to send it tumbling all the way to the ground floor.

Chairs, table legs, drawers from filing cabinets crashed about them and still they kept going. A plastic bag filled with a white powder burst and smothered them with its contents. They didn’t even break step as they wiped the quicklime from their eyepieces. A whole desk landed immediately in front of them showering pencils and pens and paper as its locks burst. Short ramming blows from the clubs and it was left behind them, a splintered wreck hung half over the railings.

A crowd of youths blocked the top of the last flight, all competing with each other to hurl the biggest item with most force. Hyde edged ahead and as he did a wild kick was aimed at his face. It was the chance he’d been hoping for.

With all the strength he could muster he thrust the blunt end of the club forward as far as he could, and rammed it into the student’s crotch. The others had to grab hold of the victim as he collapsed clutching himself, and the disruption of the defence line gave the sergeant his opportunity.

Two sweeping blows he delivered swept the legs from a pair of defenders trying to push a complete filing cabinet over the top, and they went down with it on top of them.

Burke used his pick-handle like a quarterstaff and propelled another against the wall, bringing his knee up into the pinned student’s groin.

Surviving members of the group had Hyde surrounded in a corner and were cautiously closing in, avoiding the savage jabs he made at them with the razor sharp end of a metal chair back. The circle of figures could only be seen in outline in the darkness, and grew larger and more menacing as they drew nearer. Something hit him a sharp blow
on the shoulder, and then his attackers were gone, borne down and buried under a furious attack from behind as the
rest of the squad arrived. It was over in seconds.

‘This what you wanted?’ Revell handed the roll of red cloth to the German colonel.

‘Ja, danke schon.’

He unfolded it and examined the crudely stencilled hammer and sickle in one corner.

‘Have we passed the test? That was a test, wasn’t it?’ Keeping the irritation from his voice demanded a considerable
effort from Revell. ‘It had to be, why else give a combat group a task that could have been handled by the civilian
police.’

‘You are mistaken, Major. It was not a test, not in the sense you mean. Around you are my men, look at diem.’ The
colonel indicated the thirty or forty variously armed soldiers and civilians sleeping or resting in the alleyway. ‘We
formed this unit at Christmas. If all the men who had joined it had survived then I would have a battalion by now.
Instead I have one depleted platoon. Tomorrow it may not even be that. Together we have been through hell many
times. It was they who needed to see your men in action. Now they are satisfied, and will be happy to eat and fight
with you.’

‘I was hoping someone was going to say something about eating. Lead me to it.’ Appreciative lip-smacking noises
came from Dooley.

Among the weapon- and ammunition-draped recumbent forms someone laughed. Revell couldn’t see who, but he
recognised it as a woman’s laugh, though it was brief and held more of sarcasm than humour.

Herding the students before them they crossed a wide street that had once been lined with trees: now only stumps or
shrapnel-slashed branchless trunks remained. Here and there showed the burned-out skeletal frame of a truck or tram
and walking was made difficult by chunks of brick and pieces of bomb casing that turned under their feet.

Ahead of them loomed a forest of apartment blocks, and they climbed a ramp- like pile of rubble to enter one by a
second-floor window. As the last of them did so, a desultory artillery fire began to register on the area.

A long time ago Clarence had turned off his mind from the physical discomforts and privations of the war, and now
he drank the thin greasy soup without noticing its taste and ate the stale bread without noticing that it had none, save
for a markedly bitter flavour to its thin crust. He ignored what went on around him. Having found a comparatively
quiet corner he’d settled down with his meal and now warded off any attempted conversation with a scowl.

‘Here, Clarence.’ Dooley noticed the sniper eating alone. ‘You afraid somebody is going to nick your chow? Forget
it. The way this stuff tastes nobody in his right mind would want it.’

‘You’re wrong there, mate.’ With his spoon Burke indicated the students, who having been bound hand and foot had
been dumped close to the trestle from which the meagre rations were being doled out. ‘I been told those blokes
didn’t have any ration cards on them. In dodging the draft they also missed out on the nosh. Look at ‘em.’

The youths were watching every ladleful of soup, every morsel of bread as it was dispensed. Some of them were
drooling, and a pair of them bumped and wriggled against each other, even tried to use their teeth as weapons in a
fight to reach a fragment of crust that fell to the floor.

It was stiflingly hot, with the steam from the cooking adding to the humidity of the night. As the last dregs were
licked from bowls the members of the unit drifted from the apartment to find cooler, less crowded places to sleep.
Most of them still nibbled at the small hunks of coarse bread, making it last.

Many floors above them a shell landed on the roof, reducing the height of the block by a few more feet and sending
a shudder through the whole structure. Revell heard it, and seconds after noted the slight falls of dust it brought from
the cracked plaster of the ceiling. From outside came grating and thumping as debris fell down the side of the
building, bouncing from the window ledges. Popping the last chunk of bread into his mouth, he punched his pack
into a more comfortable shape and lay down.
He was too tired to find anywhere else, and the hiss from the gas burner beneath the bubbling soup was soporific. As
his eyes closed, by the faint illumination from the cooker he saw the blonde again. She had stopped, and was looking
into the room from the corridor. In the instant before he fell asleep Revell felt she was looking at him.

The students had gone, dragged noisily away at first light, when the shelling had stopped.

‘Where have they gone?’ There was a pain in his neck, and only that told Revell that he really had been asleep for a
full four hours, not the ten seconds it felt like.

Having to look up from his map to see who was meant, the colonel just shrugged. ‘Not to a firing squad, if that’s
what you were thinking. Most likely they’ll be de-loused, fed, and put to work under close supervision on a burial
detail. A week of that and they will be begging to join a fire-brigade.’ He pointed to an area to the south of the city.
‘This is what interests us now, Kirchdorf. There is open ground there, the Russians might think it possible to use
tanks. We are to persuade them otherwise.’

Masses of pencilled alterations did not make the map easy to read, but the underlying markings and configurations
of the suburb were unmistakable. Revell said so.

‘Yes, the map does say it is a built-up area, Major, but you have much to discover about our poor city yet. We leave
immediately.’

‘Another flag to be pulled down? Another group of schoolboys to be spanked?’ Andrea had not bothered, as some of
the others had, to inch sufficiently close to eavesdrop on the briefing.

‘Fancyspanking some schoolboys do you?’ A leer spread across Dooley’s broad features.

She ignored him, but seeing the major was watching, allowed herself a small tight smile in his direction.

It was enough to make him turn away and seek distraction in some petty task. Revell felt himself break out into a
sweat and prayed that he wasn’t blushing. Those words, and that smile had triggered something inside of him.
Leaning against the table he tried to subdue the iron-hard erection that he felt sure must be bulging visibly, for
everyone to see.

Stupid; he was being stupid. The smile meant nothing, malice had prompted it, it was no more than a taunt. But
still, it was the first time she’d made any sign of even acknowledging his existence. And the thought of her, wearing
just that smile, that cruel, beautiful smile, and spanking ... Digging his ragged nails into his palms he willed the
thought to go, and his huge erection with it, and was only partially successful at both.

He was the last to leave, and as he went out into the dust-filtered sunlight he saw the blonde.

The hair that escaped from beneath the American steel helmet she wore looked clean, shiny even. He could see little
of her face behind the camera she aimed at him, but the hands that held it were smooth, and the long nails were
painted a pale pink. There was time only to notice that the one-piece suit she wore was pinched in tight at the waist
above a flat belly and slim thighs, and then the precarious path down the rubble ramp took all his attention. When he
reached level ground and turned to look back, she was gone.

Kirchdorf was only a name on out-of-date maps. A few stretches of road between swathes of churned ground
indicated that there had once been something there, but the scattered heaps of rubble gave no clue as to what.

A few distorted electricity pylons, a handful of fire-scorched telegraph poles; those were virtually the only reference
points in a landscape as devoid of them as any desert. Only one cluster of shell and bomb damaged structures
retained any semblance of their former condition, gave any clue as to their original purpose. The half-spans of
bridges, pockmarked columns and precariously supported broken sections of elevated roadway marked where an
autobahn interchange had stood.

They took up positions in trenches and weapons’ pits that others had dug and fought and died in. The evidence was
everywhere. Not all of the burial squads had been thorough. Lumps of putrefying flesh, fragments of bone, hanks of
hair, even an eye attached by the shrivelled cord of its retinal nerve to a quarter of a skull, littered the bottom of the
All of the earthworks looked to have been abandoned long ago. Most had partially caved in and the floor of each was thick with powdered dust and ash. To Hyde, the gun pit he was working to rebuild had a familiar appearance. On another battlefield he had seen something strikingly similar, the way the collapse was all on one side, the scorching on the other, and the patterns in the dust, as though it had been swirled round and round by miniature tornados. Nearby heaps of rubble reinforced the feeling as he saw glitter from beads of shining material, as if the very stone and steel had for an instant begun to melt and drip at the moment of the building’s collapse and had refrozen to their solid state with the swift passing of the incredible forces that had done it.

Retrieving his pack from a corner, Hyde took out a small drab-painted box with a dial set in its front, and uncoiling a wire from its back, pushed the probe attached to its end towards the dust at his feet.

‘Major.’ Wiping it clean, Hyde capped the survey meter probe before replacing it in his pack. ‘I’ve just run a check. There’s more than just background radiation around here.’

‘How much more?’

‘Hard to tell, there’s a lot of variations. Generally it’s in the region of a hundred Rads. We can take that, but there are a few hot spots close by where it goes right off the scale.’

‘Mark them and warn the others.’ Revell had already noticed the same evidence of ground and air nuclear bursts. Judging by the appearance of what was left of Kirchdorf, several high sub-kiloton weapons had blasted and seared it.

No wonder the colonel had described the area as suitable for tanks. It was possible, even likely, that the Russians had not been aiming at any specific target when they smeared the suburb, military or otherwise. Perhaps, having become irritated by the grindingly slow pace and expense of fighting through built-up areas they had decided to tailor some ground to suit themselves.

And there was something else about the place that made it tank country. Only men sealed inside a filtered air-conditioned environment behind thick armour could be sure of crossing it without danger of contamination and be certain of being fit to fight when they reached the far side.

For Revell, it was already too late to take any precautions. He was caked with the dust. It seeped inside his clothes, he could taste it in his mouth. Even if the Russians did not come, if the tank attack didn’t materialise, death was already creeping up on him.

SIX

They allowed the Soviet scout car to pass right through their line. The dust that hid them also served to part-blind the vehicle’s crew as it rose to cover periscope prisms and the armoured-glass blocks protecting the vision ports.

Even when it crossed an occupied trench, offering its thin underbelly to the men beneath, no move was made against it. Engine growling and burbling away to itself, it motored on until its small machine gun armed turret was hidden from sight by the mounds of debris.

Ten minutes later it returned. This time it moved less cautiously, and stopped long enough to put several hundred rounds into the area of the interchange. Apparently satisfied when no fire was returned, it headed back the way it had come.

An hour passed, in which the sun climbed higher and beat down more fiercely. Their sweat mixed with the dust and brought to their bodies an unbearable itching sensation they could do nothing to relieve. None of them touched the water bottles they had been allowed to half fill before leaving. If it was bad now, it was going to be a lot worse.

Revell felt almost guilty when the colonel sent him forward to investigate the sound of tank engines that had been audible for some time, but that was not accompanied by the clouds of dust that would have indicated movement and
betrayed a precise location.

He took Andrea with him, and together they crawled, slid and ran two hundred yards to the shelter of a rusting Leopard tank. Wriggling in through a hole low in its hull side they carefully extended the aerial of their radio out through the crack around the edge of the distorted loader's hatch.

An ammunition explosion had gutted the inside of the tank, only the massive breech of the main armament remained intact. The turret had been lifted by the blast and now it was possible to see daylight between its bottom rim and the top of the hull.

It hardly seemed possible they could have got so close. A pair of Soviet T72s stood not fifty yards off. Both had their engine covers open, and a harassed mechanic was leaning over one compartment, while he shouted at and argued with the crew seated on the other tank.

Around the tanks were a company of Russian infantry. Having grown bored with waiting they had organised various diversions, among which games of cards and dice seemed the most popular. A group of young officers stood and talked among themselves. Glancing frequently at the tanks, they looked even more often at their watches.

‘They are afraid. They have fallen behind their schedule.’ Andrea eased herself to a more comfortable position. It brought her into contact with Revell, but she made no move to back off.

He spoke quietly into the radio, but his mind was on other things. Was it his imagination or could he feel the heat of her body through the several layers of clothing between them? If it was only his imagination he was content to let it stay that way, an illusion was better than nothing. After all the months of hoping, of hopeless scheming, this was the first time he’d been alone with her.

And now that at last he was so close to her, it had to be at a time, and in a place, when he could not exploit the situation. They had seen what they’d come for, now they had to get back, and fast. The engine covers were being slammed closed and the infantry prodded to their feet.

Stifling though it was inside the metal hull, they still felt the additional heat from the exhaust gases of the scout car as it stopped alongside. A fraction of an inch at a time Revell began to retract the radio aerial, until it slid to the thinnest end of the crevice through which it projected, and stuck fast with near twelve inches of the shining metal still sticking out.

With engine beats that were far from healthy the T72s began to lurch forward, inexperienced drivers, or failing gearboxes giving the infantry riding on the rear decks and turrets an uncomfortable time.

As they began to move, Revell noticed a junior sergeant deliberately slip back from the back of the second tank and sit in the track marks clutching his ankle and feigning injury. Two privates were less concerned with appearances and simply jumped, sprinting away. An officer fired after them and the slower of them stumbled, recovered and tried to hobble on, fast being left behind by his companion. The officer fired again and this time the limping man went right down, rolled once, arched into a spasm and lay still.

With that example before his eyes the junior sergeant made a miraculous recovery and dashed after his mount. He leapt for the back of the tank and as he got a hold was kicked in the face by the officer who had used the pistol with such effect. Letting go with one hand he swung round, and as he threshed to regain a grip put his right leg between the whipping track and the drive sprocket.

Crushed and pierced, the limb was not completely severed and the junior sergeant lost several fingers as the sudden wrench with which his remaining hold was torn dragged them along a rough-finished weld that sawed straight through them.

The bark of the exhausts drowned the screams from the terrified man as he flopped about in the dust, first pressing the spurting stumps of his knuckles to his mouth, now plucking at the bloodstained cloth tangled with the protruding bones of his leg.

Leaving their vehicle, the crew of the scout car climbed on to the hulk of the Leopard and from that vantage point
watched and shouted derision at the sufferer. They kept it up for some minutes, before their commander did as the tormented man begged, between anguished screams, and ended his agony with a bullet.

Slowly and carefully Revell moved round until he could bring his repeater shotgun to bear on the turret hatches. He could hear the Russians moving about, and from the cutting-off of the beams of daylight coming through various ports and holes in the armour he could determine their positions.

There were three of them. All it would need would be for one of them to drop a grenade in, and that would be it. Should they by some miracle avoid that, then they’d be in no state to answer the burst of automatic fire that would inevitably follow.

The radio, resting on the twisted remains of the loader’s seat, was suddenly jerked into the air as a Russian gave its protruding aerial an exploratory tug. Revell didn’t give him the chance to pursue his curiosity further.

Five blasts from the shotgun threw open the hatch and caught two of the car’s crew unprepared. The storm of pellets lashed into them and the multiple impacts threw them off.

Andrea fired at almost the same split second. Patiently she had been tracking the progress of the vehicle’s commander and as the roar of the 12-gauge boomed about the interior of the hull, she put a compact burst through the hole in the turret front where the co-axial machine gun had been, and into the base of the soldier’s spine as he sat on the hull front reloading his pistol.

Blood made the metal surround slippery, and Revell had difficulty hauling himself out. The recoil was savage as the improperly held shotgun put the contents of three shells into the men on the ground. All of them were lying still, but he had seen others learn the hard way that a Russian who was down was not always out. A favourite trick of theirs was to play dead and then open fire on the backs of NATO soldiers after they had passed.

Ignoring the helping hand offered, Andrea climbed from the turret. She didn’t bother to look at the bodies.

A bullet bounced from the armour between them, striking sparks from the metal. A second cut through the air past Revell’s face and they jumped down to seek the shelter of the tank’s bulk.

A smattering of single shots followed, coming from the direction of a decrepit Tatra truck hung about with toolboxes and welding kits.

Machine gun fire came from another angle and probed for them with short accurate bursts that forced them to keep low. Only Andrea’s M16 had the effective range to engage the enemy, and it wasn’t enough. Taking a smoke grenade from his belt, Revell lobbed it beyond an angle of the hull and counted down the seconds to its ignition. Its bursting seeded a wide area with blazing pieces of phosphorus that gave off dense clouds of yellow-white smoke.

The first few paces they tried to hold their breath, but the exertion of running forced them to gulp for air, and instead they got the acrid fumes from the blazing chemical. It rasped in their throats, burned their lungs and even as they raced clear their eyes continued to stream from the irritation.

After only fifty yards the machine gun zeroed on them again and they had to take to a rough-formed trench made by the collapse of a sewer.

Mortar bombs began to fall, and though it was taking them the wrong way, they had to stay in the snaking excavation as red-hot slivers of casing scythed overhead. Above the continual bang of their detonation they caught the sharp loud bark of tank cannon. The T72’s had run into the colonel’s reception.

Now there was no chance of rejoining the squad. They were trapped on the wrong side of the fighting, and with the mortar fire continuing to pursue them with a single-minded vindictiveness they could only go on, in the hoping of finding an alternative route back into the city.

They shook off the barrage when they entered an area of docks and wharfs and warehouses, and passed beyond its range.
Everywhere was utter devastation. Few of the huge buildings had been completely levelled, but what was left standing had been rendered useless by repeated bombing and artillery fire. Ships of every size and type lay alongside but without exception they had sunk at their moorings. A foot-thick layer of debris-bearing fuel oil carpeted the water and the stench from it was overpowering. Many of the ships had burned and the hulls and upper works were a uniform smoke-streaked rust red.

Nothing that could have been of the slightest use remained. The wheels had been taken from the overturned trucks, along with engine fittings and, in some cases, even axles. There was not a packing case that had not been broken open and its contents examined. Vessels that had keeled over until most of the superstructure was submerged showed signs of having been entered and searched. Save where the charred remains still hung from davits, every lifeboat and raft had been removed. It was as if a swarm of human locusts had scoured the docks from end to end.

Checking his map, Revell began to work towards where a bridge was indicated, and as they shifted course in that direction they became aware of the sound of an engine ahead of them. From its rough note, far worse even than the two ill-maintained T72s, it couldn’t be a vehicle. Its beat was slow and ragged, as if each might be its last, but every time it wheezed, hesitated, and then managed one more.

In the echoing streets between the leaning bomb-scarred walls it was difficult to pinpoint precisely, but its location became obvious when they turned a corner and saw a group of elderly women working at the edge of a dock.

Hoses trailed from a throbbing pump, one over the edge of the wharf, the other up and into a large container mounted on a handcart fashioned from the rear end of a pick-up truck. The women were filthy, stained from head to foot with thick oil that glistened in the sun with hues of blue and green. They formed a chain that passed buckets of oil from the surface of the dock to a cluster of opened drums.

A shot rang out as a girl with a rifle saw Revell and Andrea and fired at them. For a snap shot it came close, clipping the stock of Andrea’s MI 6 and jarring it in her hands.

The salvage party broke and ran, slipping and sliding in the mess covering the ground about them and made worse by the full buckets they dropped. In a moment they were gone, but the girl with the rifle, joined by a similarly armed companion, had taken cover behind the handcart and now proceeded to snipe accurately at every move the pair made.

Not close enough for a shouted explanation to be heard above the continuing throaty pulse of the pump, and unlikely to be believed even if it could be, they had no choice but to make a long detour.

‘How do you like being bested by women, Major?’ There was that taunting smile again. Using the mute excuse of pretending preoccupation with the difficulties of negotiating a tangled mass of girders from a fallen crane, Revell didn’t answer, until she persisted by repeating the question.

‘It’s not a case of being bested, it just made sense to back off. We couldn’t get through to them, certainly couldn’t kill them, so this was the best course.’

‘You felt no annoyance, no anger that two young girls, civilians, should force you to change your plans?’

‘Why do you want to know, what does it matter to you?’

‘Because I would like to know how your mind works, what it is in a situation that guides you to your decisions.’

It wasn’t the exertion of threading and climbing through the steel web that made Revell’s pulse and respiration race. Perhaps he’d got it wrong, maybe he’d read too much into her words but he could dare to hope this meant she was going to attach herself to him the way she had to others.

From Clarence she’d learnt all there was to know about sniping and camouflage and associated skills; from Dooley every aspect of unarmed combat. And before Libby had deserted, it’d seemed she was about to batten on to him to pick his brains of all he knew about demolition and explosives and the larger calibre weapons.

Now, hopefully, it was Revell’s turn. He was certain that none of the others had ever made it with her. Clarence
wouldn’t have said if he had, but he wasn’t the sort to try. Dooley had constantly said he had, and no one had ever believed him.

If it was his turn, then she had chosen him rather than Hyde from whom to absorb the skills of command. The sergeant’s disfigurement had not been any bar to his being chosen, Andrea had never been bothered by the NCO’s ghastly appearance, and so Revell had always felt that he was in a competition, but a competition in which he was the only one who was really trying.

He mustn’t blow it, had to keep the thing alive. ‘This isn’t the time or place. We can go over it later, if you like.’ Oh damn, he had to add that last bit. He’d wanted to be positive and encouraging, and he’d succeeded only in sounding lame.

‘Yes...’
His hopes soared.
‘...perhaps.’

And crashed. He’d screwed it, he just knew it, he’d screwed up. Damn, damn, damn ... fuck. That was the first time he’d used the word, even to himself. He disliked swearing, especially the grossly obscene every-other-word type in which Dooley and Burke indulged, allowed himself nothing stronger than an occasional ‘damn’, but now the word seemed appropriate. Fuck ... word and meaning filled his mind ... fuck, fuck, fuck. Savagely hard he kicked a splintered baulk of timber over the edge of the wharf.

It struck the oil with a smack that hardly raised a splash, only one low ripple that was absorbed back into the glutinous mass within a yard. But the action had an unlooked for result.

On impact it turned over a bundle of fuel-sodden rags, to reveal them as clothes on a corpse that had been in there a long time. The oil had largely preserved the body, but as it lolled face uppermost it displayed an expanse of teeth made more prominent by the contracting of the soft flesh around them. With lips drawn back the dead man grinned up at Revell and mocked him before turning back to float face down again.

Sometimes it seemed that even the dead were against him.

There was a bridge, and it was still intact. They would not have to follow the river upstream to find the oar-powered ferries that had brought the unit across.

As they approached, Revell listened for the sound of fighting from the direction of Kirchdorf, but above the continual booming of Russian shells exploding in the city he could not make it out.

Once the bridge had carried a multi-lane autobahn, but it had taken many direct hits and now only a single-lane track wound across it, twisting past and between the many craters and sections where the road bed had been severely damaged by rounds that had failed to penetrate.

Some had done more than that though, they had punched right through. As he passed, Revell could see the river a long way below through a ragged-bordered hole. The various layers of the bridge’s construction showed clearly, and shreds of metal from a bomb fin caught in the exposed ends of reinforcing rods, still bright and shiny where the paint had been stripped from them, showed that the damage was recent.

From the centre of the bridge they had a good vantage point over that half of the city. Shell bursts kept a permanent pall of dust and smoke in suspension over it and here and there rose a black column that marked the place of some more lasting blazes.

‘There should be many more fires.’ Andrea scanned those quarters under attack. ‘It must be that there is little left to burn.’

Within a minute Revell had lost count of the number of incoming shells. He watched an impressive display of fire control as all the artillery fire ceased abruptly, and then shortly after recommenced with its entire weight falling on a single location that was instantly hidden behind flame and smoke. If the Russians were short of replacement uniforms, they weren’t short of ammunition.
A stray explosive round fell short and pounded the riverbank behind them, sending a large piece of the nose and fuse through the parapet ahead of them in a shower of stone and cement dust.

They stepped up their pace to get clear of the exposed position as quickly as possible, breaking into a run when two more shells followed, impacting on the wreck of a railway bridge alongside, cutting the last ribbons of rail with which it connected both banks.

Too late Revell saw the wire and grabbed for Andrea to stop her. There was no time to dive for cover, all he could do was lunge forward to try to shield her with his body.

A brilliant flash blotted out their vision as a vividly bright fireball blossomed on top of the parapet. Revell felt himself being lifted and the thought flew through his mind that he was being blown over the side of the bridge, into the poisonous depths of the Elbe, then he struck the other parapet, and everything went black.

He didn’t hurt, not badly. There was a violent buzzing inside his head and his body felt like it had spent a whole day being tossed about inside a cement mixer, but there didn’t seem to be anything broken.

Opening his eyes, or trying to, transformed the buzzing to an agonising ringing. All he could see was a white mist, and he risked the pain he knew it would bring to shake his head to try to clear it.

Gradually the pain subsided to a pounding ache, and he tried again. Through a milky haze, blurred vision began to return. As it did, the first thing he made out was the group of men standing close by. Visible only in outline he could see the silhouettes of Russian helmets, and at the same moment he saw that Andrea was hemmed in by the group, and had been disarmed. One of the men was reaching towards her…

SEVEN

Through the lenses of spectacles that appeared to be half an inch thick, the old man scrutinised their identity cards. Although he held them up close to his face, he still kept a tight grip on the sub-machine gun.

‘I can see why they gave him a short-range weapon. He can’t see far enough to use a rifle.’

If the old man’s sight wasn’t perfect, his hearing was in no way impaired, and he glanced from the pieces of card to scrunch his wrinkled features and glare at the major.

‘We may not be young,’ he indicated the other oldsters who made up the bridge defence group, ‘but we can still teach you something about war.’ He pointed to a mound of artificially arranged rubble. ‘There are six Communist assault engineers in there. We taught them about war; and you, how did you like your flying lesson?’

The memory of the booby-trap blast grenade was too recent, and its aftermath too much still with him for Revell to say anything. He caught the card flicked back at him, and as he fumbled to catch it, noticed the old man carefully hand Andrea hers, and give her hand a squeeze as he did. ‘How do we rejoin our unit?’ Holding on to Andrea’s hand, the old man very deliberately took a long time before answering Revell. ‘You do not. We have no time for such niceties. You report to the Office of Reserve Manpower. It is on Adolphsplatz, near the stock exchange. Go by the shortest route. If you bump into your unit on the way then it is your lucky day, if not …’ He shrugged. ‘Have you eaten?’ ‘No.’ Revell was surprised by the sudden concern. ‘Then you had best get a move on. They only serve one meal a day there, in thirty minutes.’

‘Thanks.’ Revell’s assault shotgun had been retrieved by a member of the senior citizen’s equally ancient squad, now the old man who held it reluctantly handed it over.

As they made to leave, the major felt a hand on his arm. It was the oldster with the sub-machine gun. ‘You are one of those who came up the river?’ ‘Yes.’

‘I hear there were not many of you, only a handful of tanks and a few supplies.’
Revell thought of all the casualties they’d taken on the way, but he said nothing about that. ‘We’re just an advance guard, there’ll be a lot more coming.’ The old man shook his head. ‘I do not think so. Until now the Russians were expecting an attempt by land, or even by air. Now they know better and will not let it happen again. We have been fighting them a long time, we know what they are like. They live in fear, for your success some of them will die, others will not let you jeopardise their lives. No more convoys will get through. The Communists will die fighting rather than be tortured and executed by the KGB for not having tried hard enough.’

Gnarled hands enclosed his, and Revell saw tears in the oldster’s eyes.

‘We have done all we can, we thought others would now take the burden but we see that we must finish the task ourselves. But thank you for trying. Thank you.’

He went back to help his squad rig a fresh trip wire and replace the blast bomb. His step was unsteady and the weapon and spare magazines seemed to weigh him down.

Like the Englishman down the sewer, Revell recognised a man who was near the limit of his endurance. It was a miracle the old boy had survived this long. Many half his age must have succumbed to disease, or cracked under the nervous strain. Revell was learning a lot about Hamburg, but he was learning a lot more about its people.

‘I’ve no idea where they are.’

The clerk spoke very loudly when he answered Revell’s question about where his unit might be. He was about to leave the table when the clerk leant forward and whispered.

‘Couldn’t say anything while others were listening, it’s bad for morale. I did hear something. The colonel’s fire-brigade took a lot of casualties in a scrap with some Commie tanks. Seems the Reds sent a weak force forward to draw the fire, then sent in a full squadron. Must have been a real rough-house. The count was four T72s brewed up and a couple more disabled. Sorry though, no idea where the colonel is now. You’ll just have to go wherever you’re wanted now.’

Revell rejoined Andrea sitting against the wall halfway along the platform. The underground station was packed. Every inch of space, even between the tracks, was occupied by people sleeping or queuing or gathered in small groups to talk or play cards. A few, those lucky enough to be near one of the few low power bulbs, were reading.

A cross section of humanity was there. All types, all classes were represented. In one corner a passionate young man was earnestly talking to anyone he could get to listen. He was being watched by a pair of middle-aged civilian police officers, who began to sidle closer as the youth tried to press leaflets upon unwilling people who had not been as oblivious to the presence of the officers.

In the queue waiting for new passes stood an elderly couple who had known better times. They tried, unsuccessfully, to distance themselves from those about them, holding their Antler luggage tight and making withering looks at anybody who brushed past or knocked against them.

From an alcove at the extreme end of the platform came a bellow of raucous laughter. A group of Turks were trying unsuccessfully to be inconspicuous. They were a small remnant of the mass of immigrant workers who had mostly returned home at the outbreak of war. Those who remained were the ones too poor to make the journey back to their homeland, or those wanted there by the police or draft boards, or who were engaged in some illegal racket so lucrative, like drugs, that they had been unwilling to pull out until the last moment, and then had left it too late.

Now they huddled close together in the recess, shushing each other to silence as they forgot their purpose for a moment and laughed too loud at a joke, or celebrated a winning hand too noisily.

The people they were avoiding were the armed men and women wearing blue armbands, who roamed through the crowds selecting those they needed for various tasks.

Somewhere among the throng a baby began to cry. There were few children on the platform and everyone stiffened at the sound and all conversation ceased immediately. It was as if the people’s nerves were so finely tuned, stretched so far, that if the jarring noise went on a moment too long they would snap.
It stopped, and the relaxation of tension could be felt. A pause, only of a second or two’s duration, but seeming longer, then the hubbub restarted as loudly as before.

‘You have plenty of ammunition for those?’ Revell was surprised at being spoken to in English, and even more so at the fact that the speaker wore the remnants of a British army uniform, bearing the insignia of a major in the Royal Engineers. He noticed just as quickly that he wore a blue armband. ‘Enough. What’s your interest?’ Revell felt a strong twinge of irrational jealousy as he noticed Andrea making a frank and thorough appraisal of the almost effeminately handsome officer. But the boyish good looks and quite diffident manner were belied by the mass of weaponry he carried, in the shape of a pair of holstered pistols, a silenced Patchet sub-machine gun and several grenades that hung from his belt and webbing.

‘I’ve got a bit of a job on and I’m a little short on firepower, had a few losses recently. I need a couple of good hands to ride shotgun, rather appropriately.’ He tapped the barrel of Revell’s 12-gauge.

“We were hoping to rejoin our own unit, if it still exists. Can you tell us what the task is?’ Revell made a point of placing himself between Andrea and the stranger.

‘You must be new. Off the convoy? Of course you are, silly question, you couldn’t have come from anywhere else. Actually I don’t have to tell you. The rule is, if you’re picked, you go. No questions, just do it, or ...’ He didn’t add any more, just indicated the police.

‘I’d still like to know.’

‘I’ll tell you as we walk. ‘Without looking to see if they were followed, he climbed down onto the track, and taking a torch from a pocket, led them into the gaping black crescent of the tunnel.

‘The name’s Thorne. I lead a group of odds and sods who specialise in suckering the Reds into traps. We’re getting quite good at it, but we tend to use rather a lot of ordnance, more than our few explosives plants can turn out, so we get what we want from Ivan’s Gift Shop.’

‘It has been mentioned before, what is it?’ Thorne stopped and flicked the torch beam on to Andrea’s face, letting it linger a moment until she put up her arm to shield her eyes. ‘You’ll be there in a couple of minutes, then you’ll see for yourselves. Hope you’ve got strong nerves. I’ve been there dozens of times, and it still gives me the willies. We make a detour here.’

A hole had been smashed in the tunnel wall, and from it a smaller hand-hewn branch sloped upwards. After thirty feet it opened into a trunk sewer. In this one, though, there was hardly any smell, just an acridy tang, like that from a goldfish bowl overdue for cleaning.

‘Not the prettiest of routes I’m afraid. But then the city isn’t all that much to look at now.’

Thome beckoned them to move to the wall and they clung to its crusted surface as three handcarts were trundled past. The first was piled with an assortment of non-ferrous scrap, the others with barrels whose slopping contents gave off pungent fumes that Andrea and Revell recognised from their journey through the docks.

‘Be grateful, you could have been hooked out for a job like that. I’ve heard that some of those people don’t see daylight for months at a time. Like the burial squads, they get extra rations, but then I wouldn’t like to do that either. Here we are.’

Rungs set into the wall led to a heavy steel cover. Climbing to its top, their guide rapped three times on its underside. After a short wait there was a creaking, rending noise and the cover began to rise, admitting a growing wedge of light.

They clambered up and into a brightly lit underground car park. This one was intact, the Russian gunners and bomb aimers had failed to find or penetrate it, and it was just as well. Stretching away between the supporting pillars were long, massively strong, trestle tables, their undersides braced with thick wooden props or angle-iron.

On the benches were variously sized wooden cradles, but it was what those cradles held that caught Revell’s attention. Each pair of them supported a bomb or rocket. Most were partly dismantled, many of them were badly
battered, and all of them were clearly of Soviet or East German origin.

In a far corner a steam generator hissed and bubbled, and not far off a stack of gas cylinders was coated with a crust of frozen lox.

‘Our stuff is over there.’ Thome led the way to where some men sat on and around a camouflage-painted Jaguar XJ saloon.

The car’s sunroof had been folded back, and a machine gun fitted to an improvised mount above the windscreen. On a trailer behind the car, that might once have been the chassis of a caravan, were a stack of artillery and anti-tank rocket warheads and slabs of off-white explosive.

‘Best if we get going right away. These places have a habit of going bang occasionally. There was one over on Wexstrasse, took a direct hit. The whole shift and half the street went with it. They’re still trying to recruit back to full strength.’

Revell had noticed the strained looks on the yellow faces of the few men working there. One of them crossed himself every time he picked up a different tool or removed another panel from a cluster bomb’s casing.

‘Seemed a pity to waste all the duds the Commies kept chucking.’ Thome got into the driver’s seat after ushering Andrea and Revell into the back, then with a member of his group standing on the front passenger seat manning the machine gun, and the others piling on to the trailer, he sounded the triple-tone horn to signal for the blast doors to be swung open.

Another fanfare was sounded as they swept out and up the ramp. ‘Sorry about that, I can never resist it. Always wanted a Jag, and now I’ve got one, no point in having it if no one notices.’

‘Just so long as the Russians don’t.’ Revell let himself lean against Andrea as they swerved round a corner towards the Stellingen district.

‘Oh, they know all about us. It’s just that they never know where we’re going to do our dirty work next. And the horn has its uses. Last week we took a wrong turn and found ourselves behind the Russian lines. All I did was keep it blaring away while I turned about and raced back. We’ve caused them a lot of casualties in the past, you should have seen them get out of our way. Only lost two men and the spare wheel, plus they made a few more holes in the bodywork.’

Several times they had to slow and negotiate chicanes in substantial barricades, and after each one the townscape became more derelict, and the number of civilians to be seen diminished. When they passed the wrecks of several American tanks, part buried by collapsed buildings, Revell knew they were getting close to the front.

A final roadblock of hefty concrete slabs festooned with spikes and rusted barbed wire, and then Thorne drew the car off the road and parked it beneath a sagging camouflage net. ‘From here it’s on foot.’

The trailer was unloaded and divided into individual burdens for the men. Only Andrea and Revell did not have to shoulder a share. When the column moved off they flanked Thorne in the lead, and had to work hard to keep pace.

There were no obvious landmarks to be seen, everywhere was the same featureless vista of ruin and desolation. Roads and paths had been hidden by bomb-blown debris and in places large missiles had blasted sections of water and gas main to the surface. It was impossible to tell if a shattered wall they passed was the front or back of a building, and whether or not they saw it from the inside or the outside.

Bodies, or parts of bodies, protruded from the rubble. Each supported a noisy colony of flies and maggots. The burial squads did not come this far forward, there was no point. A corpse they buried today might be blown back to the surface tomorrow, and if they just left it there was a good chance it would either be buried beneath a fresh fall of masonry or burst to a thousand tiny fragments by a direct hit.

A gutted T62 bulldozer tank marked the furthest point of Russian advance. From the open driver’s hatch a flame-bleached skeletal arm thrust skywards. On the engine deck, frozen by fierce fire into a rigid stance, stood the corpse
of a Russian officer. Clothes burned away, ribs exposed where grilled flesh had fallen from them, only the pistol locked in his furnace-welded grip betrayed his status. The flaring ammunition that had engulfed him had obliterated his face and robbed him of his identity.

At the head of a long straight street Thome signalled a halt. The men dropped their packs with scant regard for the nature of their contents and began to stuff the rocket warheads and explosives into a thirty-foot section of broken gas main that lay pointing down it.

Before they began to block with rubble the end containing the huge charge, Thome pushed a slab of plastic explosive inside and trailed back from it a twisted double strand of wire.

He smiled at Andrea. ‘Biggest single-barrelled shotgun in the world.’

‘It’ll burst.’ Revell had tried to calculate the total amount of explosives packed into the twenty-four-inch main and gave up. There was at least four hundred pounds and he knew there was no way the thin walls of the already damaged pipe were going to withstand those sort of forces.

‘Of course it will. I want it to.’ Putting a double turn of wire around each terminal on a detonator, he spat pieces of insulation. ‘No point in it all going one way, I want a scattergun effect. Once we’ve finished stacking a couple of tons of rubble at the breech end though, it’s all going to scatter towards the Ruskies.’ Unreeling the wire as he went, Thorne led them back fifty yards to the cover of an overturned personnel carrier.

‘And how do you know the Russians are going to come this way?’ There was faint amusement in Andrea’s voice, but it came from humour, not sarcasm.

‘Hamburg had a flourishing electronics industry before the war, come to that it still has, of sorts. We’ve got radio intercept equipment better than that in front line use with any army. Dire necessity is the mother of invention. You know how precise, how rigid, Russian plans can be. I can tell you now that, in three and a quarter hours, a platoon of Commie assault engineers, supported by a reinforced company of infantry and a self-propelled gun, are going to come straight down there. Right on to the muzzle of that great fowling piece. We’re going to convert the whole lot of them to hamburger.’

‘Clever, if it works.’

‘It’ll work, Major. See, I’m probably the most efficient mass-murderer you’ll ever meet, because the way I kill, it sure isn’t war.’

**THE OTHER SIEGES**

**KABUL**

With the taking of the Soviet Air Force’s main base in Afghanistan, at Bagram, by the Mujahideen, the position of the Russian garrison in Kabul now appears hopeless. Only strenuous efforts by the few remaining ground attack aircraft have deterred the encircling freedom fighters from launching a final assault. They have already rejected several appeals from the commander of the garrison for the acceptance of a conditional surrender.

It is likely that the Russians will decide to fight to the last man, rather than allow themselves to fall alive into the hands of the Mujahideen who are extracting a bloody revenge for past Russian atrocities, the worst of which are only now coming to light.

From a peak strength of 110,000 troops, the Russian forces had been reduced to under sixty thousand by the drafting of units to Europe to reinforce sectors of the Zone. Another twenty thousand were air-lifted out when the population rose against them, before aircraft losses became unacceptably high. Only a handful of the remaining forty thousand are thought to have reached the border and crossed safely into Russia.

Behind them the Soviets have left vast quantities of arms and ammunition, including thousands of vehicles, among which are whole regiments of tanks and self-propelled artillery.

With the retaking of Kabul the abandoned Russian troops will have been killed to a man.
EIGHT

Through the image intensifier Revell could see the enemy troops filtering into the street. Those with bulky packs would be the engineers. Behind the troops came the squat bulk of a self-propelled gun. The squeal of its tracks and the crunch of stone and brick being crushed carried clearly.

To either side of the APC the rest of Thome’s men had dug in. They crouched below their rubble parapets, waiting for the device’s detonation, to open fire immediately afterwards on any survivors.
The nearest Russian was only yards from the mouth of the pipe. There was a faint whirring sound as the handle on the detonator was pulled out to its fullest extent, and then a whine as it was pushed home.

Bricks and concrete smashed into the far side of the APC, as a portion of the charge blew back, but most of it belched forward, bursting apart the last ten feet of the pipe as if it were a paper straw and scattering rocket warheads down the length of the street.

Masses of secondary explosions marked their impacts and the road was lit like day. As the echo of the last died away, Revell looked round the side of the APC. He didn't need the intensifier. Flames were coming from the front-mounted engine of the self-propelled gun and illuminating the scene. Every fitting had been blasted from the vehicle and both its tracks were broken. Smoke boiled from holes in the armour, but there was no sign of the crew.

And there was no sign of the Russian engineers or infantry either, at first. Of the hundred and fifty men who had been there, not one remained on the road. The few bodies that were visible were draped over mounds of rubble or heaped against walls some distance off.

Shouldering his obviously unneeded shotgun, Revell brushed the dust from his sleeves and shoulders, and as he did saw that Andrea was still sitting down. Thome was bent over her, examining a long gash in her thigh.

Revell thought his heart had stopped as he saw the blood oozing sluggishly from the wound, and then flowing faster as the limb was pulled away from the jagged spear of metal projecting from the armour of the APC. The piece of rocket motor casing had been blown back to penetrate the armoured troop carrier's floor and almost its roof, finding Andrea's leg as it lodged in the thick aluminium that had failed to stop it quite soon enough.

'It's severed an artery.' The field dressing that Revell applied only slowed the flow, it didn’t stop it no matter how much pressure they applied.

'We’ll use my transport. There’s a hospital on the corner of Altonaer Strasse that won’t be too busy at this time.' Thorne picked the girl up and started back to the Jaguar.

Revell followed, and almost tripped at every other pace. He had eyes only for the arm she had thrown round Thome’s neck. In him was fear for her and hate for him, and both grew stronger with every step.

Over a thousand casualties had been packed into the boiler room and the adjoining store. Several hundred more had to take their chances above ground, lining the corridors and entrance hall on the ground floor and covering every inch of space in the administration offices.

New cases were being admitted all the time, and were put into one of three categories: those who could be patched up and sent on their way, those who needed surgery that would require a period of immobilisation afterwards, and those for whom no treatment could hold out any hope.

The terminal cases were sent straight to the hospice across the street where everything possible was done to make their passing easier. Patients who fell into the other two groups were allotted a place on the surgeons’ lists. On admission Andrea went immediately to the top of the list and was given a local anaesthetic within a minute of being carried through the doors.

Thorne hung about long enough to check that she was going to be alright and then went off to visit members of his group in the hospice. For a while, Revell tolerated being harried and shunted about by the overworked and tired nurses, then after being told to go for the fifth time, he went to give blood. It was the only way he could think of staying near to her.

Even patients about to be discharged were there. Many of them looked far from well, but they insisted on donating at least a half-litre. Often they must have been giving back what they had themselves received by transfusion only days before. Afterwards he sipped without tasting a lukewarm cup of tea, before leaving it half drunk and going back to the theatre.

She wasn’t there, but he managed to corner a charge nurse long enough to discover that Andrea had been moved to
what had been the porter’s locker room at the back of the building, and would be there for two or three days while the wound began to heal.

It took some doing, but he managed to evade the determined efforts of the nursing staff to let no visitors into the crowded makeshift ward and found her wrapped in a bright yellow sleeping bag between an old woman who had lost a hand, and a little girl whose bowels lay in a bag beside her.

In that room was all the misery of the war. The whole spectrum of violent injury was there: amputations, chest wounds, disfigurement. She’d had only the local anaesthetic for the operation but tranquillisers administered afterwards had put her to sleep. Her face had been washed hurriedly and her fringe left wet and pushed back. It gave her a childlike appearance, very touching, and he wished he could stay there and look after her. He’d have done anything for her, anything, but he couldn’t stay. Already a nurse had spotted him and from the doorway was trying to catch his eye.

Revell knelt beside Andrea. With just the tips of his fingers he stroked her fringe back into place and saw that even by that light touch he had soiled her smooth suntanned skin. There was a small dark mark on her cheek that no washing would have removed, it was a shadow of the extensive bruising she’d received from a wound on their last mission. Then he’d been tempted to leave her behind, but he hadn’t been able to bring himself to exclude her, to exclude himself from her company.

She’d never allowed him near, given any hint of encouragement or indication that she was ever likely to, and still he hoped ... There was a faint smile on her face, it played at the corner of her lips and fractionally accentuated the curve of her cheekbones. He could only wish that it was a real one, and directed at him. He was very tired. It would have been good just to lie down beside her and hold her hand, and sleep. He was tired and lonely. The war; command; frustration; they towered over him, crushing him down and he felt his will to resist the pressures crumbling.

A hand was on his shoulder, and he turned to see the nurse making an urgent pantomime of ejection towards the door. One last look at Andrea, and he complied. He didn’t know if he would ever see her again. Thome was not at the hospice. No one remembered seeing him, or knew where he was. For the second time in a day, Revell had no unit. He sat on the steps of the building, fighting the temptation to lie down and sleep. It was hunger as much as willpower that prevented him doing just that. Even the condemned man ate a last meal, a pathetic act under those circumstances, as if it mattered when death was only a little way off, but the sensation was not about to be allayed by the application of reason, and he looked around for the kitchens. ‘Are you hungry?’

It was the blonde with the camera. She stood in front of him, proffering a piece of sausage and a half-loaf of bread. ‘I am, yes, but those are your rations.’ ‘I can get more, here, take it.’

Just to hold it felt good. Revell took a bite from the sausage. It was full of meat and rich with flavour. ‘Where do you get food like this?’ ‘Friends. I have lots of them. My name is Inga. Come with me, there is something I would like to show you.’

Revell stood up and followed without question, like a schoolboy called from the dinner table by the headmistress. He didn’t know where she was taking him, and at that moment he didn’t really care. She laid a hand on his arm to caution him against some inert power lines drooping low across an alleyway and the slight pressure of her long slim fingers made him tingle. The sensation remained for a moment after she later, and slower than she need have, let go. She chatted as they walked. There was a trace of accent in her voice, but he couldn’t place it. Swedish, Swiss? Something about it was familiar, but precisely what escaped him. Apparently the city-fathers of Hamburg had decided to record history in the making, she was to chronicle on film every detail of the siege. Her job meant a pass that would take her anywhere, extra food, and if she needed it a car with petrol.

As they walked she linked her arm through his. It seemed an innocent gesture, but he sensed a fraction too much pressure for it to be quite that. Being with her made him feel good. The distant, and sometimes not so distant, hammer of the guns was a barely heard background noise.

With a genuine-sounding interest she asked him about his family, and he talked of his parents, and as her gentle probing prompted, about the bitch, and the divorce, and about Andrea. He had known her only minutes and already he had told her about years out of his life. She wasn’t Andrea, but she was attentive and attractive, and as he felt
through the sleeves of their clothing, warm. There was such a lot he had kept bottled inside him, now there was someone who really seemed to want to listen and the pent-up thoughts and emotions became words and he talked as he had never talked to anyone. He wanted their walk to continue, until the burden he’d made for himself was lightened by being shared.

Star shells lit the city. Shells pounded whole suburbs, but Revell heard and saw nothing as Inga guided him through a labyrinth of ruins, occasionally commenting noncommittally, but mostly just listening. For this duration, however short it might be, he’d escaped the war.

‘Fucking half rations! Half fucking rations!’ Dooley looked at the miniature pool of potato soup swilling about at the bottom of his bowl, and hurled it and its contents at the nearest wall. ‘I’ll tell you, fucking Colonel fucking Horst, what you can do with your fucking half rations? Piss off!’

‘Yes?’ Horst was unmoved by the impressive display of temper by the giant American.

‘I fucking took out a shitty T72 with my fucking bare hands. I jammed a fucking log in its fucking tracks then broke the fucking necks of the fucking crew as they came out, and you stand there like some fucking comic opera general from Ruritania and tell me I’m on half fucking rations? Piss off!’

‘Why did you have to kill the,’ Horst paused, ‘the crew with your bare hands?’ ‘You know fucking why. Because my fucking weapon had jammed, that’s fucking why.’

‘And your weapon jammed because you fired a burst. A burst! You used more ammunition in three seconds than my unit has done in the last three days. If we have no food to spare, we have even less ammunition. That is why you are on half rations.’ Dooley made to say more, but didn’t. He sat beside Burke against the cellar wall and watched his meal trickling down until it had absorbed so much dust it could run no further, but stopped, and began to harden.

‘If it’s any consolation, mate,’ Burke slurped noisily on his soup, ‘the Ruskies are a bugger sight worse off than we are, even you, on half rations.’ With the last of his bread he mopped every drop of moisture from the bowl. ‘I stuck my bayonet through a Commie who weren’t anything but skin and bone. I’ll swear the bugger looked almost happy to die. He couldn’t have weighed above eighty pounds, and I saw others who weren’t no better. If what we’re getting ain’t good, what they’re getting ain’t nothing.’

Pushing the last morsel into his mouth, he licked his spoon, and then the crumbs from his fingers. ‘This bread tastes ruddy awful, real bitter. Wonder what they been doing to it?’

‘Shit, that sure isn’t no mystery.’ Ripper was taking longer over his food, and had more than half of his three ounces of bread left to eat. ‘During vacation I used to work in a bakery, and taking an interest I had a chat with the guys who work the ovens here. Seems they can’t afford to use a few tons of cooking oil each week, greasing the tins, so they made an artificial substitute, using a soap base. That’s why the crust tastes kinda bitter. Won’t do you no harm though, less you drunk a gallon of the stuff.’

‘Such things have had to be accepted a long time in Russia, since before the war.’ Boris pointed at Clarence and Burke. ‘Perhaps one more election and your country would have started down the Socialist slope towards food substitutes, food rationing and uncomplaining acceptance.’

‘Well, I sure ain’t accepting, and sure as hell I’m complaining.’ Chewing the last mouthful, Ripper pulled a face at the coarse flavour of the lukewarm drink with which he tried to wash it down. ‘What we just had, well all excepting Dooley that is,’ he ducked the flake of damp-stained plaster shied at him, ‘weren’t fit for hogs. Now isn’t there some place hereabouts where a guy can get decent food that at least bears some resemblance to the real thing?’

‘I heard they got a black market.’ Burke prised gristle from between his teeth, then pressed his stomach with the palm of his hand and produced a rapid sequence of spectacular belches. ‘But if what I’ve seen in the Zone in the past is anything to go by, then I’d say our chances of scraping enough together to find the price of a can of beans is pretty remote. Especially as the only thing they’ll accept in payment is hard currency, around eighteen carat.’

‘Who do we know who’s in the habit of carrying around chunks of gold?’ From Sergeant Hyde the question had a rhetorical air, but he was looking direct at Dooley.
‘Oh no.’ Conscious that all eyes were on him, Dooley hugged his pack close. ‘What’s mine is mine, and it stays that way. There’s nothing you can say is going to make me part with my hard-earned savings.’

‘Savings shit.’ A snort was added to Burke’s repertoire of revolting noises. ‘You’ve been trying your hand at a bit of wheeling and dealing. Remember that quartermaster sergeant who had all those blankets go missing? Only a direct hit that burned his store to the ground saved the poor worried bastard from a court martial. That was when I first saw you with those Krugerrands.’

‘Lies. It’s all fucking lies. You won’t bloody blackmail me. I told you. Nothing you can say is going to get me to part with what’s mine by rights.’

‘You sure about that?’ Hyde made no threatening move, but the big man backed into a corner and balled his fists.

‘Give up, Sarge.’ Burke shook his head. ‘When he says we can’t get him to change his mind and pool what he’s got, I believe him ...’

With a smug expression, Dooley nodded his pleasure at their acceptance of his refusal.

‘... Even if we told him the black market is on the Reeperbahn...’ ‘Where?’ His grip on the pack relaxed as Dooley became instantly interested. ‘Did you say the Reeperbahn? Where all the hookers ... and the strip clubs ... Jesus, why didn’t you tell me, what are we waiting for?’

‘Keen, isn’t he.’ Clarence came from the shadows of an alcove. ‘But knowing friend Dooley, might I suggest you check first on just what funds he does have available. In the past he has been known to exaggerate, just a little.’

With savage ill-grace, and a glare at their faintly smiling sniper, Dooley dug a grubby hand into the depths of his pack, and withdrew a small, garishly patterned plastic case that might once have held a woman’s toilet things. Unfastening its zipper, he emptied the contents onto the floor.

The flickering light from their single oil lamp illumination found a thousand facets on which to reflect as it lit the pile of assorted rings and other jewellery.

‘And the other?’ Burke tapped an angular bulge in the side of the pack.

‘Bloodsucker.’ From a faded blue velvet covered case that a second rummage in the pack produced, Dooley tipped a dozen gold coins into his hand. The pair of sovereigns looked insignificant among the nest of large South African pieces. ‘You satisfied now? That was going to be the down payment on a pig breeding unit when this was all over.’

‘We’re doing you a favour; save you from a life of toil and shit shovelling.’ Scooping up the jewellery and taking the coins, Burke handed them to Clarence. ‘You look after them. You’re distrusted less than anyone else.’

Without comment on the dubious compliment, the sniper transferred the gold to his own pack, along with a few extra trinkets and a little currency donated by the others.

‘Now don’t be unhappy, friend.’ Adopting a paternalistic manner that his youth made unconvincing, Ripper consoled Dooley by patting him on the shoulder. ‘The old guy has a point. Hell, a stud like you don’t want to waste his time on one frau and one farm. Think big.’ ‘Big?’

‘Sure. You don’t need a stack of gold to get what you want. Get yourself off to Miami, batten onto the wrinkled old dames who go there for their twilight years. All you need is enough for a decent set of duds, and you’re off. You could be ironing the wrinkles out of the old girls at the rate of ten a day, if you can keep it up. Know what I mean?’

Understanding dawned slowly, then burst upon Dooley’s face. ‘Hey, you’re right. The place is packed with widows ... but I’d have to do it right. A few good suits, a tux or two, sports jackets ... and I’d need a car, expensive but not too flashy, got to get the image right. It’ll take a bit of cash ... think I can have a bit back, just to sorta get me started...?’
NINE

Twice they were forced to take cover while Soviet bombers circled overhead. The first time they made the mistake of going down into a huge command shelter that was occupied by the inmates of a mental hospital. A dozen nurses and staff were trying to create a degree of order but as fast as they secured the co-operation of one section, there would be disruption in another and bedlam would break out all over again.

Much of the problem appeared to be created by the fact that the raid had coincided with a mealtime, and many of the patients, knowing only that they were hungry, were making their feelings felt.

Inga and Revell were besieged the instant they came through the blast proof doors and found themselves jammed into a corner while various hands plucked at their pockets in search of something to eat.

After several minutes of this not deliberately violent, but bruising, treatment, a member of the staff forced a path through to them and managed to convince the more reasonable of the patients that they had nothing. With the turning away of a few, the rest gradually followed until a single old man remained. He pulled at his bottom lip, looking at Revell and Inga in turn with an accusing glare. ‘But you have been eating.’

It was a statement, and Revell could only nod in agreement by way of answer. He looked around, but luckily none of the others had heard, or if they had then they’d already lost interest.

‘Oh, don’t worry about them. They’ll not bother you again. Are you surprised that I am so rational? I know you are. We don’t all gibber and caper you know, and all of us have been better since the siege started. They haven’t had the time to give us our treatment. But for some of us of course, treatment or no treatment, it makes little difference.’ The old man indicated a boy, squatting on the floor, whom two nurses were trying to get back into his clothes.

‘May I take your photograph?’ Inga went to take her camera from its case.

‘How very nice it is of you to ask. Most would just take it, without asking, as they might of an animal in the zoo. But I must decline. You would have to use a flash in here, and that would bring attention back to you, and I do not think the staff would be happy if I were to step beyond these doors. I hear the all-clear, you will be going now. Perhaps, if you can spare the time, you will come and we can talk again, perhaps?’

He held the door open for them as they went out, and at the last instant held Revell back by clutching at the material of his sleeve.

‘Do you know why I am in here? No, of course you do not. I was locked up because I kept starting fires. I burned down some huts, and damaged a warehouse and a school, but I never hurt anybody, never. I just wanted to see the flames. Isn’t it strange. Now for starting fires they would make me a general, but if I did not kill they would lock me up for that. Sometimes I wonder, is it really me who is insane?’

The air outside was heavy with the stench of fires and unconsumed cordite from a nearby anti-aircraft battery, but it smelt good after the shelter. When the warning went again only five minutes later they took the risk of spending a few minutes searching for somewhere better. At least there was no one else in it, and it was a rare thing to find any underground place in the city that did not fill with its quota of humanity when a raid commenced, but when a stub of candle was found and lit with difficulty the reason became apparent.

In a city where everyone lived with death as a constant companion, where no reminder of its proximity was necessary, the burial crypt of a church was not the place where any would shelter who could cram themselves into some other place. But there was evidence that in the recent past some had.

A corner held a few tattered scraps of cloth that might have been an improvised bed for a child or an elderly and infirm relative. Overlooked, in an alcove that had once held the urn now smashed on the floor close by, was a small ornate oil lamp that in peacetime would have remained unused forever but, here and now, where any economical way of providing precious light was valuable, its being misplaced would be a serious loss to a family. Revel set it back on the shelf after examining it. Perhaps the owners would think to return and search here, if they still lived. And if they did not, then eventually others would find it. No corner of Hamburg had not been searched a hundred
times already, and each would be scoured as many times again.

Without blast doors to blanket the sound they could hear the raid in progress. The whine of the bombs as they fell, the crash as they detonated, sometimes followed by the thunder of falling masonry. And the flak gun could also be heard, firing very short bursts at long intervals.

‘The gun is for show only. It cannot reach the aircraft, but its use is reassuring to some. There are a handful more scattered about so that the illusion is seen by all.’

Straining to listen, Revell was certain he could hear only two aircraft. ‘If the flak defences are so weak, how come the Commies aren’t over all the time. One week of round the clock bombing and it would be all over.’

‘The guns are not the only air defence. There are several batteries of missiles also. They were made here, in the city, and the few times they have been used they have brought down Soviet bombers, but they are mostly held in reserve, against just such mass attacks.’

‘The Ruskies must know all about them then.’ Inga was suddenly offhand. ‘It is possible, but I think they have problems also. We know that they are short of aircraft spares, of replacement pilots, of experienced ground crews. That is probably deliberate, the commander of the encircling Warsaw Pact forces is out of favour with the Kremlin.’

Looking for inspiration for a change of subject, Revell scanned the various tombs and inscriptions. It was not a likely place to find conversation that would take war and death from their minds. He needn’t have bothered wracking his brain, as after several minutes’ silence it was Inga who spoke. The topic she chose was a surprise.

‘Do you like movies about vampires?’

‘Eh? I’ve seen a few, on television, but they’re not my favourite viewing. You like them?’

‘Oh yes, I’ve seen hundreds. I love the suspense.’ She hugged her arms about herself. ‘I think it is ... delicious.’ ‘I’m not sure if that’s the right word to use about vampires.’

For a moment Inga looked puzzled, then she laughed. It was a young, very pretty, very feminine laugh, a sound that could not have been heard in that gloomy place since it had been built. To Revell’s mind it would have been as effective a vampire deterrent as a ton of garlic pickled in holy water.

‘I suppose like all men you like to see a film in which a woman is abused by many men.’

‘No. No I don’t like to see that sort of thing.’ It was the truth, but he had to wonder if she recognised it as such. Oh, he’d looked through plenty of soft porn mags, even bought a few when he was having that trouble with the bitch, he’d needed something then. But rape, he found that at once both disturbing and repelling. Under bright lights the crudities of the sex act were not pretty. He’d seen a stag film once. Even allowing for its poor quality he’d found it ugly, though he’d been fascinated, and roused, by a scene that showed a bound male about to be whipped by a plump and grubby-kneed whore attired in the classic costume of black leather mini skirt, thigh boots and peek-a-boo bra, that last being made to look even more ridiculous by being so ill-fitting that her nipples constantly strayed from the cut-outs and had continually to be wrenched back into place.

He’d never got to see the whole scene. Hal’s wife had returned at that moment, and they’d only just got back round the card table in time.

Even if Revell had been capable of encapsulating all that in a couple of coherent sentences for Inga, he wouldn’t have uttered them. He was working hard to combat his clumsiness with women, and at present was concentrating on thinking before speaking. It had taken a time to sink in, and he’d had to learn the hard way that while a piece of physical clumsiness, a grab at the wrong time, or done too hard, might be forgiven, a careless word could finish a relationship instantly.

Inga looked really beautiful in the candlelight. He needed her, and he wasn’t about to throw away his chances by doing either.

‘Come on then, let’s have a bit of tit.’ Dooley bounced the woman on his knee and stuffed his hand up her jumper. ‘Lovely, nice big fat ones.’ He tried with his free hand to haul the garment up, getting ready to dive on the matronly
breasts with his tongue and teeth, but she broke away, grabbed him by the hand and towed him behind a curtain that screened an alcove from the rest of the room.

Dooley was half undressed before he realised that his frantic pace of disrobing was not being matched by the woman. She stood with her hand stretched out, waiting.

He fumbled through his pockets and thrust at her a few crumpled notes he’d held back from the others, then jumped as she gave a shrill, piercing scream and knocked them from his hand...

‘Sounds like our big friend has failed to make a conquest.’ Standing with the others in the street, Sergeant Hyde listened to the tirade of invective from inside, and then was almost bowled over as Dooley came hurtling out, holding more clothes than he was wearing and followed by a barrage of empty bottles.

‘Jesus, what’s she so sore at me for? I offered to pay, over the odds an’ all.’ With the others not waiting for him, Dooley had to perform a series of weird contortions as he alternately hopped, hobbled and stumbled along in their wake, trying to dress as he did so.

‘We warned you. You can’t use money here. A note’s too small to wipe your bum on, tastes foul as fag-paper and won’t buy a bloody thing.’ Burke took delight in pointing out to Dooley that he’d dropped a boot fifty yards back. ‘For a tin of sardines you could have your own sodding harem for a day, but for money, not a hope.’

The St Pauli district gave the impression of having received less attention from the Russian bombers and gunners than many other parts of the city. Perhaps it was an illusion, fostered by the generally different character of the buildings in the quarter, or perhaps it really had. Rumour said that no Russian soldier ever got leave; that alone would have given them good reason for doing what they could to preserve the facilities and, more importantly, the inhabitants of that famous red-light district.

Star shells kept the area perpetually bathed in harsh white light that was somewhat softened by the great piles of multi-coloured broken glass every few yards. It was as if whole buildings made of it had disintegrated and been swept up. Coming from the thousands of imploded neon signs it was every garish shade imaginable, and still huge quantities remained suspended in the thousands of broken signs and shop fronts.

At the concussion from any distant explosion, more small pieces would tinkle to the ground without seeming in any way to diminish the apparently inexhaustible supply.

‘What’s that address the colonel gave us?’ Burke accepted the scrap of paper from Hyde. ‘Bloody expensive bit of paper. It’s going to cost us fucking half of whatever we manage to get hold of.’

‘He could have stopped us coming, and without this we would never have found anything anyway.’ Patiently Clarence waited for a star shell to dip lower so that it would shine on a street sign currently in deep shadow. ‘Grosse Freiheit, this is the one.’

‘I sure would have liked to visit this place before the Reds got to remodelling it.’ Picking up the silver end cap from a neon tube, Ripper shied it into an alleyway. From the darkness came the angry spitting of a cat.

A scruffy figure huddled in a doorway threw aside the overcoat he was using as a blanket and with astounding speed dived into the alley to the accompaniment of clattering and crashing bins.

‘Looks kinda like he fancies pussy for supper...’ ‘Who doesn’t?’
‘I don’t mean that kind, Dooley ... Aw, what the hell! Back home I knew a guy who ate a skunk, don’t see why this bunch shouldn’t finish off the stock of the local pet store.’

‘They probably have. I haven’t seen one dog since we arrived.’ As they passed, and while the thrashing and crashing was still coming from the alley, Hyde saw a young boy dart into the doorway, grab the temporarily abandoned coat and run off with it.

They would have missed the address but for Boris. He’d put on his wire-framed bifocals and was peering intently at every building they passed. The place they wanted was trying hard to be anonymous. From the wall beside the
doorway the number had been removed, but over the years it had been there it had preserved the natural colour of the brickwork beneath it and that ghostly shadow now betrayed the location.

‘Do we knock?’ Incautiously, Boris pushed his head into the gloom. The others saw him reappear faster, the barrel of a pump-action shotgun just an inch from the end of his nose.
‘Geschlossen!’

It was an ugly guttural voice and Hyde decided that the owner likely matched it and was not about to be persuaded by sweet reason or the offer of a modest bribe. Taking a grenade from his belt he wrenched out its pin and held it towards the invisible guardian of the entrance. ‘You just reopened.’

The barrel withdrew and there came the sounds of someone hesitantly shuffling backwards.
‘Have to remember that stunt, Sarge, worked a treat.’

‘Stop trying to butter me up, Burke. You’ll be getting the same share as everyone else, and anyway it wasn’t all that fucking clever. I’ve dropped the pin. Have a look for it before my fingers get tired.’

Understanding of what was going on as the squad scrambled about on its collective hands and knees must have been the last straw for the not too strong nerve of the shotgun carrier. They heard running, then a distant door being frantically unbolted and finally slammed as the man made his escape.

Chrome and shiny red plastic were the dominant materials in the cellar bar. A small stage at the far end of the room was still flanked by a set of drums and an electric organ on one side and an easel holding a show card proclaiming ‘Freda, the Naughty Schoolgirl’ on the other.

‘If you really are buyers, then I can give you a little drinkies before we, shall we say, dicker?’

The figure that appeared through the curtains behind the small candlelit bar was grotesque. Wearing a sequin-scattered fluffy pink sweater whose plunging neckline revealed no cleavage, only a carefully shaved chest, heavy makeup that failed entirely to conceal shadow and a wig that was just too elaborate, too perfect to be anything else, the proprietor draped himself across the shining Formica surface and fluttered long false lashes caked with mascara.

‘Now what would you like?’
‘Somewhere to throw up would be nice.’ Burke would have added more, but Hyde signalled for silence.

Again the eyelashes performed their semaphore. ‘Naughty, mustn’t do that in here, especially as you have frightened off my dear little helper.’

‘You mean your bum-chum with the shotgun? I was wondering why he needed a weapon with such a long barrel, I suppose he uses it to ...’

The sergeant’s hint was less subtle this time, and Burke shut up while he concentrated on extracting his foot from under Hyde’s steel-shod boot.

‘Thank you, I do find that sort of talk so uncouth. Now, eh, oh, you’re a sergeant, how nice ... what would you like to drink?’

‘Nothing. We’re told you can supply food, at a price.’ The transvestite’s honeyed tones were grating on Hyde, but he tried not to let it show.

‘My dear, even now, anything is available in Hamburg at a price. I’ll get the list for you.’ Coming out from behind the bar, the proprietor revealed himself to be wearing a short clinging skirt, split to past mid-thigh and calf-length boots with five-inch heels that made him teeter at every step. With an exaggerated hip action that wouldn’t have disgraced any main-street hooker or bump and grind stripper he crossed to a cigarette machine on the wall and pulled a scrawled list from behind it.

‘Here. Getting just a little low now, but most of those are in stock. Go on, feast your eyes on it. Some real goodies aren’t there?’
‘Seems kinda heavy on prunes and bean sprouts.’

When Hyde’s elbow made contact with his gut, Ripper backed off and ceased trying to read over his shoulder.

While the inventory was being examined the proprietor brought out glasses and poured each of them a nip of milky white liquid from an unlabelled bottle, giving the NCO a double measure. ‘This will put a twinkle in your ... well, hope you enjoy it.’ Taking a tiny sip, he winked at Ripper.

It was that as much as the alcohol biting into his throat that made Ripper choke, until Dooley pounded him back into a normal respiratory pattern. ‘Heck, I’ve drunk everything, from ‘shine that were still warm through to my Aunt Emmie’s home brewed turnip gin, but I never come across anything like this afore.’

‘It’s an acquired taste. Like a little more?’ Ripper joined their driver in silence when he realised he was drawing the faggot’s attention.

‘There’s no prices.’ Hyde laid the paper on a table.

‘Well, there wouldn’t be, would there? Inflation you know, wicked, but I can hardly give it away can I? And it does rather depend on what you’ve got to offer.’ Again he caught Ripper’s eye and flirted, and was a little put out when the young American deliberately wandered away and feigned interest in an old telephone directory hanging on the wall by a pay-phone.

‘We’ll take a case each of the pilchards, the treacle pudding, the hamburgers in onion gravy, the baked beans ...’

‘I really must be fair, for such a good customer it wouldn’t be right of me to let you take those. Not that I’d ever sell anything that was ... off, but I think there is a chance, just a chance that they may be, shall we say, suspect. I’ll let a couple of tins go cheap, well, at a discount, to some of the locals. That should tell us, then if they’re alright you can have them next time. Take prunes instead.’

‘I’m overwhelmed by your sense of decency.’

Half turning to pat Clarence on the wrist as a mild rebuff for his sarcasm, the transvestite stopped. He’d seen the look in the sniper’s eyes and it had made him go cold. Bustling back to the business he tried to hide his discomfort.

‘Now, you must have something very special to offer for such a big order. Oh, do hurry, I can hardly wait.’ His fingers making fluttery birdlike movements, the proprietor sat across a table from Hyde as he accepted the bundle from Clarence, and spread the gold and jewellery on the bright metal surface.

‘Which of those do you want?’

‘Which ... Oh, you’re being unfair, you’re making fun, you saucy thing. Now, do come on, show me what you’ve brought.’ When nothing more was produced he looked at Hyde, then at the others, and then back at the trinkets and coins. ‘Those,’ he swept them to the floor so that they rolled and scattered across the room, ‘those wouldn’t buy a can of each. Do you think I run a charity shop? Get out.’

‘Remember, your bum-chum’s not here now.’ Burke shoved the snarling ugly-mouthed freak back into its seat.

‘Find the stuff.’

‘NO.’

As, on Hyde’s order, the others began to pull the place apart the proprietor yelled and fought to get free and Boris had to assist in pinioning him.

The search didn’t take long. There was a small combined bedroom and kitchen behind the bar, some very basic lavatories and that was it. All that was found was two tins each of ham and potatoes, and four of sliced peaches.

‘Where’s the rest of it?’

Ceasing to struggle, the transvestite spat at Hyde, missed, and was cracked across the face with the flat of the NCO’s
hand. Blood trickled from a split lip, staining the fluffy sweater and making a dark glistening patch amid the sparkling sequins. The voice now was more normal, more masculine, but still had a distinctive soft edge of affectation. ‘I don’t keep it here, you fools. It’s hidden, where you’ll never find it, and you won’t get me to talk. I like pain, if I talk you’ll stop hurting me. You can’t win.’

‘Let him, it, go. Pick up Dooley’s gear and let’s get out of here.’ Ushering the others up the stairs, Hyde hung back to wait for Clarence and Ripper.

‘Won’t you watch my act before you go?’ Mounting the stage the transvestite attempted to push his wig straight as he began a hip swaying dance in time to the tinny music from a portable cassette player he set on top of the electric organ. ‘Of course, I’m not in my proper costume, and the lighting’s not good, but this’ll give you an idea.’ He slid a hand into the neckline of his top and rubbed his chest.

Clarence walked to the edge of the stage and in one fluid movement grabbed a metal-legged stool and swept the dancer’s legs from beneath him.

Alone in the room, Ripper didn’t hear Hyde calling for him and went to the edge of the stage. Nursing a swelling ankle the transvestite saw him and dragged himself to the edge.

‘You look nice in your uniform. Stay here, I need a helper, I’ll let you do things, anything.’

‘Mister, you are sick.’ With that Ripper brought the butt of his rifle down on the damaged ankle, laddering the dark fishnet tights. As he followed the rest of the squad he could hear the transvestite calling after him, and hoped the others couldn’t.

‘Oh, oh, don’t go, you can hurt me if you want. Oh, you bad boy, you’ve made me ... oh, I’m wet... don’t go ...’

‘These will not go far, after we have given Colonel Horst his share.’ They’d walked several blocks and were back in the commercial quarter before Boris took the cans from his pack and weighed them in his hands.

‘Probably start bloody rows as well. Here, give ‘em to me.’ Dooley took the food and approached an old woman. ‘Hey, old girl, frau, got something for you.’

Grabbing up her few possessions the woman scuttled off as fast as her weak legs would carry her and dived into a narrow opening beyond which the big man couldn’t follow.

‘Here, let me show you.’ Taking a can of ham, Boris crossed to the other side the road and walked past a small family group resting from pushing a handcart. As he did he deliberately let the can slip and walked on pretending not to know he’d dropped it.

The father picked it out of the gutter and held it like it was a bullion bar, carefully wiping the dirt from it with a frayed cuff. He looked after Boris, as if uncertain what to do, then caught sight of his two children and pushed it under his jacket.

‘OK, Dooley.’ Hyde gave him a shove. ‘You want to play Father Christmas, that’s how you do it.’

‘Fucking marvellous, isn’t it. You can’t give food away, you got to let them lift it. Hell, I always knew everything in the Zone was upside down, now I reckon it’s inside out as well.’

He wandered off up the road, seeding the pavement with luxuries close by those he judged to be worthy or in need of his generosity.

‘He’s enjoying himself.’ Burke watched him go. ‘Still, this time he’s not doing any harm, useless great lump.’ He couldn’t help smiling as he witnessed one of the worst pieces of acting he’d ever seen when a deaf old lady failed to notice a can of fruit dropped at her feet and Dooley pretended to see it and let her beat him to it. In that moment the old lady’s life was transformed, and it showed in her face as she hugged her prize.

The last one gone, Dooley walked on his own for a while, and when he came back streaks of clean skin showed on
his face. ‘I thought I was enjoying this fucking war. I must have been fucking mad.’

He went off to walk on his own again, and each time he scrubbed his sleeve across his eye, so his face became a little cleaner.

TEN

The soaring concrete column on the TV tower looked as if a manic giant had taken several huge bites out of it. Four hundred feet up, the restaurant and observation platform looked largely intact, but above that the transmitter and receiver aerials had been smashed almost beyond recognition. Some of the great bowls and dishes had been torn away and now lay crushed and battered at the foot of the tower.

All the surrounding area appeared to have been singled out for special attention by the enemy artillery, and for several blocks the most that remained of any building was a pockmarked skeletal frame. Where less substantial structures had stood, now no two bricks remained joined.

A group of men were working at the base of the tower, and as the pair approached, a truck-mounted generator started up and roared loudly until the covers were closed.

Inga showed a pass to a guard on what had once been a doorway, but had now been remodelled by the raw energy of explosives into a ragged-edged opening, and led Revell inside. The generator provided power to a string of low-powered red-painted bulbs that marked the route through the dark interior to the doors of an elevator.

Only the inner doors ‘remained, the outer ones lay close by, torn off and holed by the round that had penetrated the walls to gut the entrance hall. Taking care not to touch the tangle of exposed wiring snaking from the control panel, Inga pressed the button for the restaurant. Squealing and jarring in their damaged dust-filled guides, the doors closed slowly, needing help over the last few inches.

‘You sure it’s safe?’ Staggering as the elevator lurched upwards, Revell heard the cables twanging and felt the vibration they passed to the suspended compartment.

‘It has only to work this one last time.’ Inga steadied herself by taking the major’s arm. ‘A little before dawn it is to be brought down. The demolition charges are already in place. I have been given permission to go to the top a last time, to take pictures. The view is unique, I thought you would be interested.’

‘So I am, but I’ll feel more able to focus on that aspect of what we’re doing when I get out of this death trap. Why couldn’t you just let the Commies finish the task for you? Looks like they’ve been making determined efforts.’

‘They have, or rather they did, at first. For the last six months, apart from an occasional air-burst that was no doubt intended to discourage its use by our own artillery spotters, the only shells that have hit the tower have been those in whose path it happened to stand. Now, though, it is becoming unsafe. Two days ago a man and a woman and their children were killed by falling rubble while gleaning for copper cable around the base. So the decision has been taken that we should choose when it finally falls.’

With a series of uncomfortable jolts the elevator stopped and together they wrenched the doors open and stepped out on to the slashed and rucked remains of carpet tiles. There was no illumination in the restaurant, but it wasn’t needed. The glass walls had gone, and the breeze that blew in from one side and unimpeded out through the other brought with it the continually shifting glare from descending parachute flares.

What from the ground had seemed little more than superficial damage was very different when viewed close to. Dozens of high explosive rounds had ripped through the place, tearing down partition walls and scattering the ruined kitchen equipment through the dining and reception area to lie with the broken china and fire-discoloured cutlery. A ceiling that had been set with thousands of light bulbs simulating the patterns of the star fields was now only a mass of drooping flex and fitments.

She hadn’t let go of his arm, and didn’t as they walked to the edge of the drop. Revell was in no hurry that she
should, and maintained a gentle pressure. Together they looked over the city.

Their outline sharpened by the harsh light from the drifting, blazing magnesium, Hamburg’s remaining buildings took on an appearance of stark ugliness. To Revell it was like looking into the rotting mouth of a decrepit crane by the aid of a penlight, and gave rise to the same sick sensation as viewing extreme disease or deformity did.

‘I have brought a flask.’ Inga lowered her camera case to the floor. ‘First I shall set up my equipment, then we will have a drink, yes?’

Revell was happy to agree to that, but not as pleased when she withdrew her arm and set about clearing a space to set her tripod. She hummed as she worked, brief snatches of tunes that chased each other and tantalisingly changed each time he thought he’d recognised one.

He was enjoying being with her. She was so natural, so uncomplicated, so undemanding ... so totally unlike Andrea. That was the first time he’d thought of her since Inga had offered him the food, and even now she failed to fill his mind. Andrea was frustrating past, out of reach present and probably unobtainable future ... Inga was here, now...

The room shook and the whole tower swayed under the influence of a near miss down at ground floor level. Lunging forward Revell grabbed Inga round the waist as she over-reached herself in saving the tripod from going over the side.

Pulling her to him he held her close until the sensation of movement passed, then deliberately but with reluctance pushed her away a little before the embarrassing hardening of his body became obvious to her also.

‘That is not a common reaction to danger.’ The brushing of her slim hips against his erection as she turned away seemed an accident, but the smile she threw back betrayed that it wasn’t. Caught off guard, unprepared, he couldn’t think what to say, and said nothing. He hadn’t expected her to be an innocent, but still the boldness of her action and remark surprised him. Taking it as encouragement he stepped to her side and tried to put his arm around her waist to pull her to him but she effortlessly avoided the advance and moved to the other side of the now camera topped tripod.

‘No, not here, not now. I must work, we have the night in which to get to know each other. When the pictures are taken, when we have talked, then perhaps. We can have breakfast at my apartment, if you like...’

If it was a slap-down, it was the gentlest Revell had ever received; with considerable skill she had avoided his clutches, put him in his place, held out hope and made a half-promise. For the remainder of the night he would be more careful, less clumsy. It would be a long wait, but as he watched her bending over to adjust a lens setting and attach an image intensifier to it, saw the material of her suit pull tight across the sleek curves of her body, he knew it was going to be worthwhile.

From far below the smoke and the smell of burning rubber drifted in. Looking down, he saw that the generator truck was on fire. About a large crater nearby sprawled its operators and the entrance guard. Another of the huge explosions occurred a couple of blocks away and in a bizarre domino effect a series of end walls were knocked over by the blast.

Experience told him what type of weapon had been used to deliver such a powerful warhead. It had to be one of the huge 240mm Russian mortars. It was one thing for the city to be pounded by artillery, another altogether for the centre to be on the receiving end of a barrage from such a comparatively close-range weapon.

Revell had seen for himself the state that Hamburg’s defences were in. Old men, young boys; captured weapons and weapons fabricated from scrap and salvage: ingenuity and guts were keeping the Warsaw Pact armies at bay long after they should have been able to walk in and take over without effort.

It wasn’t right that he should be here now. As soon as he’d failed to find Thorne he should have reported back for reassignment. Maybe some of his squad were still alive, and if they were it was possible they were cursing him and Andrea for not having seen and reported the true strength of that gathering Russian attack. Damn it, there was nothing to be done about it now; there was little point in dwelling on it. But that was one of the penalties the privilege of command brought with it, the constant worry that you’d fouled up, that you’d not looked after your men
as best you could.

By staying here he was failing them now, worse than that, he was failing himself. Taking off his helmet he passed his hand through his hair, and several strands came away with the combing action of his fingers. There was a giddy sickness too, not from his stomach, but from a general feeling of weakness that sapped the strength from his whole being.

A grit-filled zipper on a pocket almost defeated him and he swore under his breath as he tugged at it to overcome the resistance. The pills turned first smooth then pasty in his mouth and he had deliberately to produce saliva to swallow their residue. Finding somewhere to sit down he waited for them to start working, to combat the cumulative effects of the radiation doses he’d absorbed in the last day or so.

Some men kept a record, noting as accurately as they could the partial and whole body doses, seeming fascinated by the mounting total of the count as it steadily rose towards the level at which there would be no help to be got from medicines or transfusions, when all that could be done for them would be caring supportive treatment to ease them through the last painful hours.

To Revell’s mind the doctors had made a mistake in telling the men how much they could take before death became certain. Some might have found out for themselves, and in any event their officers would have been in the know, would have taken the right action when the time came; but for some the maintaining of the personal log became an obsession, and that often robbed them of their sanity long before there was the possibility of the radiation, stealing their lives.

Another of the huge mortar bombs exploded in the distance, followed a few minutes later by another. The Russians were taking no chances with so valuable a weapon, its towing and ammunition carrying vehicles and large crew. They were limiting themselves to just the two rounds before changing their location to defeat the tracking radars that would be trying hard to find them.

The second shot had started a large fire. With so little left to burn above ground that could only mean that the bomb had found an underground dump, or perhaps a shelter. It might not be just supplies that were being consumed.

‘Somebody bloody catch her.’ Burke sprawled in the dust, just missing the girl.

Alight from head to foot, flame streaming behind her, she was rushing about from side to side of the street, evading the arms of the men who sought to catch her and smother the fire. Bleating screams and showers of sparks marked her fast erratic course, until gusting flame whipped into her eyes searing vision from her, and she ran into the shell of a tramcar.

Sergeant Hyde was the first to reach the girl. He pulled her down to fight the enveloping flames with his bare hands, but they rekindled as soon as he went to tackle another area of her clothing.

‘She’s gone, Sarge.’ As the NCO stood back, Burke used the side of his boot to scuff dust over the body.

They left the corpse still smouldering, lying otherwise unnoticeable among the general litter of the road, and went back to help the others.

The scene in front of the blazing building wrenched at all their senses. Many of the women who had been working in the communal kitchen had managed to get out, but there could be no hope for others who might still be trapped by the inferno. Thick slabs of exotic marble were bursting in the heat, and the frontage of what had once been a banking hall was now crumbling and melting and making it difficult for the would-be rescuers to reach those injured who’d had only the strength to make it to the street and could go no further.

Screams from the burned and maimed drowned even the roar of the fire and at least one of those laid in the road, burned black, bearing seared and splashed by molten aluminium and glass, staggered to her feet, flung up an arm to shield her face from the roasting gases, and deliberately ran back inside.

Somewhere Dooley had found just enough water to soak a threadbare blanket and now he used it as a shield to try to reach the wounded. He was still yards from the nearest when the billowing steam from his makeshift protection
turned to smoke and then almost instantly to flame and he had to throw it down and retreat.

An improvised fire appliance arrived, a converted fuel tanker now equipped with hoses and a pump, but before it could go into action gas cylinders inside the building began to rupture and tongues of liquid flame spurted across the road. At the merest touch the tinder-dry bodies began to burn. That brought movement to some, but it wasn’t the frantic thrashings of death agonies, just the gradual arching and rolling brought on by the rapid drying and shrinking of muscle and cartilage.

‘There it goes.’ From a hundred yards off Ripper felt the heat as the whole facade collapsed and filled the road from side to side with a wall of red-hot debris. ‘Say, if hell’s like that, I might just start going to church again.’

‘I’m surprised you’ve ever been.’ Taking up the front of the stretcher Clarence started towards the waiting red-cross-embellished Mercedes van. He was thankful he was not at the back, did not have to see the destroyed face of the girl they carried.

‘Course I been, used to go regular. Why, one time I was in the choir for a spell, ‘til there was that trouble with the organist and the new kid. Always thought the boy sung a shade too high to be quite right. And I never did trust that organist, always wore perfume, only he called it cologne, but it was perfume all the same. After a while the new kid stank of it too…’

Hyde was in deep conversation with Colonel Horst. Boris could see them keep glancing at him. He pretended he didn’t notice, and that it didn’t bother him, but it did. What did he have to do to prove himself to the sergeant, was there anything he could do that would persuade the NCO that his desertion from the Red Army was genuine, that he was not some sort of double agent? No, he doubted it. The sergeant’s suspicions went deep, but his hatred and prejudices went deeper and it was unlikely that anything could eradicate something so long planted, so firmly established. Hyde was coming over, he forced himself to be busy about his task of gathering scorched and severed limbs together. What other assignment had the sergeant for him, what worse than this had he found?

‘Got a little job for you, Boris. Here, take this pack, and hang on to it.’ Opening a corner, and pulling out a wad of the cloth bundled into it, Boris recognised the coarse texture, its colour, and then as final confirmation the insignia of a Russian captain of artillery. ‘I don’t understand, this is a Russian uniform…’

‘So it is. We’re giving you a chance to go back to your mates, to find something out for us.’ Hyde pushed the pack back at the man as he tried to divest himself of it.

‘No, I cannot. If I were to be caught... and I would be, I do not know the passwords... they would not kill me, not soon, they might keep me alive ... half alive... for years. You do not know how skilful they can be...’

‘Strange how much you seem to know about the KGB’s methods. But if they frighten you, then you’d just better make sure you don’t get caught, hadn’t you.’

Boris chased after the sergeant. ‘What do you want me to find out, is there no other way, nothing else I can do?’

‘We want to know where we can find the cruds who keep dropping these.’ Hyde waved towards the gutted building and the bodies lining the roadway. ‘The colonel says that mortar has done more damage in one night than the Ruskies’ massed artillery has in a week. He wants us to spike it. That’s just what we’ll do, when you’ve located it for us.’

‘But it will take days. I would be detected inside an hour, it is hopeless...’ ‘It’s usually fired from positions on the far bank of that big lake in the centre of the city, the Aussenalster. That’ll give us a starting point, the rest will be up to you.’

Dazed, Boris moved away, still clutching the pack. He thought he had conquered his fear, had found its limits and learnt to cope with it, but now all the old feelings flooded back and he had to sit because his legs suddenly had no strength. Hardly knowing what he was doing he slowly and methodically wiped his hands on the rough canvas of the pack, having to grind them hard to scrape off the adhering body fats that had run from the split and bloated limbs he’d handled.
A tipper truck stopped close by, and the gang of men that climbed from it began to toss on board any corpses that the doctors and identification clerks had finished with. Using their bare hands, their shirt fronts streaked with every kind of filth, they handled the bodies as they might have handled cartons of soap.

Every one of the men had the same haggard expression and in the deep lines etched in each could be read a catalogue of horror without end. This was one of the burial squads. They were fed better than most as they had more work to do, received better medical treatment than most as their work was important and put them at risk, and they had a death rate second only to the infantry units holding the city’s perimeter. Their death came in many forms, but one factor was common to all, it was at their own hands.

Until now Boris had thought that nothing could have induced him to do that job. Suddenly it seemed a desirable alternative to the task that lay ahead.

THE OTHER SIEGES
USS NEW JERSEY

Aircraft flying from the aircraft carrier Forrestal, flagship of the American Pacific fleet, are now able to maintain round the clock air-cover over the battle-ship New Jersey, two hundred miles off Manila. They will sustain the effort until tugs arrive in eighteen hours to take the ship in tow. Converted to carry and launch salvos of cruise missiles, and re-commissioned thirty-eight years after its completion, the 60,000 ton veteran of World War Two has comprehensively vindicated President Reagan’s decision and confounded those who called the ship a dinosaur and predicted she would go to the bottom in her first engagement.

The New Jersey has withstood three days of bombardment by Russian missile boats firing one-ton ship-killer missiles. During that time the battleship’s defences have defeated seventy missiles before they could get through, and sunk eighteen enemy vessels confirmed and a further unknown number of transports and landing craft. Of the nineteen hits sustained on the New Jersey’s hull and superstructure only ten achieved penetration, two of them failing to detonate. Less than ten per cent of the ship’s complement have been rendered casualties. Despite the damage to the propellers and rudder that immobilised the ship early in the engagement, more than sixty missiles were launched at the Russian task force, inflicting losses that forced it to turn about and run for Vladivostok. The Soviet press is already clamouring for the punishment of the ship’s captain, Edward J. Morgan, accusing him of ‘the murderous and piratical act of attacking unarmed merchant vessels.’ The State Department had no comment to make. The President is reported to have smiled, and said, ‘Nuts.’

ELEVEN

The waters of the lake were still as glass, and reflected the pyrotechnics in the heavens as perfectly. And despite the boom of distant detonations and the closer clatter of a desultory machine gun duel at the northern end of the Aussenalster, it seemed that every slight sound made by their hessian-muffled oars was as loud as the roar of a pounding waterfall.

Flak jackets had been hung along the side of the ex-lifeboat, as much to do something to break up its angular outline as to provide any degree of protection.

It had taken them thirty minutes to get safely clear of the west bank, painstakingly threading their way round and through the vast amount of wreckage the day’s breeze had piled against the shore. Further out it was easier, but more than once they had to stop paddling and tense against a collision they could not avoid with the partially submerged wreck of a yacht that had drifted away from the masses of destroyed craft occupying the basins of the many marinas.

Fifty yards from the shore, partially hidden from it by the upturned hull of a bullet-riddled cruiser, they hauled the rubber dinghy alongside. Boris was given the torch, helped over the side, and pushed off towards the shore. They saw his terrified face just once as the awkward craft spun around, then he got into the rhythm of it and began to use his hands to propel himself to the bank.
‘Poor guy. He’s shit scared.’ Dooley watched the Russian land and scramble into the cover of a stand of leafless trees before he lost sight of him in the darkness.

In trying to shift to a more comfortable position on the hard wooden seats, Ripper succeeded only in slipping off and sitting in the several inches of dirty water swilling about the bottom of the boat. ‘Aw shit, I’ve wet me-self.’

‘You and Boris both.’ Dooley let his fellow American struggle back up on his own.

‘That’s a point.’ Unsuccessfully Ripper put his hands to the seat of his pants and attempted to wring them dry. ‘Say, Sarge. If our pet Ruskie produces the goods then that’ll prove he’s on our side, you’ll have to trust him then.’

‘Like hell I will. It might just mean his KGB bosses are letting him throw us a crumb or two so he can hang around and wait for something big to come along.’

‘A 240mm mortar with its crew and support vehicles is hardly a crumb.’ Clarence could see flaws in the sergeant’s argument.

‘Keep the noise down, let’s have it quiet from now on.’ However logical the sniper’s reasoning, Hyde wasn’t about to drop an ingrained prejudice so easily, and by virtue of his rank he was able to cut short the discussion, and halt the offences upon it.

Occasionally they would have to dip their oars and make a few strokes to compensate for an almost imperceptible drift, but that apart, all they could do was wait. Several times they heard vehicles on the Russian side. They seemed all to be wheeled, as there was no grinding of squealing of tracks, but the racket made by their knocking engines, rattling panels and crunching gears made even that vague identification suspect.

The interior of the lifeboat was alternately bright as day and pitch black, as star shells ignited and expired overhead. One of them fell, still burning, into the lake close by, and the surface exploded into bubbling steam as it fought to quench the blazing ball of magnesium. When finally the waters won, a large area of the lake was wreathed in a floating white mist that carried with it the pungent smell of the extinguished chemical fire.

They had to wait almost two hours for the signal, and when it came Burke, who was on lookout, had to wait for it to be repeated twice more before he could convince himself it wasn’t his strained eyes playing tricks.

Using the minimum number and quietest possible strokes they pulled to the shore, and had to wade the last few yards through a carpet of floating debris, when the boat grounded.

‘Just for once I’m sure glad I didn’t listen to my Mam.’ Dripping from head to foot, Ripper was the last to reach the cover of the trees. ‘She always told me I should join the navy. Shit, after tonight nothing is ever going to get me into a boat again. My arse is numb, my arms ache, and to cap it all the damned ship moved when I were climbing out.’

‘Pity the water wasn’t a bit cleaner, you’ve been needing a good wash for ages.’

Ripper took no exception to Burke’s remark. ‘I know that, but like I told you, it’s done on purpose. If it comes to close fighting, and you’re up wind of some Ruskie, smelling like a perfume counter, then you might as well turn a spotlight on yourself. Those Ghurkhas don’t wash when they’re in action.’

‘You’re not in the same class.’ Clarence didn’t take his eye from the image intensifier fitted telescope of his Enforcer rifle, as he panned through the trees. ‘But you might absorb another lesson they could teach you, the need for silence. Now shut up.’

It was a timely warning. A line of slouching soldiers were ambling along a path through the trees. An NCO in charge was making regular, half-hearted- sounding threats, but they had no impression on the file of Russian infantry who neither straightened up nor smartened their pace. Without looking to right or left, with eyes only for the broken surface of the path, they passed within thirty feet of Hyde and the hastily concealed members of the squad. As they vanished into the distance the platoon leader’s gruff voice could once more be heard raised in unenthusiastic exhortation to his weary men, still apparently without effect.
Boris had been the first to take over, and was the last to emerge. ‘This whole area is full of Russians. I was challenged; I had to kill a sentry.’ Although already wiped clean he continuously rubbed handfuls of grass over his palms and between his fingers to rid them of the very last traces of blood. ‘It is alright, I hid his body.’

‘Have we got a lead on those mortars?’ Hyde displayed no interest in the fate of the unlucky Russian, or the trauma suffered by their deserter in having to kill a fellow countryman with his bare hands.

‘Yes. It is like always. There are several fired, pre-surveyed and ranged sites from which it is fired in random rotation. The nearest is only two hundred metres from here.’

‘Right, so we’ll set an ambush for them. Let’s go.’ Hyde knew he need add nothing more.

The men fell into single file, each taking the position in the order of march that by custom and practice had become his. Dooley was rear guard and for his size moved with surprising stealth as they came out from the trees and crossed a wide road between the wreckage of a burned-out ammunition convoy. He was just across when a scout car sped past, the strips of tread from its worn tyres making a rippling sound as they flailed the surface. He looked back once before following the others into the ruins of an apartment block. Another Russian platoon was plodding through the trees they’d just left. Now there was no doubting what Boris had said, there were enemy troops everywhere, and some were now behind them.

‘We must not wait any longer.’ Inga began to pack her camera equipment away. ‘The new demolition party that has arrived may not know that we are up here. If they blow the tower early ...’

Revell had been dozing, but when he looked over the edge and saw the men far below beginning to stack drums of cable near the entrance, he understood the urgency.

In places the stairs had ceased to exist, destroyed by the same hits that had bitten great pieces from the tower’s external fabric. When they reached one of these sections they had to improvise, sometimes using the handrail, still secured to the wall, like a fireman’s pole, and once having to make a drop of fifteen feet to the next intact flight, easing themselves down until they were holding on by their fingertips and then carefully aiming their fall on to the narrow strip of bare concrete that was all that stood between them and the eventual oblivion of a three hundred foot plummet to the ground level.

It might have helped had the staircase been as dark as had the interior of the lift, but there was sufficient light from the fires and star shells coming in through the many rents in the wall for every danger to be graphically visible.

Several times Revell wondered at the girl’s coolness. Though she might be frightened at some of the risks they were forced to take, and only a fool would not have been, still she kept going, without any hesitation, any holding back. It was an impressive display of willpower, and seemed so out of keeping with the aura of, if not helpless, at least dependent, vulnerability and femininity, that it gave rise in his mind to a first enigma about her.

They made it to ground floor level with only minutes to spare. Two men who were working to connect the last of the charges looked up in utter astonishment when the pair walked from the service stairway and out past them.

‘Do you want to stay and see it go down? In a world full of destruction, it must be considered something special.’

‘You’re the something special I’m interested in right now.’ He almost cringed. Had that sounded as school boyish to her as it had to him? It was an agony, waiting for her reaction.

‘That was a nice thing to say. Then shall we go?’

Past the still smouldering wreck of the generator truck, the crater, the almost invisible dark stains where the guard and the first demolition crew had lain, they walked away from the tower, striking out in a direction that Revell hadn’t been before.

Their way took them through what must once have been a beautiful park. Most of the flowerbeds and displays had been ploughed over by shell fire, but those that had survived the violent transplant bloomed on and filled the air with scents that for a while washed from the senses the memory of smoke and cordite and death.
The tracks of a miniature railway had been caught in the general upheaval and now made fantastic loops high off the ground, still bound as parallel ribbons of steel by their remaining ties, just like the full-scale tracks that arched above so many bridges and embankments across the city.

Exhibition halls in the park had been reduced to no more than steelwork frames, revealing their bombed interiors to the world, and a glass-topped observation tower lay stretched full length, still largely intact thanks to its reinforced construction, and half buried in the lawns that had given before its plunging weight.

Inga’s apartment was on the second floor of a building that looked as if it had been struck by the full force of a battery of Katyushas. She led him up a staircase that was only a little better than the one in the TV tower. At its top (for although the building went on, the stairs did not), she opened a smoke-stained door and they stepped through into total darkness.

Revell stood waiting as a match flared behind him. That slight light made mad shadows and reflections dance about it and robbed him of the chance to get a first sneak preview of the room. Dark shapes chased along the walls, darted to the ceiling and then were lost as the light dimmed to nothing, but it was like the pause between tuning-up and the overture.

Civilisation burst upon him as an oil lamp was turned up full. He had forgotten that there were rooms with curtains and carpets, with furniture, with paintings, with tables, with ornaments… with all the things that people beyond the Zone took for granted. In a brief instant he came to understand the full meaning of that pat intellectual phrase, culture shock. It must be like this for an aborigine, seeing his first house, his first automobile. Shock was the only word that described the sensation. War had done more than rob him of some of his life, it had obscured his memories until trenches and shelters and filth and hunger seemed the norm.

‘You like it?’
There was puzzlement in her voice, and Revell snapped out of his stupor to search for nice things to say. As she went through to the kitchen to find glasses he wandered round the room, running his hand over the backs of the polished chairs and finding no rough edges, no embedded shrapnel, over the fabric covering of the couch and finding no tears, no patches.

‘How do you keep it like this?’
‘It’s not all mine, I have had to move twice. Once because of a Russian advance, once because of an unexploded bomb. I like it here, but I do not know how long I will be able to stay. Here,’ she handed him a glass brim full of amber liquid. ‘It is peach wine. The very last bottle I have. After this I shall have to try to get some of the terrible potato wine that is made here. I do not drink much, but sometimes I need one.’

‘That’s like me. I’m not much of a drinker.’ They stood opposite each other, an arm’s length apart, not tasting their drinks, not talking. Outside there was a far distant rumble of gun fire but it didn’t intrude, rather it seemed an accompaniment, a background score to the silent scene they were playing out.

‘I want you.’ Revell put down his drink and took a step towards her. ‘I know, and I think that is what I want also. Please, wait here. Follow in a minute.’
When she had gone into the adjoining room, Revell picked up the drink again. He didn’t want it, but he was aware of the fur on his teeth and ran a gulp of it around his mouth before swallowing the sickly sweet wine. He was conscious of the dirt and sweat staining his battledress. In the immaculate room he was made to feel like a scarecrow dumped in the banquetting hall of a stately home. Not that the contents of the apartment were that extravagant, it was just that the place was clean, and smart and… and civilised. That was a world he hardly belonged to any more.

It must be over a minute now. He couldn’t be sure, it seemed only seconds, but he’d finished the glass and without thinking had picked up hers and taken a sip. It had to be above a minute. He crossed the room, took hold of the door handle, turned it slowly and pushed it open.

‘You cheated.’
If it was an accusation then it was a playful one. Inga stood by the bed, her long slim body lit by a single nightlight on a small dressing table. The one piece suit had gone, was now draped over a cane-back chair. Her breasts were bigger than he’d expected, they must have been constrained by the stretch-material. The transition of her body line
from waist, over hips to thigh was smooth and gradual, a flowing sculptured look that was interrupted only by the white cotton briefs she still wore.

‘Would you like me to help you?’
The trappings of war fell from him as she deftly worked at buckles, zippers and buttons. As she reached for the waistband of his pants he stopped her, and did that for himself. She put her hands to his shoulders and ran them down over his chest to his belly, where they parted to run separately to the top of each thigh. He wanted to grab her hands and drag them to his erection but he didn’t, and stayed still as her palms retraced the journey.

‘I do not need these.’ Inga took her hands from him and hooked her thumbs into the top of her briefs.

‘No.’ He saw that he had startled and surprised her, and softened and lowered his voice. ‘No, let me do that for you.’ He was trembling, like an excited high school kid on his first heavy date, but he couldn’t help it. Dropping to his knees in front of her, his hands reached for and gripped her remaining garment at either side. He began to ease them down, saw the first stray wisps of pubic hair. It was darker than the sun-bleached mane that reached to her shoulders and he was pleased, preferring that some of her secrets stayed hidden until he came to explore her body. ‘I want you to let me do things for you. I want to make you feel good. Just tell me what you want.’

He didn’t look up, continuing to follow the progress of the fragment of cotton as it eased slowly over her thighs. She moved her legs a fraction further apart as the gusset came away, and with that final resistance gone the briefs slid easily down her smooth skin.

As they settled on the floor he felt a fingernail, then two, then three, rest on the nape of his neck. Their pressure increased until they must have been half buried in his flesh, then they began to follow the line of his backbone and he felt the exquisite pain-pleasure sensation of their raking progress.

‘If you say such things I might be tempted to make you my love slave. You wouldn’t like that, would you?’

Still he couldn’t bring himself to look her in the face, then without hint or warning she and the pain and the pleasure were gone and he was contemplating only the discarded underwear.

‘Come here.’

Inga lay stretched full length, face down, on the bed. Her face, slightly turned towards him was half hidden by an enveloping down-filled pillow. He waited, trying at once to take in every curve and contour of her body.

‘There is some baby-oil on the dressing table. Rub it all over me, all over.’ Like a zombie he collected the small plastic bottle and returned to the bed. Flipping open the top he went to squeeze a little into his palm, then hesitated, and instead, holding it close to her leg, compressed it sharply. Inga jumped as the jet of cold fluid struck her, but he hardly noticed that, having eyes only for the oil that was beginning to trickle over the inside of her thigh. Very gently he started to work it in, using first the tip of his fingers, then his whole hand.

‘Do both at once, it feels lovely.’

Again Revell sent the thick fluid on to her flesh and as he knelt on the side of the bed, half over her, she opened her legs further and began to sigh as his hands ran up her calves to her thighs, then lingering only a second to cup her warm buttocks, over them to the small of her back where they turned to start the sensuous process again.

Her skin began to glisten as his hands roamed further seeking out every last inch of her flesh, and his own too was beginning to catch the light as perspiration coursed down him, not from the physical effort of what he was doing, but from the mental strain of resisting the urge to lie on her golden body and take her.

Gradually, deliberately, he edged nearer until by bending over her he could bring his erection to brush against the top of her leg. Inga sensed what he was doing immediately, and pushed herself up on to her elbows to half turn and look at him.

‘You are not allowed to do that, not yet. There are lots of other things you must do for me first, then perhaps, just perhaps, I might let you show me how you do things to yourself. But before that you must give me lots of pleasure,
beautiful sexual pleasure. Give me your hands.'

Rolling on to her back she took his hands, her grip slipping on their oiled skin, now totally devoid of roughness. There was a wicked, inviting smile playing about her lips and making her eyes sparkle as she took the unquestioning offering and pushed them down between the tops of her legs.

‘Perhaps you have done this for a woman before, I do not care. I shall teach you to do it the way I like, and when you have learnt you will do it for me many times.’ The smile vanished and was replaced by an expression of concentration as she guided his fingers. ‘You learn fast, yes, like that, not too hard, yes, oh yes.’

Revell paused and pulled back as Inga writhed, grinding her legs tight together. She subsided, then sought his hands again. This time she lost control almost instantly and he found his own heart pounding as he watched her thrashing the rumpled covers to a new tangled configuration. He went back to her before she had finished, could feel the heat rising from her body, found his fingers competing with hers as she fought to prolong the massive orgasm, then as he reached her she climaxed, and lay still.

He sat back on his haunches to wait her next command. She sprawled on the bed, chest heaving but gradually subsiding, her breathing growing quieter. He’d done it well, he knew that; he wondered what would be next.

TWELVE

Ripper was very pleased with himself, he’d done a good job. The Soviet driver had flopped about on the grass beside his cab for a few moments, but the second stab, delivered to his chest, hadn’t really been necessary. The man had died, without making any sound, even as the blade was pushed into his heart with surgical precision. Now he waited for Hyde’s signal that it was all clear, and safe to drag the corpse back into cover.

They had heard the mortar being fired intermittently all through the night, and had been about to reluctantly return to the boat when the column of trucks had pulled into the square. Even then, as success, or the hope of it, had seemed within their grasp, blind chance had conspired to try and rob them of the opportunity.

A giant eight-wheeled truck had parked immediately in front of the building they occupied, and its driver had climbed down to undo his clothing in preparation to relieve himself. Only his preoccupation with that had prevented him seeing the squad, and Ripper had acted before the man could look about him and raise the alarm.

The killing, the driver’s absence, had gone unnoticed, so far, but Hyde knew they had to work fast if they were to retain the element of surprise in what it was they had to do.

With the body hurriedly concealed, they abandoned their carefully prepared position, forced by the truck’s obstructing bulk to shift to a fresh one.

It wasn’t as good; a bomb site where, because of the noise made by even the slightest disturbance of the debris, they had to take up whatever firing points they could find among the rubble, with no opportunity to do anything to improve them.

‘Hold your fire.’ Despite the danger of their exposed position, Hyde knew they had no choice but to bide their time and wait.

The detachment travelling with the mortar was not limited simply to its eight-man crew and the drivers of its handful of support vehicles. Several field cars had also pulled into the square and disgorged a party of officers and a squad of slab-faced, smartly uniformed infantry who could only be their bodyguard.

‘That’s all we need, a bunch of bloody sightseers.’ Taking aim at a colonel, Burke had the barrel of his rifle jerked down by Hyde.

‘There’s no way we can get them all when we open up, and it only needs one of that tough-looking goon squad to survive and start taking pot shots from cover and we’ll never get to the bloody thing to set the charges.’
‘Then just how d’you figure we’re going to get at it then, Sarge?’ Ripper had taken his knife from its sheath and was measuring its length with his fingers.

‘Just wait and see. What the hell are you doing?’

‘I don’t know, leastways I do, and then I don’t.’

The NCO gave up, but Dooley’s interest was aroused. ‘Why you measuring the blade?’

‘You know, it’s weird. When I stuck that Commie, I mean he ain’t the first I’ve stuck since I been here, there were those two tank crewmen back at Kirchdorf, when we lost the major and Andrea; and there was that assault engineer with the flame thrower we found hiding behind that T72 you stopped...’

‘OK, so you’re good with a knife, so what?’ ‘Well, all those guys were real thin, I mean but thin, like they was only skin and bone. The driver I just took out, he had a gut on him. Not a lot, but a gut. I could tell the way the knife went in.’

‘You must be imagining it.’ Dooley didn’t take him seriously. ‘From what I’ve seen even a Ruskie quartermaster on the fiddle would have a hell of a job getting hold of one square meal a day. Either your tiny brain is playing you tricks or the guy must have been a new recruit. Maybe he was fresh from boot camp, or had been drafted straight from the streets of Moscow.’

‘That cannot be right.’ As he shifted slightly to a more comfortable position, Boris caused a minor slide of broken brickwork and his efforts to stop it only intensified the miniature avalanche. He didn’t speak again until every last fragment had settled. ‘Even in Moscow, the only people with full bellies are the party members, and they are careful not to be drafted into the army.’ ‘Alright, that’s enough now.’ Hyde’s interest had been taken by a small four-wheeled Gaz truck that had pulled into the square. The officers appeared to have been waiting for it, and now they gathered around its rear doors while one of their number went inside. ‘Weird-looking bus. No masts or sockets for them so it’s not a radio-van. Obviously got air conditioning, but it’s nothing like big enough for a commander and his staff who’d rate a luxury like that.’

While the late arrival absorbed their interest, the mortar crew had succeeded in setting up their weapon close by and its tracked tractor unit now pulled clear. From the back of an ammunition truck parked over the far side of the square two fat, fin-tailed rounds were lifted and then carried to the mortar, one on a trolley with severely buckled wheels, the other slung from a two-man bar sling.

They were deposited between the gigantic mortar and the strange truck while their fuses were set. For no reason that Hyde could see the crew’s actions enraged several of the officers, who, suddenly noticing what was going on, began to rant at the erring artillerymen.

‘What do you make of that, Sarge?’ Through the close-up clarity provided by the rifle’s superb night-sights, Clarence could see the officers’ fury, and then their assault upon the luckless and apparently unwitting transgressors. They didn’t waste their own energies; after knocking the unresisting men to the ground and delivering several sharp kicks, they handed them over to the bodyguards.

That they’d had plenty of practice showed clearly. With minimum effort but maximum force they reduced the artillerymen to unconsciousness within seconds, then just to be sure gave them another pounding with their rifle butts before letting their comrades carry them away. As a lesson in the skilled application of brutality it was superb; as an illustration of Communist barbarity it was classic.

There was something very special about that truck, but Hyde couldn’t figure out what it was. Well, what the hell. Now they had just the circumstances they wanted. The ready-use ammunition was perfectly placed...

Clarence took his time. There was no point in trying for a fancy shot at the shell’s nose fuse. With the depleted uranium cored bullet he had chambered he would go for the body of the mortar round. Its thick cast casing would be no impediment, not to the colossal temperatures the bullet’s impact would generate. The near fission hot molten and vaporised materials would pass through the casing as though it wasn’t there and through the explosive content of the interior as easily, though that filling would not as passively accept the intrusion as the outer wrapping.
That a Russian officer stepped into the bullet’s path at the last instant made no difference. At a range of under a hundred yards the round passed clean through his leg. He’d not begun to collapse when the principal target bucked and spat blue flame.

Blinding light filled the square, but no explosion came with it. Hyde looked up to see, where the shell had been, a brilliant white-fire spitting fountain that was expanding at a prodigious rate. Already the wounded officer had been engulfed and fittings on the mortar were beginning to deform and melt as the incendiary bomb consumed itself and everything around.

Frozen into a tableau of petrified disbelief, the Soviet officers could only stare, then the one who had been in the van jumped out and ran. In a moment he was gone, lost to sight among the ruins.

The vehicle’s tyres were beginning to smoke, and a plume of vapour was escaping around the edge of its fuel filler cap. When the spare wheel bolted to the side, taking the full ferocity of the nearby holocaust, exploded, the spell was broken.

Rank counted for nothing as the Russians ran for their transport, and many of the officers came off worst in disputing places with the members of their supposed bodyguard. The square was full of vehicles backing and turning and colliding. Men who had failed to get seats clung to the outsides, taking the risk of the crashes that occurred.

Opening fire with every weapon on the fleeing transport the squad picked off man after man. But even those who fell, no matter what the severity of their wound, still tried to get away, and kept trying until another shot or the crushing wheels of a truck or field car put a final stop to their desperate efforts.

None of the Russians bothered to return the fire. When the driver of a field car died in a hail of bullets and the uncontrolled vehicle turned over only yards from Hyde’s men, the survivors who crawled from the wreck discarded their weapons to aid their speed as they raced past and away.

Within a minute the square was left to the dead or terribly injured. There were no more targets. The bomb’s warhead, with the added fuel of the other ready-use round it had ignited, would continue to burn and illuminate the surrounding district for some time, but with nothing else to consume, eventually it would burn out. Hyde knew that, the Russians must have known that, so why had they run?

Again his attention turned to the unusual vehicle standing just beyond the extreme perimeter of the conflagration. It had slumped towards the fire, the tyres on that side charred and crumbling away, but it had not caught fire.

Waves of heat were washing over him, but he shuddered as though they were icy blasts from the pole. Taking out his survey meter he uncapped it and pointed it towards the van. Some radiation was to be expected, the uranium cored round would by now be no more than micro-particles floating in the hot air currents filling the square, but he was looking for something else and when the head of the probe was aligned with the open rear door of the vehicle he saw just the reading he had expected and feared.

‘There’s a nuke cooking in there. We’re moving out.’

Word had spread ahead of them and the greatest danger they faced in the run back to the lake was that of being struck by wildly driven transports of every description. As they neared the shore, though, a smattering of shots came their way. A withering volley silenced the enemy post, but it was an indicator that they had not been entirely unnoticed.

More bullets cut into the trees behind them as they splashed to the boat and threw their weight against it to overcome the cloying suction of the mud into which it had settled. Clarence was the last to board and sub-machine gun fire tore into a flak jacket beside him as he was hauled in.

All need for stealth was now gone. The material was ripped from the blades and the cleaned wood was plunged into the water to send them skimming at speed back to the far bank.

As he worked the tiller Hyde kept watch over the stern. When they had only fifty yards to go he detected vague
movement back where they had come from, and thought he heard the sound of engines. This was confirmed when a shell whistled past overhead, and a troop of Russian PT76 swimming tanks growled into the water in pursuit.

‘Boy, we’ve made them mad as hell.’ In fumbling to save the oar he’d nearly let slip, Ripper had also seen the danger. ‘Shit, I ain’t been so scared since the county sheriff’s black and white chased me across a field after I were caught stealing a couple of apples.’

‘This makes just as much sense.’ Burke kept snatching backward looks to watch the progress of the amphibious combat vehicles. Pushing a white bow wave before them, only their turrets and gun barrels were visible above it. As they beached he sent a whole magazine towards the leader hoping to hit the driver’s snorkel-like periscope, but the series of short bursts brought no check to the PT76’s steady progress.

‘This way. This way.’

A Royal Engineers major was waiting for them, and led the squad through the garden of a rambling mansion-sized house and out on to a wide main road.

Hyde pulled up. ‘We’re sitting targets if they see us here.’

‘There’s a turning a little way down. Come on, hurry.’ At a fast jog the sapper officer took them two blocks then ushered them into a side street.

Recognising the name of the road, barely readable on a fire-scorched sign on the side of a building, Boris brought it to Hyde’s attention. ‘Sergeant, on your map this is one of the streets marked in red.’

Holding back for a moment, Hyde saw the Russian tanks turning on to the street they were just leaving. They slowed, clearly undecided which way to go, or whether to terminate the pursuit, then the officer of engineers saw them also, and fired a long burst from his Patchette at them, a burst that seemed mostly composed of tracer. Striking and bouncing from a tank’s armour it instantly drew their attention.

‘That should do it...’

‘Why don’t you let them have the fucking lot, why stop at half measures?’ To Dooley’s dismay the officer did just that, putting the rest of the magazine into the flank of an armoured ambulance that had followed the tanks into the road.

The non-combatant vehicle immediately revealed its true identity as a crewman appeared from a top hatch and fired a ring-mounted heavy machine gun at them. Water showered from traps on the tanks’ hulls as they fired shells from their main armaments and added the chatter of their co-axial weapons to the weight of shot skimming towards the squad.

There was no further hesitation. Their guide led them at a fast pace half the length of the side road, then into a solid slab-sided building that bombs and rockets had done no more than pockmark, once all the glass had been shattered in its facade.

‘Not much for you to do now. Best just pick your grandstand seat and get ready for the fireworks.’

Hyde had begun to take an interest in the sapper major, and watching the road, kept half an eye on him also.

Everyone had to come back from the windows as on entering the comparatively narrow street, the Russian vehicles unleashed a storm of ordnance at the buildings flanking its length. Bullets and fragments of shell came in through every window and ricocheted about the gutted and looted interiors. Part of a shop front collapsed as a low velocity 73mm shell blasted its last supports away.

Apparently satisfied that they had either destroyed or frightened off any potential opposition they drove into the street, keeping always to the centre of the road, maintaining a proper interval between each vehicle.

‘Those tank crews know what they’re doing. Pity they’re not getting proper back-up from the infantry in the red-
‘Never did know a Commie who’d willingly get out from behind armour unless he were forced to, present company accepted.’ Ripper added that for their deserter’s benefit, but Boris wasn’t listening.

It was the first chance he’d had, and Boris was hastily stripping off the Russian uniform and replacing it with the ragbag assortment of different nationalities uniforms that was his usual dress. He glanced to see if anyone was watching, before bundling the discarded clothes into a large crack in the partition wall and pushing them from sight and almost out of reach.

It must have been entirely at random, for there seemed nothing to guide the Russian gunners’ choice as to which buildings to put shells into. They would wait until they had pulled level with one, and then the barrels would depress back to the horizontal as the semi-automatic loader was disengaged, then they’d traverse and fire without hesitation and seemingly without aiming, as sometimes the shells exploded against front pillars, sending clouds of dust back over the tanks, and at other times they’d penetrate almost to the rear of the ground floor before impacting and sending fireballs roaring up through the structure.

‘I love doing this.’

The major turned the handle of a detonator and a series of small charges rippled through a tall office block a little way along. Slowly at first, but with gathering momentum, the whole fabric began to sag and then in a welter of thousands of tons of steel and concrete it fell into the road to completely block it.

‘Expensive way of making a roadblock, when you’re short of explosives, isn’t it?’ Hyde had a genuine interest in the answer. The expenditure seemed profligate viewed against the parsimony with which small arms ammunition was issued in the city.

‘No. We used munitions captured from the Ruskies, stuff that we suspected might be booby-trapped. Couldn’t even steam out the contents for use elsewhere, so we just fix our own detonators to them and use them like that. The cost is negligible.’

Again the detonator was turned, and this time it was a PT76 that took the full force of a blast that came from beneath the road. The vehicle was lifted several feet into the air by the forces erupting from the ordnance-packed sewer. Tracks, road wheels, hatches and every type of fitting were ripped from the vehicle before it crashed down and began to burn.

From a row of shops opposite the misused ambulance came a dozen great gouts of flame as crude projectors spewed streams of burning chemical. Liquid fire dripped from the tracked vehicle and every door was thrown open, only to be slammed shut again as the roasting air hit the men struggling to escape. A moment later they tried again with the same result, and then with the vehicle’s engine racing they tried driving out of trouble, and only managed to motor into it.

A mine exploded beneath a track and the ambulance spun around in its own length as it broke. The rubber of every track pad and road wheel was well alight. When the belt of machine gun ammunition to the weapon on the roof began to cook-off, crew and infantry passengers could take it no longer.

With the surface of its aluminium armour beginning to bubble in places, with phosphorus and sodium dripping from it, the doors began to open again, and stopped after only a few inches. The heat that had deterred them before had welded the hinges into solid masses. Screams came from inside and a blistered hand was thrust through the gap between rear door and hull, only to be fused to the metal.

The remaining pair of amphibious tanks were trying to reverse past the wrecks to get out of the street, but the space available was narrow and they were getting themselves into all sorts of trouble as they collided first with shop fronts and then with the burning wrecks and finally with each other, a collision that cost both of them the thin aluminium splashguards over their tracks. ‘What’s the crew of those elderly brutes?’

Clarence had the answer for the officer of engineers. ‘Commander, driver, gunner and a section of infantry.’

‘Ah, then we’d better finish them now, before the blighters decide to abandon ship, or tank rather, and take to the
hills. Be a damned sight harder to winkle them out then.’ From his pocket he took a small radio transmitter. ‘Hope
the Ruskies aren’t jamming this frequency, that’s the risk of these things. Much prefer wire control, where it’s
possible.’ His thumb flicked a control to the ‘on’ position.

Red flame flowed over the front of a building opposite the tanks as drums on its top floor were punctured and
ignited by small charges. Another building began to go the same way, and then one across the street was followed
by another that made four and the process continued until a whole block on either side presented the roaring face of
an inferno.

‘Now this is a bit of a waste.’ The engineer returned the transmitter to his pocket. He had to shout to be heard above
the fires. ‘This was planned to catch Russian infantry. We could have fried a whole battalion or more.’

Distorted by their rapid expansion, weakened by being heated until they glowed, the girders and reinforcing rods
that kept the bomb-damaged buildings upright began to fail.

Giant chunks of concrete, whole sections of frontage, began to fall into the street, and the tanks’ crews saw the
danger too late. Even as they started to leave by the escape hatches, braving the searing heat of the street, they were
struck down by the rain of beams and masonry cascading from the upper floors. The hulls of the tanks were speared
by white-hot steel, crushed beneath torrents of concrete, and as their fuel tanks were ruptured and ammunition
ignited, their destruction became total.

‘Might be an idea if we made a move ourselves. Be silly to get roasted in our own oven.’

‘Hold it, eh, Major?’ Hyde had levelled his rifle at the engineer, and cocked the weapon. ‘I think we should have a
word before we go anywhere.’

‘Hey, Sarge, you lost a screw?’ Dooley couldn’t make sense of what was happening. ‘This guy saved our bacon and
broiled a platoon of Reds with their transport. You think he’s a spy or something?’

‘I don’t know, but something’s not right, so how about you go through his pack and find out just who we have here.
Unless, that is, he’d like to save us the trouble and talk.’

The Royal Engineers major shrugged, then a quiet smile spread over his smoke-stained handsome face. ‘The name is
Thorne.’

THIRTEEN

It was past mid-day when Revell woke, but only his watch told him that. The room was still dark, heavy shutters
remained fastened over the windows. He groped for matches on the bedside table and lit the stump of candle.

With the pale illumination, memories of the night came pouring back, and with them the uncomfortable realisation
that he was very sore. Rude noises came from the baby-oil bottle as he squeezed the last drop from it and gingerly
patted it on to his red and flaccid penis. The contact was painful, but the coldness was soothing.

Noticing that Inga’s suit was missing from the chair, and hearing her moving about in the next room he hurriedly
dressed, wasting some time in having to hunt for his scattered clothes.

‘Oh, I was going to bring you breakfast in bed. I know it is a little late…’ She saw him as he came into the lounge.
‘No, I don’t want anything, thanks anyway.’ He hesitated. ‘About last night…’

‘Last night was last night. It is past, and I shall not talk of it if you do not want to, but,’ she leant against him and
stroked behind his ears with long slim manicured fingers, ‘but I do not think you will be angry with me if I tell you it
was lovely. I liked watching you do that, you came so many times, and when your fingers were inside me, and your
tongue…’

‘Yes… but like you say, that was last night…I wouldn’t like anyone to know…not that I think you would…’
‘Shush.’ She put a finger to his lips. ‘It is forgotten, until the next time. Now, eat with me.’

‘I can’t, I must go back to be reassigned. That’s where I should have gone after I left the hospital, and I must check on Andrea.’

Inga didn’t argue, she could see that his mind was made up. ‘The reassignment office is closest, at least let me go there with you, won’t you?’

‘Sure, but I want to get away now, I’ve delayed too long already.’ He saw her hurt expression at that. ‘But I’ll admit it, I enjoyed it too.’

The sun was high in the sky and trying hard to break through the perpetual dust and smoke cloud that hung over Hamburg. It was blistering hot down in the street and the queues at the water tankers were longer than usual.

A familiar landmark was missing from the city skyline, but if the people shuffling endlessly forward with their buckets and jerry-cans noticed, they made no remark.

It was slightly cooler underground, but the sheer numbers of people lined up before the tables and waiting on the platform and tracks beyond kept the humidity high and the air stale. There appeared to be even more of them than there had the time before.

An hour passed before they even came within sight of the table: an hour of having their feet trodden on, of hearing petty squabbles all about them, of edging forward a half-pace at a time. If Inga had not been on his arm, helping to make the time fly, he would have barged his way to the front, using his strength, his rank or the 12-gauge to be attended to first. As it was he put up with the crowds and the noise and the bickering and the shoving because it stretched that much further the last few minutes he had with her.

‘You were not wounded?’ Andrea spoke to Revell, but her eyes were on Inga. ‘What the hell are you doing here, you’re supposed to be in the hospital.’ Revell was completely taken aback by her appearance. He noticed an assignment slip in her hand.

‘I could not stand being in that place. All that is wrong with me is that I have lost a little blood and I have some sutures in my leg. I reported here to get back into combat, but all they have given me is command of an old truck, an older man and some radio location equipment. Tomorrow I shall try again to return to a fighting unit. Who is she?’

The dislike generated between the two attractive women was instant and total. Revell would have liked to have thought that he was the cause of that, but he couldn’t believe he was. The introductions he made served only to ice the air further.

‘Did you know the squad was still intact?’ Andrea now ignored the tall blonde, acting as though she didn’t exist. She watched for the major’s reaction to the news.

‘Where are they?’ He tried to keep his voice casual, to give her no satisfaction by reacting with surprise.

‘At the Schauspielhaus, on Kirchenallee, resting. They were in action last night. I hear they crossed the Aussenalster and destroyed the big mortar that has been tearing Hamburg apart. It is only a rumour, but it is said they forestalled a Russian attempt to use a nuclear round on the city.’

Revell thought he felt Inga tighten her grip on his arm, and he patted her hand to reassure her. The action brought a withering look of contempt to Andrea’s face. Saying nothing she hitched her M16 more comfortably on her shoulder and went out. He noticed a slight limp in her walk and might have gone after her had his companion not kept a firm hold on him.

‘You will be rejoining your unit now?’

‘Immediately. I’ll come to the apartment as soon as I get a chance.’ He tried to pull away, but she clung tight.

‘I have a feeling, do not stay at the theatre. It will be safer if you find somewhere else. Please, do as I ask, please?’
‘Don’t worry, I’ve survived this long.’ ‘Yes, but do not stay there, it is very important.’

The urgency, genuine pleading, in her voice was unmistakable, and Revell didn’t know quite what to make of it. He sought to calm her. ‘OK, I’ll get them to shift quarters, does that satisfy you?’

She nodded and then threw her arms round his neck and held him tight. Mostly the people in their vicinity ignored them, but an elderly woman sitting unravelling an old woollen cardigan smiled approvingly, and gave her chest a maternal pat as she watched the couple.

He had to tear himself away or he would never have had the courage to go. Disentangling himself from her embrace he gave her one quick kiss then turned into the press and made for the door, moving fast as he pushed through the throng and not looking back.

The squad registered amazement at his still being alive, but expressions of pleasure they saved for the news that Andrea had also come through. Revell saw a new face, and recognised it.

‘Thorne, have you been looking after this crowd?’

‘No he fucking hasn’t, Major, sir.’ Hyde shoved Thorne in the chest and barged him aside. ‘And he isn’t an officer in the Royal Engineers either. He’s a bloody sapper corporal, for the time being. I held on to him as I thought we might as well have his services for a while before the military police have him.’

‘This looks like being a day for surprises. OK, well done, Sergeant.’ Inga’s words came back to him, and their recollection convinced him there was more to them than some female whim, some half-baked premonition, though what he couldn’t fathom. ‘Get the men ready to move, will you. We’re relocating in five minutes, soon as I’ve squared it with Colonel Horst.’

‘Here, Major, what for? We’ve only just got settled here. They’re just putting a light under a field kitchen and we’ve found decent bogs and beds.’ Burke expressed the indignation and annoyance that several of the others displayed, but didn’t voice.

There wasn’t a reason he could give, not one that would make sense to them. Hell, it didn’t make any damned sense to him. ‘Just be ready to move when I get back.’ It wasn’t a good start to his resumed command.

To Revell’s relief the Bundeswehr colonel didn’t require any reason. He didn’t care where the major’s men set up home, so long as they could be found quickly in an emergency. He testily declined to take seriously the suggestion that he might like to move his own men from the theatre also, when no logical explanation was proffered to back the idea.

Hyde had to work hard and constantly to quell the mutinous muttering among the men when they left the great building and trudged off down the dusty road. Most of his threats had to be directed at Burke, who maintained a dirge-like monotone of complaint.

‘Comes back from the bloody dead ... drags us from our fucking dinner ... four shitty rows of upholstered seats ... nearest things to bleeding beds inside of a week ... proper chemical bogs ... even shit paper ...’

‘It were separated layers of corrugated cardboard.’ Ripper injected a qualifying note. ‘And we’d have had to knock the arms off the chairs before we could have laid on ‘em, and then they’d have probably tipped up and folded away with us inside of them.’

‘I’d still like to know why he’s dragging us away from a cosy billet...’

The air-raid sirens commenced their wailing, as they heard the approaching jets and dived for cover. A pair of MIG-27’s ripped the air apart with the staccato crackle of their turbofan engines as they passed overhead at only a few hundred feet.

From the fronts of their belly packs came the rapid clatter of their 23mm Gatling cannons delivering the maximum rate of fire. The mixed tracer and explosive and incendiary shells marched across an intersection, over the front of a
gutted cinema and plunged in through the side wall of the theatre. At the same moment the aircraft released the contents of their under fuselage and inboard wing pylons.

Miniature parachutes deployed from retarded bombs began an arcing descent towards the building, and falling with them were the tumbling teardrop-shaped canisters of napalm bombs.

Three of the six iron bombs fell short, blasting an avenue of destruction through an area already hit many times. The others straddled their target, and the walls and the whole fabric of the theatre were beginning to crumple as the napalm struck.

Fire made giant bubbles through the smoke of the earlier detonations and the building was completely hidden as thousands of gallons of petrol-jelly drenched and consumed the ruins.

For once, though, the city’s flak guns were putting up more than a token resistance. Lines of tracer, almost invisible in the bright sky save where they rose against the background of a smoke pall, chased the jets that, with their afterburners roaring, were climbing as fast as they could. For the trailing aircraft that wasn’t fast enough.

Pieces flew from the jet and the smoke trail it left suddenly turned darker. Its undercarriage began to extend, further decreasing its rate of climb, and then a plume of white vapour poured from its fuselage side. For another four hundred feet it towed the twin trails, then an explosion threw it sideways across the sky and the white trail turned to a long feather of flame. The outer section of its port variable-geometry wing broke off and the MIG went into a stalling turn that became a flat spin towards the ground.

At three hundred feet an anonymous chunk of wreckage falling with the aircraft resolved itself as the ejector seat. It towed the slashed and burning remnants of a parachute.

Aircraft and pilot struck the ground near enough together, somewhere over towards the docks.

‘You got second sight, Major?’ Gaping, Ripper watched the fires taking hold of the flattened theatre.

Revell didn’t have to answer; the incident had restored his stock, put him firmly back in charge again. But there was a question he was going to have to ask Inga, and he wasn’t looking forward to insisting on an answer.

‘Must be that nuke we found the other night.’ Revell re-read the order. ‘Looks like the city fathers have been scared to learn the Commies are ready to drop big ones on the city itself, so they’re bringing forward plans for the breakout.’

‘About bloody time.’ Dooley’s gut signalled its emptiness from both ends of him at once. ‘Another day and we’d have been classed as residents and then we’d never have got out.’

‘We’d never be residents, not anywhere.’ Attempts Burke was making to suppress wind from his small intestine were failing, and he joined the big man in a repulsive duet. ‘We’re cannon fodder. They’ll let us do the dirty work for them, but they wouldn’t have us as ruddy neighbours in case we glowed in the dark and frightened the kids.’

‘Same back home.’ Taking the sensible precaution of moving up wind of the other two, Ripper continued reassembling his rifle. ‘Got a letter from my Aunt Emma just before we came on this jaunt, and from the tone of it I got the distinct impression she thinks I’m in danger of growing two heads. Mind you, the jars of home-made wine she gets through I reckon she sees two of most things.’

‘If your second bonce is no improvement on the first, in looks or brain power, I wouldn’t bother if I were you.’ Burke signalled the finale of the obscene double act with a thundering fart that almost lifted his backside off the ground.

Dooley just had to top that, and lifting each buttock rapidly in sequence contrived to turn a long burst of pungent wind into an almost recognisable tune.

‘If you two carry on for much longer, then the Communists are going to think we are using poison gas.’ Boris sniffed the air.
'Take care, mate, one whiff of that and you’ll be pushing up the daisies.'

'Can the rest of you not smell it?'

'I hesitate to ask, but smell what?' Cautiously Clarence sampled the evening breeze, taking care to first check the reading on the chemical level indicator attached to his belt.

'Food, no not just food, meat, cooking meat.'

'Our pet Ruskie is going off his trolley.' Clarifying his meaning by tapping the side of his head, Burke suddenly stopped, and began to copy the others who were also testing the air. ‘Christ, I must be going dotty as well. It must be the hunger.’

‘Then we can all smell it. Either we’re down wind of a Russian officer’s preparations for a private party, or they’ve come up with a new stunt to drive us all crazy.’

‘Not very likely, Clarence.’ Revell was also enjoying the aroma of roasting meat. ‘The Reds gave up subtlety long ago.’

A green star shell burst overhead and bathed everything in a ghastly light that turned healthy flesh a putrid colour.

Ripper held out his hands to examine the effect. ‘Can’t say I’m keen on what it does for me, but on Burke I reckon it’s an improvement.’

‘Silence from now on. We’re moving up to our start line, that was the signal. There will be a barrage of sorts to cover the noise of the move, but the guns are short on ammo and we can’t count on its smothering everything, so if you’ve got any last words, out with them now.’

‘Or forever hold your...’ A look from their NCO and Burke cut it short. ‘... Amen.’

‘Can I just say you might have used a better form of words, Major.’

Corporal Thorne was unimpressed when Hyde turned his disfigured face to him.

Revell let it go. He could afford to, there was scant chance that the sapper would come through the night of fighting that lay ahead. Only the order to take up positions for the breakout had saved him from being handed over to the military police on a string of charges. But he was paying a price for that reprieve. The satchel he carried contained five homemade limpet bombs. Utilising a shaped-charge principle they were to be used to finish any disabled armoured vehicles that continued to resist, or any pill-boxes the flame throwers could not subdue.

From close behind them a battery of field guns opened a steady if none too rapid fire, managing to send another shell on its way as the echoes of the previous died.

There were other groups moving through the dusk. Some, like themselves, were armed with an assortment of weapons, a supply clerk’s nightmare; others were equipped exclusively with Patchette submachine guns, or anti-tank rockets, or engineers’ stores. Most of it had been produced in Hamburg’s own underground factories, and much of it, long held back against this day, was being tried for the first time.

Down a side street they passed several M60 and Challenger tanks. They were far too precious to be thrown blindly into the first assault on the enemy forces. The infantry and engineers would probe the Russian defences first, and then, and only then, when the ground was known and the enemy anti-tank weapons accounted for, would the tanks be unleashed.

The same did not go for some improvised armoured machines that stood hidden under thick camouflage netting immediately behind the start line.

Multi-wheeled civilian commercial vehicles had been fitted with rudimentary armour over their cabs and vulnerable tyres, and where their cranes or cement mixers had been there were now quick-firing cannon of every calibre.
Two huge bulldozers had also been fitted with sheets of plate and now waited with their accompanying engineers for the order to advance. Most poignant of all among the strange assortment of vehicles in which so much faith was being put, was a tiny Daimler Dingo scout car of World War Two vintage. Retrieved partially restored from some enthusiast’s garage and fitted with a single general purpose machine gun, it was going to lead.

They were directed into a house whose suspended floor had been removed by fuel scavengers long before, and settled to wait again.

Spiders and other bugs and insects came to bother them, making them itch and adding to their cramped discomfort. Revell hardly noticed them. As he looked around his men his greatest satisfaction was that Andrea wasn’t there. She was safe elsewhere, like Inga.

Those two were so different, so completely opposite each other in every conceivable way that it was impossible to imagine any grounds on which they might come together.

One by one the guns were falling silent, leaving as the only sound the far distant boom of some Russian heavies firing on another part of the perimeter. It was clear the Russians had no clue as to what was about to be unleashed on them.

The attack was planned to go forward and peel away the successive rings of enemy positions, pushing them back and away to either side to widen the gap until it was impossible for them to re-close it. Then they would dig in and hold that cleared ground until they got help from outside. There would be none until then.

The NATO High Command had not been told of the breakout, there had not been the time to involve them, or the wish to take the security risk of the lengthy communications that would have been necessary.

It was the desperate plight of the city that prompted so desperate a plan. The toll in human lives had been terrible so far; with the food situation becoming chronic it was going to get rapidly worse. They had nothing to lose.

FOURTEEN

The old man noted the readings, and made a pencil dot on the plastic cover of the map. With irritating slowness and deliberation he took a ruler from a shelf, dusted it on his sleeve, and used it to join the last two marks. Halfway along, the line he made intersected another, and he ringed the junction.

‘Now we must get the police.’ He peered at the girl over the top of his cracked glasses.

‘There is no need. Wait here, I will deal with it.’ Andrea climbed from the back of the radio location vehicle and breathed deeply to clear her lungs of the foul smoke the operator’s pipe had been giving off. She had not asked him what he was burning, she could guess.

The building so clearly indicated by the search aerials on the van’s roof looked to be severely damaged, virtually uninhabitable. Slowly, to make as little noise as possible, she climbed the rubble strewn stairs. A stray chink of light escaped from beneath a soot-stained door. She leant her rifle against the wall and unholstered her pistol. A gentle push confirmed that it was locked, but a glance at its charred surround gave her reason to believe it might not be all that strong.

Taking a step back, and preparing for the pain that would come when for an instant her damaged leg took all her weight, she took a deep breath and kicked out at the wood just below the lock.

Pain was forgotten as it crashed open and Andrea levelled her pistol at the only person in the room.

‘I do not have a gun.’ Inga reached for the headphones and carefully took them off, letting them fall on to the radio that had been pulled from its place of concealment beneath the sofa.

‘That is a great pity, I had hoped you had.’ Without taking her eyes from the blonde, Andrea reached for her rifle,
and used it to wedge the door shut. ‘But now I think that this is best. Did you learn much from him?’

‘From your Major Revell? No.’

‘What did he do with you, I want to know all the details.’ Andrea took the girl by the wrist and pulled her in through the open bedroom doorway. The sheets had not been changed, they were near transparent with the oil that had soaked into them. ‘I see you played games. Now, everything. Tell me everything.’

Revell led his men at the head of the second wave, and they met little opposition as they passed through the first belt of defences. Broken guns and bodies lay everywhere. Sandbagged positions burned along with the machine gun crews that had manned them, and there were screams coming from a burning armoured bulldozer.

The tiny Daimler had driven into a crater, and now the spitting barrel of its machine gun, firing over the rim, marked the furthest point of advance.

A monstrous eight-wheeler had been knocked out close by, but while its pulverised cab meant that it would be driving no further, the automatic weapons firing from its cargo platform were doing bloody execution among Russian troops trying to escape from isolated trenches where they found themselves trapped.

The hold-up was caused by a pair of anti-tank guns flanked by a complex of zig-zagging trenches from which enemy riflemen were keeping up a heavy protective fire against any infantry attempt to take the guns.

At fifty yards from their objective the squad had been forced to go to ground, and it seemed the attack had stalled. Every second’s delay gave the Russians a longer breathing space in which to make hasty preparations for a counter-attack that must succeed if the Hamburg forces were caught in the open.

‘We’ve got to have the tanks up in support.’ Revell was trying to make himself understood over the radio, but he wasn’t the only one calling for help, and the Russians were already beginning to jam many frequencies.

‘They’re waiting for us to get those guns first.’ Hyde watched the muzzle flashes of the 122mm pieces as they proceeded to systematically destroy every vehicle that came within their range.

‘And we need them to do something about those trenches before we can close enough.’

‘Major.’ Thome crawled to join officer and NCO. ‘If I can blow the guns, will you drop the charges, let me stay with this outfit?’

‘You sure there’s nothing else you want? OK, you got it, good luck.’

Thome ran off, dodging mortar bursts and sprinting between the lines of tracer.

‘We’ll not see him again.’ Snapping off a shot, Hyde brought down a Russian gunner who had been careless enough to show himself around the side of a gun shield. The action brought a storm of retaliatory fire that forced the men to hug the slight cover the low mounds of rubble offered.

Gradually the incoming fire grew in volume as the Russians became more confident of holding the position, and began to feed men back into it.

A high revving engine became audible, and the Daimler leapt from the crater, tossing into the air the lengths of steel mesh that had assisted its escape. Hyde expected to see it turn and race for cover, leaving the battlefield to more thickly armoured vehicles, but it didn’t, instead it picked up speed as it weaved and jinked towards the guns. Heavy calibre shells flashed past the darting scout car, small arms fire beat a tattoo on its thin armour. As it churned through the tangle of barbed wire fronting the weapons’ pits a figure leant over its side and slapped block-like objects on to the steel walls of its hull, then with the driver threw himself out.

The driver was caught by a burst of automatic fire even as he jumped, Thorne went the other way and tumbled into a foxhole on top of a Russian sergeant.
Only the sapper reappeared.

Leaping a trench, using the rampart fronting it as a ramp, the Daimler crashed through the sandbag wall about one of the guns and came to a stop nose down among the split sacks only a yard away from it.

Several explosions ripped through the pit as the limpet bombs detonated, killing the weapon’s crew and starting fires among its ready-use ammunition.

It was too much for the men on the other anti-tank gun. They ran. Seeing that they had been abandoned, the enemy infantry decided to follow and the jams their panic created at the exits from the trench system made them easy targets for the men who stormed the fast disintegrating defences of the second line.

There was no stopping them now. They kept close on the heels of the fleeing Warsaw Pact troops, giving them no respite, driving them on to create more confusion, more uncertainty further back.

And now the tanks came forward and added their long-range firepower to that of the handheld antitank weapons that had been all they had available so far, and they arrived just in time to engage the first Russian armour to appear.

T72s and T84s were stopped and began to burn as the powerful cannons of the British Challengers and the 152mm combined gun and rocket launchers of the M60s punched rounds through their armour as fast as they appeared. An M60, worn out by long months spent racing about Hamburg to bolster weak parts of the defences, threw a track, and instantly the infantry formed a defensive perimeter about it while the repair was effected. And while that was going on the tank’s main armament and cupola machine gun continued to give support fire.

When they reached an abandoned, carefully camouflaged anti-aircraft missile site, Revell knew that they were almost through. Beyond that lay a last major ring of defensive works, but they faced the other way, were intended to fend off NATO attempts to relieve the city, and by now the number of men available to man them would be far fewer than was necessary to make their interlocking fields of fire truly effective.

Mopping up was still going on, the flanks of the corridor that had been punched through the encircling armies would have to be consolidated, but they would be able to put to excellent use the many defences the Russians had spent so much effort in making.

‘The whole fucking world’s gone mad.’ Dooley plonked himself beside the major after completing a scavenging expedition to secure as many souvenirs from the dead enemy officers as he could. ‘I just been talking to a guy who’s waiting for the stretcher bearers. Him and his pals spotted this Commie field kitchen and thought they’d try the cabbage soup, see if it was as foul as they serve in Hamburg. They get right up to it and wham, the Ruskies fight to keep it like it was the steps of the Kremlin. Then you know what they do, when they seen they’re gonna get beat, they blow it up, and themselves as well. Soup and bread and meat everywhere.’

‘Did you say meat?’

‘Sure I did, Sarge. You been too close to the guns? Your hearing going?’ ‘There ought to be a field kitchen near that missile battery. We’re not needed for the moment, shall we take a look?’

Major Revell didn’t have to make the invitation a second time.

Although they’d not yet encountered any themselves, they’d seen others walk on to mines, and took care to retrace a route they’d already found to be safe.

The site was completely deserted. There were some signs that hurried preparations had been under way to destroy the missiles, their launch vehicles and associated truck-mounted radars, but little of it had been completed, and none of it carried out. Demolition charges lay scattered about the open back of a truck and more were in cases aboard it. That was why it had not disappeared like all the other light weight vehicles such a large unit must have had. Plenty of dry skid marks showed where field cars, motorcycles and command cars had taken off in a hurry. A burning motorcycle combination in the distance revealed that not all had made successful escapes.

‘It’s here. Two bloody great wagons, with trailers ...’ Bullets cut the air close by and Burke had to dive for cover.
There was a look of semi-permanence about the site. Camouflage had been done very thoroughly, and the usual
tented accommodation had been supplemented by three small wooden shacks. It was from the middle of those that
the fire had come.

‘Good job that trench were there.’ After some difficulty getting out, Burke crawled back to join the remainder of the
squad who had taken cover behind a holed and rusting oil storage tank at the rear of what might once have been a
small engineering works. ‘Bloke they dug it for must either be bloody tall, or a heck of a coward. It’s all of six foot
depth.’

‘Try a grenade on them.’

The only one among them with any left was Boris, who had to work his way close enough to toss the fragmentation
bomb under the slightly raised floor of the cabin.

Lifted off its foundation piles by the explosion, the wooden structure settled back with its walls all at angles and its
doors blown off. The floor had been gouged and splintered by slivers of metal that had penetrated it to wound the
men inside.

A spray of automatic fire finished the Russians who were groping for their rifles, but as Boris moved forward to
look inside, Clarence’s shouted warning came only just in time. From between the trucks came a long gout of flame
that belched into and over the cabin to set it ablaze.

Its operator got no second chance. Bullets fired under the vehicles brought him down and as more finished him the
snout of the flame gun dribbled fire on to his chest.

‘I smell meat again.’ Ripper inhaled deeply. ‘Yeah, of course you can. I see the ribs barbecuing from here.’ Dooley
returned from another treasure hunt. ‘You know these missile guys had some real strange notions about how to dig
trenches. There’s a load more of those deep foxholes round the back.’

The shack in the middle was well alight, but it was still possible to approach those on either side, though their
splitting and cracking walls would be a part of the conflagration soon. Revell opened one, to see rack upon rack of
meat hanging to dry. He slapped Ripper’s hand away when he reached for a piece.

‘Something you should see, Major.’ Hyde led them to a huge cast iron stove. Once perhaps the pride of some trendy
person’s fitted kitchen, now the bright red Aga stood beneath a corrugated iron canopy with a crooked chimney
made from lengths of drainpipe, surrounded by broken floorboards and furniture intended as its fuel.

A fire still burned in it, and Hyde used a piece of cloth to open the oven door to reveal an almost done roast. ‘And
there’s something else, one last thing.’ Again he led, this time to a pit well away from the kitchens. Taking a scrap
of paper he lit it, and let it flutter into the depths.

Ripper threw the contents of his stomach after it, extinguishing the light. ‘Why’d he do that, what’s the matter?’
Dooley sauntered over to the group and peered into the pit.

Gritting his teeth was the only way that Hyde could stop from joining Revell and Thorne who’d also begun to heave.
His words came out through them. ‘You thick sod. Those aren’t bloody trenches, they’re bloody graves. These shits
were starving, so they used the only food source they had left to them. Think about it. What’s there always plenty of
in war?’

‘You mean they… they have been eating their dead?’ ‘Yes, and ours. That’s why they’ve been trying to destroy the
evidence.’

But Dooley wasn’t listening any more, hands on his knees he was retching uncontrollably as his empty stomach
went through the ritual of straining to eject something that wasn’t there.

Standing back Clarence took care to stay beyond the range of smells from the ovens and the burning huts. He
watched Boris stagger away clutching at his stomach and reeling from dizziness and nausea. It had hit the deserter
worse than any of them, and he could feel sorry for the man. For some reason he hadn’t expected the major to react
the same way as the others. Not that he considered the officer to have no human traits; he clearly had, as his pursuit of Andrea testified; but he’d always thought of him as harder than most men. Perhaps it was an act, or maybe something that happened to him while he was away from them that had changed him.

Finally Revell managed to bring himself under control, though the urge to retch remained and was doubled when he heard the others doing it. He was glad Andrea wasn’t there, to see him like this. Damn it, he wished he could stop. He tried to take a sip from his flask but his body’s reaction was instantaneous, throwing it back the moment it touched his throat.

And Inga too. He could only hope that there was someone else who could be sent to take the pictures that would inevitably be wanted for propaganda, and eventually for war crimes evidence.

The siege was almost lifted, the Russians were on the run and nothing could prevent them completing the task now. The city was safe, he was glad the girls were too. He would have to choose between them, there couldn’t be room in his life for both. But he wouldn’t choose yet, he would wait, and see what happened.

‘He did that because you told him to?’ Andrea had listened to the recounting of the night Inga and Revell had spent together, not making any comment, showing any expression, only asking questions now and then. ‘Yes. I made him do it four times, he seemed to want me to.’ Throughout the recital Inga had been aware of the pistol’s unwavering barrel pointed straight at her. ‘What are you going to do with me?’ She tried not to show her fright. With a man it would have been easy, but with this cold woman she could not tell. She tried to smile, to make light of her situation, effect nonchalance, and was surprised to see an answering smile.

‘I have not thought that far. Do you think I am attractive?’ ‘Yes.’ Inga answered as boldly as the question had been posed. ‘Undress.’

Inga didn’t hesitate, the pistol still pointed at her, but perhaps she saw a chance. She had never done it with a woman before, but...

Andrea watched, and as the last garment was shed, stood close in front of the naked girl. ‘You have told me everything about your night together?’

The events flickered in freeze frame style through her mind. It was possible she might have the order wrong, had the acts out of sequence, but that was all. ‘Yes. I have told you everything.’

‘Did you enjoy it?’ This she had to reply to carefully. Inga was aware of that. She had to inject something, a hint of reservation. ‘It was nice, yes, but... but a man cannot truly understand a woman, know what she really wants.’ Anxiously she watched for a reaction, but could see none.

‘You are cold?’ Looking down at her breasts Inga saw that her nipples had hardened. ‘I think I am, yes, a little.’

‘There is one last thing I want to know. Show me how he kisses.’ It was the chance she’d been waiting for. Taking the half-pace that was all that separated them, Inga put her arms round Andrea’s neck, pulled her close and kissed her hard and long on the lips. At first there was no response, then a hand pressed into her back and made the embrace go on. She was breathless when she was allowed to break away. Her whole body tingled as though it was undergoing a mild electric shock, only pleasant. It would be possible for her to get to like this, perhaps eventually she could even recruit this enigmatic girl.

‘Do it again.’ This time it was less harsh and lasted even longer as she forced her tongue into Andrea’s sweet tasting mouth.

‘And that is how he kissed you? Exactly the same way?’ ‘Exactly like that.’ ‘Thank you. That is all I wanted to know.’

Five shots hit Inga in the chest and she died instantly, before her body finished bouncing on the bed on to which the impacts threw it.
Before retrieving her rifle and going out, Andrea shook the contents of the oil lamp over the bed, laid a trail of it into the lounge and let the rest of it soak into the carpet around the radio. A last time she walked to the bedroom door and looked at the body sprawled face down on the stained sheets. She could still taste the blonde’s lipstick.

Blue flame rippled from the growing blaze by the radio, across the carpet and into the bedroom. She left the front door open to give the fire a plentiful supply of air. By the time it was noticed it would have a good hold, be out of control.

As she went down the stairs she removed the clip from the butt of the pistol and with loose shells she took from a pocket began to reload.

Five bullets had been too many. Two would have been sufficient, three at most. She must discipline herself; in future three would be her maximum, any more would be wasteful overkill.
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