THE ZONE 7 • KILLING GROUND • JAMES ROUCH

THE ZONE
Cover illustration:
The T-72 employs the same armament, ammunition, and integrated fire control as the T-64. The low, rounded turret mounts a 125mm smooth bore gun with a carousel automatic loader mounted on the floor and rear wall of the turret. The 125mm gun common to all the T-72 models is capable of penetrating the M1 Abrams armour at a range of up to 1,000 meters. The more recent BK-27 HEAT round offers a triple-shaped charge warhead and increased penetration against conventional armors and ERA. The BK-29 round, with a hard penetrator in the nose is designed for use against reactive armor, and as an MP round has fragmentation effects. With three round natures (APFSDS-T, HEAT-MP, ATGMs) in the autoloader vs four, more antitank rounds would available for the higher rate of fire.
The infra-red searchlight on the T-72 is mounted on the right side of the main armament, versus on the left on the earlier T-64. The 1K13-49 sight is both night sight and ATGM launch sight. However, it cannot be used for both functions simultaneously. A variety of thermal sights is available. They include the Russian Agava-2, French SAGEM-produced ALIS and Namut sight from Peleng. Thermal gunner night sights are available which permit night launch of ATGMs.
I cried when I saw so many good things. The whole regiment went on an orgy of eating and drinking. Even the officers. When a detachment of the Commandants Service tried to stop us we turned our machine guns on them.
Private Ivan Yesualkov, the only survivor of Motor Rifle regiment 191, nuked while looting an abandoned NATO warehouse.

*All the fuss about you guys in the infantry makes me sick. Where’d you be without me and my boys? I’ll tell you, chucking stones and sharpening sticks for spears, that’s where.*

Quartermaster Sergeant Gary Ball, 66th Infantry Division.

*Some of our most important storage facilities inside the Zone are extremely vulnerable, following the latest Warpac advances. If a vital dump, such as the one at (censored) were to fall into their hands when their offensive operations had slackened due to materiel losses, it would be like a transfusion to them. We must make better provision for their defence now.*

Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Taylor, in a submission to the Joint Chiefs (Allocation of Army Manpower sub-committee, sitting 127. Decision deferred.)

ONE

The flamethrower’s roar echoed back from the buildings around the square. For a moment it died away, and then the squirting yellow flame arced above the cobbles again. Its savage glare was reflected by the wet stones and illuminated the facades of the shattered stores and houses.

‘That should do it.’ Thorne slipped the wide straps from his shoulders and lowered the tanks to the ground. They were empty and rang hollow as he dropped the projector and hoses on top of them. ‘You know, that’s the first time I haven’t enjoyed using the bloody thing.’ Thirty meters away a growing fire crackled and lit his face with a ruddy glow.

In other corners of the square two more of the huge bonfires were already well alight and beginning to push the night back into the surrounding windowless ruins.

Retreating from the growing waves of heat, Burke looked critically at the stack of civilian corpses topping the untidy pile of timber. ‘Might not. The skinny ones are always difficult to burn, and there’re no fat civvies left in the Zone now.’

But even as he said it several of the mutilated corpses began to add their dripping body fats to the pyre’s rough fuel. As their blotched and bruised flesh roast and split further, the drops became streams that burned a vivid yellow, sharp contrast to the dark red flame curling from beneath.

Grouped around their patched and battle-scarred armoured personnel carriers, the rest of the company displayed no interest in so common a scene. Hunched beneath helmets and rain capes, their gruesome work complete, they awaited the order to re-board.

As the area became lighter it illuminated the exhausted, stress-lined faces of the men, and revealed that some who leaned against the shell-gouged hulls had their heads bowed and eyes closed in fitful sleep.

Major Revell and Sergeant Hyde stood a little distance away, beside a mud- spattered Volvo bus. They flanked a fussily dressed elderly German official who was making notes.

A young woman, haggard and dishevelled and clutching an ill-wrapped coughing baby, stammered names and addresses as she waited, last in the queue to board. She hesitated in her nervous recital as the administrator imperiously raised his hand to signal a halt while his painstaking writing tried to keep pace.

His slim silver pen was the only metallic object to catch the light in that tableau. The bus had long since lost the glamour and colourful livery of its earlier days. Evidence of its widely travelled pre-war past showed in the ghosts of old sign writing beneath a thin and heavily scratched layer of drab olive paint.

A row of faces pressed against the dirty windows of its interior. Tears made streaks down the panes but were lost against the beads of rain washing mud from their exterior.
‘Hold it, lady.’
Too surprised to resist immediately, the young mother hesitated as she made to climb aboard and just looked blankly at the tall black medic who had stopped her. Only when he reached into the bundle she held to expose a child’s arm, painfully thin and almost translucently white, did she try to recoil.

In a single well-practiced movement, Sampson wiped a swab over the tiny limb, pressed firmly but gently home the tip of a hypodermic, cleansed the area a second time and stepped back.

Numb, frightened and confused, the woman made to board again. It was Revell who put out his hand to steady her when she threatened to slip from the worn step, after she’d shied from the sergeant’s offer of help.

Hyde moved away, averting his face. What would have been a face if the grafts and reconstructions had left him with more than mere openings for mouth, nose and eyes.

Above the sound of the rain and the flames came a new sound. Revell recognized the thunder of a Russian rocket barrage, 240mm judging by the powerful concussion of the distant overlapping detonations. They were getting uncomfortably close if they were able to employ such comparatively short-range weapons. It was doubtless such an onslaught that had devastated this hamlet. Now the enemy had switched their attention to some other modest collection of homes and businesses, again where the only claim to legitimacy as a target was that they were grouped about a crossroads.

‘You’d best get moving, Herr Klingenberg. It’s bad enough you’ve kept these civvies here to watch what we’ve been doing, without keeping them hanging about to wait for the Russkies’ artillery to sweep back this way.’ It was difficult to check a tight smile as Revell noticed the official abandon his slow, almost pompous manner and replace it with a twittering burst of nervous activity.

‘Ya, ya. I am going now.’ Klingenberg shouted to the bus driver, ‘Schnell, schnell.’

After several ineffectual stabs at a control, the driver had to haul himself, with obvious irritation, from his seat and kick the doors closed. As he resumed his place, started and gunned the engine, the clattering growl of the big diesel was almost drowned by the growing roar and crackle of the fires. That in its turn was smothered by a grief-stricken wail coming from within the bus.

It soared above all other sounds, going on and on, louder and higher than it should have been humanly possible to sustain. The distinctively dressed body of a child, a little blond girl, had rolled from the top of a stack and flopped untidily to rest on the steaming cobblestones.

An arm and part of the torso had been burned away; what remained gave off clouds of foul vapours. Sparks scudded, wind whipped from the smouldering frayed edges of clothing. They made tiny spiral points of light that were quickly lost against the more dramatic outpourings from the main pyre.

Heavy drops of rain began to fall.

Impatiently Revell watched the haughty German as he, with meticulous care, stowed pen and notebook in the proper compartments within his document case. A perceptible shade faster than was strictly in keeping with his earlier demeanour, he made for his own transport. He forced himself to slow when a glance back revealed that the big medic was grinning broadly. Then a stray round blasted the edge of the village and Klingenberg threw away all pretence at dignity and scuttled the last few steps.

Throwing the case onto the back seat of the Mercedes Estate, Klingenberg wrenched at the door when his first attempt to slam it shut was prevented by the buckle of his raincoat becoming jammed in it. His pinched face reddened as it took several tries before he managed to release his clothing and secure the door.

The amusement Revell experienced, though, was not directed at that but at the vehicle itself. Whoever had executed the complex disruptive camouflage paint job on the vehicle had failed to extend their painstaking handiwork to the chromed fenders or full-length roof rack.

Its heavy-duty tires crunching over broken brick and shards of glass, the Mercedes led the bus out of the square.
Spectral faces were indistinctly visible inside the big vehicle. None remained pressed to the windows. They were leaving hell and daren’t turn back for a last look.

‘I hope he goes over a mine.’ Sergeant Hyde watched the shrouded taillights of the little convoy disappear from sight.

‘No chance, Sarge.’ Sampson shied the hypodermic into an anonymous ruin. ‘Infantry and marines die, civvies just get slaughtered, but German civil servants, they’re immortal. Man, when I buy my farm, if I’m reincarnated then all I want to come back as is some poor-paid boring little filing clerk in some piddling hick town hall.’

‘Get them on board, Sergeant.’ Revell turned his back on the noxious pillars of flame and black smoke rising into the predawn sky of another ugly day inside the Zone. Now that the job was done and the surviving civvies were on their way to safety he felt the return of the sapping exhaustion that had been dragging at his mind for days. Or perhaps it had been weeks. Time had almost ceased to have meaning. There were times when it took conscious effort to recall what month, or even what year it was. It was with only half his attention he watched his men lethargically climbing into the APCs, and the others, who had been watching approach roads, return. He should have injected a note of briskness into the proceedings, but it was no more in him than it was in his company, or what was left of it.

Since the Russians had launched their offensive ... how long ago was it, four days, five…? They had been steadily falling back before the relentless pressure of mass attacks. The Warpac forces had been using ammunition as though they had a limitless supply, and every thrust had been preceded by devastating barrages, like the one that had virtually wiped this inoffensive little place from the map.

Revell could only be thankful that his Special Combat Company had been operating on the flanks. In the centre, whole NATO divisions had been obliterated. And even so, in the course of less than a week’s fighting they had sustained losses of nearly seventy percent. Of a reinforced company he now had thirty-five men left. Of the sixteen APCs he had begun with he now had four, and one of those was being towed.

But he knew in his heart it was wrong to say they had been fighting. Almost from the start they had been denied that opportunity. Time after time they had prepared positions, road blocks, ambushes, and every time they had been ordered to withdraw before enemy attacks had developed.

It was the massive Soviet air superiority that had caused their losses. Now it had reached the stage when any movement by daylight was inviting destruction. Fighter bombers and helicopter gunships were roaming at will, and to be seen on the open road was an invitation to a series of attacks. The onset of the bad weather twenty-four hours earlier had bought some slight respite, but neither low cloud nor night could completely halt the attacks. With the wealth of sophisticated targeting devices carried by the gunships and bombers it was most likely only a shortage of experienced pilots that had brought about the slight respite.

It was bitterly frustrating to take such punishment and not be able to strike back. What Revell and his men wanted was something real to fight for, not some anonymous ridge or railway cutting from which they were ordered to withdraw without even sighting the enemy.

Sharply, above the more distant rumble of the barrage, came the punching crack of cannon fire.

‘Let’s get moving, sergeant. That’s the Reds taking out the barricades on the edge of town. Their tanks won’t take long to smash through. Are we still being jammed?’

‘On all frequencies. They’re pumping out that mush at tremendous power. If any of our fliers were in the air the transmitter would be standing out on their screens in 3-D.’ Hyde stepped onto the rear ramp of the M113. ‘So we’re still pulling back?’

‘That was the last word we had, as soon as we finished here.’ Revell scanned the hellish scene in the square, now filled with the stench of the burning bodies. ‘Why they wanted this done though, God only knows. Is this any more decent than decomposing under a pile of rubble?’

Shrugging, Hyde ducked into the tracked carrier. ‘Probably the home village of some German politician who pulled
a few strings…’

‘Don’t fucking wait for us, will you.’ Running and shouting, Dooley charged from an alleyway. He put on a spurt as he saw the last of the company boarding, was overtaken by Scully who had followed him but now reached sanctuary first.

‘Move over, you shits.’ Scully scrambled inside, shouting down the complaints from others who objected to being sprayed with the muddy water escaping from the cloudy plastic sack he carried. He sneered answers to his noisy and rude greeting. ‘Piss off. This is important stuff. You want to fuck up your guts on army rations, then that’s your bloody lookout. It took me an hour to grub up this lot. I’m not chucking them out now. I volunteered to cook when you lot wouldn’t do it, and if I’m going to do it then I want some decent veggies in the pot.’

‘You reckon they’re decent?’ Ripper watched the little man contort himself to push the soil-blotched turnips and carrots into an under-seat locker.

‘Of course they bloody are.’ Rearranging various bottles of soy sauce and ketchup and scooping back handfuls of stock cubes, Scully succeeded at his second attempt to fasten the improvised catch. ‘It’s the stuff grown above ground that glows in the dark.’

Seated by the rear door of the APC, Ripper suddenly stuck his leg across the opening to prevent Dooley entering. ‘Now you ain’t bringing them in here, boy.’

‘Don’t fuck about. It took me bloody ages to catch this lot.’ Supported in both arms Dooley carried a highly ornate gilt cage filled with a mass of twittering bright blurs.

Shrill cheepings and showers of multi-coloured feather and millet husks accompanied his attempts to push it inside ahead of him.

Other voices joined Ripper’s drawl in protest and Dooley reluctantly backed off.

‘You miserable load of cruds. Don’t you ever tell me I haven’t got no soul again. Shit, I’ve got more feeling in my head than you’ve got in your little fingers.’ For a moment, at the back of Dooley’s mind there lurked the doubt that he’d got that a bit wrong, or at least not quite right. ‘Oh sod the lot of you. Someone sling me an empty kit bag then.’

Catching a bundle of frayed and stained canvas, Dooley crammed the cage into it. In the process he almost disappeared within a screeching cloud of flying plumage. With elaborate care he fastened the bundle to a broken tool rack on the hull’s exterior.

Sluggishly the tired hydraulics closed the ramp and sealed the troops within their armoured cocoon. With a bellow from holed exhausts and some misfiring, the old battle-worn APCs pulled out of the square, the last in the line starting off with a jerk as its towline tautened.

As they clanked and crunched over the rubble their passengers fell into an exhausted sleep. Only Dooley stayed awake. He stared at the spot where only a thin slab of aluminium armour separated him from his prize. For a moment the hell that was the Zone could be forgotten, and he smiled, to fall asleep with a look of smug satisfaction on his face.

TWO

They were too late, by just a matter of seconds. The bridge was blown even as they came in sight of it.

At first, for a few tantalizing moments, it had seemed as if the charges had failed in their work. Revell had urged their driver on, but even as Burke had floored the pedal without consideration for the surge of fuel consumption by the straining motor, the long pre-cast concrete structure had twisted, sagged and fallen to ruin in the broad churning river far below.
There was no time for the luxury of self-recrimination. With dawn only an our away Revell knew they had to find a crossing, to find shelter beneath the protecting umbrella of the main forces anti-aircraft defences. This side of the river they had no chance. Once light they would be unable to move by road, and on foot it would only be a matter of time before they were mopped up by Warpac recon units.

Even as the last massive chunks of steel-reinforced debris were plunging beneath the turbid waters, Revell was turning the column in a fresh direction.

The heavy overcast was holding back the morning, but it was growing perceptibly brighter when they topped a hill overlooking the river once more.

‘It hasn’t been blown, yet.’ Scanning the lattice steel structure, Hyde first used binoculars and then an image intensifier.

‘So? It is still of no use to us.’ Andrea sat beside the sergeant on the edge of the roof hatch. She leaned an arm on the barrel of the TOW launch tube and rested her cheek against the cold wet metal. ‘That is not a bridge. It is a long slaughterhouse.’

Revell hardly heard her. Barely a kilometre away, the bridge might as well have been a hundred. Its full length and the approach roads were choked with an unmoving jam of military and civilian transport. Tanks, APCs and armoured cars were inextricably mixed with every nationality and type of soft-skin transport, and between every one of them were locked masses of refugee carts. There were even one or two civilian motor vehicles, doubtless their gas tanks holding the last few dregs of carefully hoarded and precious fuel. But nothing was moving.

As he watched, Revell saw a pair of Hind gunships sweep the length of the stalled traffic with cannon and rocket fire. They took no evasive action during the run, not even to the extent of releasing decoy flares against AA missiles. The degree of their complacency was illustrated by the second machine even displaying its navigation lights.

Fires leaped from a score of locations and added their jet smoke to those already rising into the predawn light. A ruptured fuel tank flared a brief bubble of flame and a bursting tire made a small fountain of blazing rubber.

A single broken line of tracer curled toward the second gunship. Well-aimed, it was shrugged aside by the armoured belly of the machine. Turning tightly, the pair swept back and saturated with a storm of fire and steel the location from which the weak resistance had come.

Only a few hundred feet above the Russian helicopters a single MIG fighter flew top cover for them, sometimes lost to sight in the low cloud.

A gasoline tanker stalled in the centre of the bridge exploded and liquid fire poured toward the river far below. Ammunition aboard trucks close by began to detonate and made sparkling fountains of white, red and green.

Spreading a map on the wet metal of the hull top, Revell screwed up his eyes in the half light to trace a path with a grimy finger. ‘We’ve fuel for maybe another thirty kilometres, if we go easy on it. We’ll have to drop the cripple and pack everyone into the other three.’

Hyde craned over the major’s shoulder to look at the point he was indicating. ‘A railway bridge. What are the chances of it still being intact?’

‘Wish I knew.’ Revell refolded the map. ‘But it’s the only one we have a chance of reaching.’

Stretching her arms above her head, Andrea watched without real interest as the Hinds soared to skim the bottom of the clouds and then dived to commence another strafing run. She turned away as the gunships tore into and pounded to scrap a dozen more vehicles. Fresh fires erupted. ‘We will be crossing the front of the Russian advance. It is likely we will run into their reconnaissance units.’

‘Maybe.’ There was nothing else Revell could add.

‘We’ll be travelling by side roads.’ It was Hyde who found a crumb of comfort.
'That country is rough; unless the Reds are trying to sneak around the side it’s not very likely we’ll encounter a main axis of their advance.'

‘Only one way to find out.’ Patting the anti-tank missile launch tube, Revell took a last glance at the bridge. ‘So let’s be on our way before those commie fliers get cheesed off with hammering wrecks and start looking for stragglers, like us.’

Bracing himself behind the major’s seat, Sergeant Hyde took out the map and examined the route the officer had chosen. In the dim light of the APCs interior, and with it swaying and jolting over the poor track roads, it took him a while to orient himself. He studied it for several minutes before an indistinct nagging doubt crystallised into coherent thought.

‘Doesn’t seem to have been a lot going on around here, not up until now.’ Revell almost let the point go as a chance remark, then had second thoughts and re-examined the area. He was surprised he hadn’t noticed the fact himself. It was further indication of just how tired he was.

While all of the remainder of the eighty square kilometres displayed by the map were covered in a mass of additional symbols, denoting old battlefields, dumps, contaminated areas and minefields, the area they were traversing was entirely free of such information.

‘Printing error?’ It hardly rang true, but Revell had to consider it, even as he dismissed it from his mind.

With a shake of his head Hyde discounted the idea. ‘I’ve never been this way before, but I’ve always had a feeling that it’s about where Paradise Valley should be.’

‘No such bloody place, Sarge.’ Driving gingerly to conserve fuel, Burke was for once able to take part in a conversation. His first in days, since the intercom had broken down. ‘That’s a bleeding fairy story, put about by staff officers and base barnacles, so we’ll live in hope and go on defending the bastards.’

With supreme delicacy and skill Burke nursed the GM V-6 over a rise without having to change down, and saved another spoonful of diesel. ‘Hell, Sarge, you don’t believe those stories do you? They’ve been going the rounds as long as the Zone has been in existence.’

‘Hey, can someone clue me in on this?’ Ripper stepped on toes as he hauled himself forward and into the exchange. ‘What the heck is Paradise Valley?’

‘It’s a fiction.’ Clarence gave up trying to sleep, and flexed his fingers around the long slim barrel of the sniper rifle propped between his knees. ‘Like Burke says, it’s a fairy story. But if you have to know, think of it as the Quartermaster’s version of the elephants’ graveyard. It’s supposed to be a fabulous dump where they keep all the goodies and essentials that are permanently in short supply. The rumour of its existence probably sprang into being after the first Warpac attack, when some poor devil on the NATO side ran out of what he needed most. You know, little things, like ammo, or morphine.’

‘Or fuel,’ Thorne butted in. ‘Or maybe transport, for a fast retreat. We seem to have been doing that since the evening of the first day.’

‘Holy shit.’ Ripper was all toothy enthusiasm. ‘I don’t give a damn if it’s rumour or fairy story. Hey, if it’s no more real than that, maybe we can still trade on it. My Daddy used to make money out of stills that weren’t real. He used to tell the revenue about them, always collecting cash money up front. Then when they hit the site and there weren’t anything there he used to swear they must just have moved on. By then he’d spent the reward so there weren’t nothing they could do.’

‘I’ve seen everything traded in the Zone, but never fairy stories.’ Thorne leaned back against the bare condensation-streaked metal of the hull, and by closing his eyes took himself out of the conversation.

‘There are plenty of refugees trapped in the Zone who’ve paid fortunes, for bogus maps of safe routes to the west, or handed over all they’ve got to so-called guides who dump their customers as soon as they’ve been paid. In advance of course.’ Clarence too had tired of what he saw as pointless speculation. Settling back, he sought what comfort he
could in the vehicle’s hard shell, festooned as it was with sharp angles, projecting brackets and hanging equipment.

He flinched and his eyes flickered open as another body slumped against his. He relaxed his instantly tensed muscles when he saw that it was Andrea. With her alone he could bear any form of physical contact. Even that, by insinuating a pack between them, he kept to a minimum. Still he could not repress an involuntary shudder as the warmth of her breath on his shoulder permeated his layers of clothing.

Ripper was not so easily to be put down, and after a short pause made another attempt to draw one of the crew, anyone who could profess to some knowledge on the subject in which he’d taken such interest. ‘Well, if we do come across it we’d be sure to be able to take on extra gas, or maybe even swap these ancient wrecks for better transport.’ He looked around hopefully.

‘It’s a dream; forget it.’ As Revell hoisted himself into the command cupola he caught a glimpse of Andrea, where she snuggled against their sniper. Much as he loathed the sight of her with anybody else, it took an effort for him to pull his eyes away.

Through the mud-smeared thick prisms he viewed the road ahead. It twisted and turned constantly, sometimes flanked by shallow banks but fairly level, but then suddenly climbing with a broken rock wall to one side and a precipitous drop to the other. They passed through a tiny village, just fifteen half-timbered houses, a tiny combined store and gas station and a tall spired church. It had been looted and abandoned long ago. Except for fading paint on doors and shutters there was no colour about the scene, with even the defoliated trees adding to the impression that he was looking at a black-and-white photograph. The same drenching of chemicals that had killed shrubs and trees had also inhibited the growth of weeds that would otherwise have enveloped the road and paths, but though that facet of dereliction was missing, the drifts of dirt and other wind-blown debris more than compensated.

They slowed to negotiate a tangle of branches from an old elm that some storm had thrown down to partially block the road. The brittle timber snapped in a shower of water droplets, and then they were clear and picking up speed again when a hail of twenty-millimetre cannon fire lashed at the APC.

The tracer-towing high-velocity rounds smacked hard against and into the mass of spare track links, sandbags and scrap metal that crudely reinforced the front plates. They ricocheted wildly, leaving scraps of their phosphorous bases to smoulder among the shattered remnants.

Burke threw the APC into a skid turn to take them off the road and out of the line of fire, but the tracks only scrabbled at the loose shale of the bank. As he hurled the machine into reverse for a second attempt, another burst of armour-piercing and incendiary shells lashed out.

There was an ear-punishing crash as a round found a gap among the remains of the protective litter on the hull, penetrated the splashboard and almost punched its way through the hull. A semi-molten scab of aluminium flashed the length of the crew compartment to smash a first-aid box beside the rear ramp.

‘Make smoke.’ Revell wrenched at the door-control lever. ‘Out, out, out.’

As Burke scrambled from the driver’s position a third and longer burst of enemy fire put a round clean through the smoke-wreathed armour, smashing the instrument panel and shattering against a control stick. Flames licked from destroyed wiring and the padding of the seat covering.

Jamming in the half-lowered position, the ramp tore weapons and equipment from the crew’s grasp as they bailed out fast, with the fire already taking hold behind them.

THREE

Slewed at an angle across the narrow road, the boxlike bulk of the old APC gave the squad cover as they scattered among the flanking trees.

As he bailed out, Sergeant Hyde caught a glimpse of a four-wheeled Warpac armoured car barely fifty meters away,
parked close against the bank at a bend in the road. Stabs of flame from the snout of its cannon marked another score of shells unleashed against the now abandoned M113.

Masked by the wreck, the driver of the second vehicle in their little convoy wrenched his machine into reverse and brought it into clanging collision with the last in the file. Track links snapped and both slewed to a stop with their drives broken.

Hyde’s swearing made him overlook the fact that the Russian gunners’ preoccupation with the hulks of their armour had given the company time to scatter into cover. But it was only a momentary lapse. Those few precious fractions of time wasted by the enemy when he failed to switch his fire to the fleeing crews were quickly made up for when a torrent of co-axial heavy machine-gun fire was hosed into the woods.

There was a brief pause as a belt or magazine was changed, and then the rapid-firing weapon probed again among the trunks for human targets. But already the best chance had been missed. Only three of the grenade dischargers on the lead APC had been fired but now they added their swirling clouds to the output of the fiercer blaze inside the APC.

The steadily falling rain prevented the smoke from rising and caused it to swirl in confusing wisps into the woods. Hardly diminished by the downpour, it wreathed the intervening ground in a fitful screen.

Again the air was full of metal from the high-velocity Russian cannon as tungsten-tipped shells smacked great scabs of bark from the trees. Where some lodged, their incendiary content added to the artificial fog.

In nervously erratic ripples the streams of bullets stitched across the timber, betraying the gunner’s lack of fire discipline, as he fired blindly, expending ammunition at a prodigious rate.

From inside the flame- and smoke-generating APC came the crackle of small-arms ammunition cooking-off. At the noise, the enemy turret-gunner reverted his attention back to the wreck.

‘This is our chance.’ Having failed to find the major, Hyde grabbed Dooley, and then kicked out at Thorne to get his attention also.

Thorne gave up his elbow-armed conflict with Scully to get equal shares of the cover of a slim tree barely adequate for one, and joined the NCO behind an insubstantial holly bush. ‘I’ll strangle the shitty flier who sprayed this lot with crap and stopped them growing to a useful width. If I live to get the chance to look for him.’

‘If we don’t do something about that scout car you won’t.’ Hyde hugged the ground as a random burst scythed through the shrub and showered them with fragments of dead leaves and wood. ‘The fucker’s ammo won’t last much longer at this rate, but I’m not prepared to sit on my arse in the hope I’ll still be in one piece when he runs out.’

They ran crouched low, ignoring the cuts and scratches inflicted by low branches and thorns as they made a wide detour around the ambush site.

They threw themselves down as another wild burst slashed slivers of bark from standing timber only inches overhead.

‘What the fuck is that thing doing here?’ Almost dropping his M16, Thorne hitched the three-pack of rocket-launchers more firmly onto his back after a series of jarring collisions with low-hanging branches and the tearing effect of the several dense thickets they had passed through.

‘It’s a fucking scout car. What would it be doing? It’s fucking scouting, that’s what.’ Carefully moving aside a tangle of undergrowth, Dooley still succeeded in drenching himself with the mass of droplets of water it discharged.

The trio’s circuitous route had brought them to a point level with, and slightly above, the Russian armoured car. Inchng forward farther, into the heart of a long-dead briar patch, they made their preparations.

‘There’s a Hummer behind it.’ Whispering, although there was no chance of their being heard at fifty meters
distance, and above the rattle of automatic fire now returned at the four-wheeler, Thorne pointed to the much-holed vehicle close by the scout car.

Along its doors and side panels showed the close-stitched holes of a burst of machine-gun fire, each dark centre surrounded by the bare metal ring where impact had smacked away the paint. Against the starred windscreen lolled the head of its driver, his face barred with blood that streaked the shattered glass.

Reaching across, Hyde helped Thorne slip the heavy pack from his shoulders, and taking one launch tube for himself, withdrew a second for Dooley. His actions being mirrored, the sergeant extended the firing tube, not bothering to raise the sights at so short a range.

‘Why are the fuckers hanging about?’ Shouldering the rocket-launcher, Dooley instinctively waited for the sergeant’s fire order. ‘Those little shits haven’t got any armour, so why’s he hanging about when he got lucky and kicked our wheels from under us?’ The four-wheeler filled his field of vision, and his finger took up the slack on the trigger. ‘It don’t make any sense, those recce wagons of theirs usually avoid a scrap.’

‘Who cares…?’ Hyde took a moment longer over his aim, and then whipped his launcher sideways to clout Dooley’s downward and prevent his firing. ‘There’s one of our blokes down there.’

For the first time Thorne noticed two men huddled against the embankment for its protection from the incoming small-arms fire skimming past the Warpac armoured car.

One of them wore the distinctive latest pattern NATO camouflage jacket and helmet. An obviously Russian officer had him covered with a pistol.

Pinned there by the fire from the woods about the disabled armoured personnel carriers, they could neither board nor scramble to the comparative safety of the trees.

The scout car began slowly to reverse, turning slightly to offer the Russian and his captive the protection of its flank, and set low in that side was a small hatch that swung open.

As the scout car began to move, the fire aimed at it increased dramatically. Hyde knew he could do nothing as the captive was propelled toward the opening. Everything told him he should fire, let the NATO man take his chances, but still he held back, willing the man to make a break for it, do something.

The intensity of small-arms fire from the woods was such that external fittings on the scout car were being broken and wrenched away as streams of tracer swept back and forth across the angled steel plates.

A burst aimed low ploughed sparks and fountains of mud from the road, ricochets passed under the belly of the vehicle and both men staggered as they were struck.

Slumping against the armour close to the hatch, eyes closed and teeth clenched against the agony of his smashed ankle, the NATO soldier did not resist when strong hands reached out and roughly hauled him inside.

The officer was not so lucky. Falling to the ground with both legs broken, he was hit again, in the face. Blood, teeth and tissue spurted from his mouth. He twisted around to make a desperate lunge for the closing door. Fingers locked on the edge of the opening, he was dragged as the scout car began to reverse. Twice the door was cracked hard against his hand, but his grip held. The third time it was opened fully and then slammed viciously. Fingers severed, the officer sprawled and had no chance to avoid the deep-treaded wheel that passed over his stomach. A last writhing contortion and he was finally still.

‘Do I fire?’ Dooley had re-shouldered the launch tube and was tracking the retreating target. ‘Do I bloody fire?’

For a moment the scout was stalled as it became entangled with the Hummer. Watching, with his mind locked almost into a trance, Hyde couldn’t give the order. He could picture the frightening scene inside the vehicle: the dim red light, blurred by swirling fumes and smoke that carried the sour stench of cordite, the non-stop hail of bullets striking the armour blending with the thunder and rattle of the cannon and co-axial machine gun.
And there’d be blood everywhere, some from the crew where they’d been cut by flying scabs of metal punched from the hull where tungsten-tipped rounds had almost penetrated, and much more from the injured man on the floor.

That’s just what it had been like when Hyde had lost his face to the furnace heat generated by a Soviet antitank round. A hollow-charge shell had struck the APC square in the side and jetted a plasma stream of molten metal and explosive across the crew compartment. Their East German prisoner, laid bound on the floor, had instantly become a demented, screaming blazing torch.

‘A couple of seconds and it’ll be gone ...’ Getting no response from Hyde, Dooley took aim. ‘Fuck it, I’m bloody firing.’ He bellowed his rage as the missile clipped a sapling, veered from course and pancaked onto the ground far short of its target.

Broken open by the impact, the solid fuel spilled and burned to form an instant smokescreen that masked the target, and when it cleared, it was gone. Seconds later the warhead self-destructed and sent a plume of steam and woodland debris above the treetops.

The three men exchanged no words as they trudged to rejoin the others, now emerging from cover.

Following a few paces behind, Hyde looked at his hands. They were shaking. He realized that deep within himself the months of combat were finally taking their toll. Circumstances, and his own stubborn refusal to see it, had driven him to and beyond his limit.

Passing the Hummer, Hyde checked the driver. Sometime during the brief action he had died. Alone, uncomfomted, ignored in the skirmish going on about him, he had succumbed to the massive head wound that had blown a chunk from the front of his skull. Pulverized brain matter still dripped into his lap. Most likely he had known little about it after that single smashing blow. He had probably even been beyond pain. It had been a mercy, of sorts.

‘We lost Solly, Ferris and Lang. They caught a burst trying to get out over the top. Same as ours, the door jammed.’ Preoccupied with a dozen thoughts, Revell didn’t register the British sergeant’s detachment from the scene. ‘Apart from that just a few scratches.’ He took off his helmet and, in wiping sweat away, added more dirt.

The light rain was doing little to disperse the blood from the three corpses huddled by the interlocked APCs. Except in one place, where it mingled with a large puddle that was gradually reddening.

‘They’re both fucked, Major.’ Burke reported his examination of the collision- damaged transports.

It took that to snap Hyde back to reality. ‘Do you fancy being just a trifle more precise? Or would you like to be carrying the fifty-calibre for the rest of this trip?’

‘Reporting, sir. Command carrier burned to a crisp, number two carrier has broken back, three links damaged, and jammed transmission. Number three has jammed transmission, commander’s cupola ripped away ... Oh yes, and the electrics have been buggered by a bit of shit a penetrating shell sent flying about inside. They’re both workshop jobs.’

Ignoring his sergeant’s glare, Burke looked back at the APCs. Fuck it, he was a combat driver, not a bloody infantryman. And all this bloody hassle caused by one sodding little stray Warpac scout car. He spat in annoyance.

‘What’s up, boy?’ Ripper displayed his mass of little green teeth in a broad grin.

‘You reckon you’re too ancient to learn how to use your feet again?’

‘Salvage what you can, Sergeant. Ammunition and ration packs to take priority.’ Revell walked across to the Hummer. Something about it had been bothering him. He walked around it twice. Somehow it jarred, but he couldn’t figure why.

‘It is new.’

Revell started; it was as though Andrea had read his mind yet again. That was the thought he’d been forming. A glancing re-examination confirmed it.
Beneath a superficial coating of mud the Hummer was factory fresh; it didn’t even have any unit or other markings.

‘How long is it since we saw any new NATO transport in this sector of the Zone?’ Stepping back, Revell took in the perfect paint work, new tires and complete complement of shovels, axes and gas cans.

‘I cannot recall.’ Andrea looked to the blazing APC and the collision-damaged pair of M113’s beyond it. ‘I thought that all replacement equipment was issued to headquarters staff and their like, for the vital movement of filing clerks and senior officers.’

‘You’re all sick. You know that, don’t you?’ Pushing between the officer and Andrea, Sampson felt the driver’s neck for a pulse. At the first brush of his fingers the cooling of the man’s flesh told him there was no point. He wiped blood from his fingers, dragging them down the side of his jacket to rid them of the last adhering clots. ‘Half of West Germany is a blitzed and contaminated wasteland and all you’ve got to complain about is who’s getting the new sets of wheels.’

There was a loud shout and the three of them saw Dooley plunging into the billowing smoke shrouding the fiercely blazing APC.

He staggered out of the pall seconds later, clutching a bulging, smoke-stained kit-bag. There were two ragged-edged holes in the tight-stretched drab material. When Dooley pulled it aside, in contrast to the earlier noisy excitement there was just a single plaintive ‘cheep.’

The bright-coloured birds clung forlornly to their perches. A beak, a foot and a scatter of yellow and green feathers marked the only mortal remains of the Russian gunners’ unwitting target. The victims’ abrupt demise had for the moment at least tamed the excitability of the surviving birds.

Satisfied the loss was no worse, Dooley recovered the cage and slung it over his shoulder. ‘Well, what are we waiting for then?’ He ducked as a large chunk of red-hot metal flew overhead, propelled from an explosion on the side of the APCs hull.

‘That’ll be my flame tanks.’ Struggling with the straps, Thome attempted to shift a bulky pack to a more comfortable position. He didn’t bother to turn and look. ‘There’s always a spot of residue left in them.’

Sergeant Hyde detailed men for the point and rearguard. Ammunition aboard the burning M113 was beginning to cook-off, making almost too much noise for him to make himself understood. He was relieved when the major signalled for them to move out.

Of the many dozens of actions he’d been in, it was the first occasion in which Hyde could recall having been bothered by the sounds of battle. He noted it as perhaps a further indication that his nerve was cracking.

As they filed past the flattened corpse of the Soviet officer, few of them gave it as much as a cursory glance. Only one man deliberately averted his eyes.

‘Now don’t you go on letting things like that upset you, boy.’ Ripper gave the man a hearty slap on the shoulder. ‘It’s gonna come to all of us. And besides, he wouldn’t have wanted to live no more. Not with his pecker flattened and the end shot off his tongue. His sex life wouldn’t have been worth a pinch of chicken shit.’

Boris made no reply. It was not the sight of a body that he avoided. He had seen more than most, and having suffered fates far more horrific than this lone example. What bothered him was that as a Russian deserter who had for more than a year been fighting on the NATO side, he was becoming less and less able to look upon the death of his fellow countrymen.

It had not always been like that. When he had first gone over he had exulted at every Warpac death he had witnessed. During his time in the Red Army, many men had attempted desertion from his unit. Most had been dragged back and brutally executed in front of their comrades as an example. And now, as he gradually learned more of the methods by which the communists were keeping their forces together in the field, the sight of the remains of an ordinary Russian soldier filled him with sadness.
In the Soviet army the penalty for failure, even if through no conceivable fault of his own, did not result only in a man's death at the hands of the sadists in the Commandants Service, the field police; it usually meant a similar sentence on some or even all of his family. It was to that they had sunk, to the methods of Stalin’s time, and worse.

The junior officer whose blood he had walked through had been a victim of that system. His crew had jettisoned him to avoid putting their mission at risk. The system was run by fear.

For Boris it held a special terror. He had deserted during the confusion of a heavy air raid. If for an instant his disappearance was suspected of being anything other than total obliteration beneath a falling bomb, then already his family would have suffered.

As he trudged with the others through the rain, sometimes beneath the scant shelter of the dripping trees, he felt as though he no longer cared whether he lived or died. All that was important was that he did not fall alive into the hands of the KGB, or their military equivalent, the GRU.

'I wonder who the poor sod was that they carted off.' Burke didn’t address the question to anyone in particular, but his gruff voice carried to others in the file. ‘They must have wanted him bad to take risks like they did. If we’d had any TOW rounds left or been keeping company with an Abrams they’d have been deep in the shit.’

'I made a note of the driver’s ID.' Sampson wiped water from his face. ‘He was with some piddling little supply company, Dutch I think. Whoever the guy was who was with him he couldn’t have been that important.’

‘Perhaps.’ Clarence didn’t raise his voice, but with its precise clipped tones it carried. ‘Perhaps the Reds have heard the stories and they’re looking for Paradise Valley.’

‘Quiet back there.’ They had a long way to go, and Revell wanted to put an early stop to speculation like that. With Russian reconnaissance patrols already probing the area they could not afford to waste time on a wild-goose chase in search of some mythical end-of-the-rainbow-type supply dump.

He was about to order an increase in pace, to take their minds off the speculation, but against the continuous and virtually ignored thunder of artillery came the much louder, and closer, throbbing of a Soviet gunship. Their step quickened automatically.

FOUR

They were lost. Time after time Revell and Hyde had conferred at crossroads as to the right or best direction. Almost as often, within a kilometre their chosen route had veered to the wrong heading. In the rugged mountainous terrain they would have been slowed to a crawl if they had struck across country, and so their compasses were virtually useless. The instruments served for little more than to act as general indicators that now and again they were heading in the desired direction.

Their only map was no better. Many of the roads were not marked and in any event all signposts had been removed long ago. It was an action planned to confuse the enemy, but as now it often had the reverse effect. Also against them was the fact that even before the war this had been a sparsely populated area of West Germany. The few scattered houses and farms they glimpsed were all abandoned and anonymous.

A first halt had been called after a couple of hours, while officer and NCO scaled a wooded ridge in the hope of identifying some landmark. They tried hard to conceal their frustration when they returned exhausted after the fruitless effort.

‘At this pace it’s going to take a bloody week to get back to our lines.’ Scully felt no benefit from the forty-minute rest when they restarted. The straps of his pack and his rifle sling bit into his shoulders. Their weight felt doubled by the water that lay on them and dripped from every crease of his combat clothing. Save where a tear was letting in an occasional icy stream he was still dry, but the wind was cold and beginning to burrow its way through to him.

‘Keep it moving.’ Revell looked back from the head of the main group and noticed a perceptible slackening of pace.
‘We must keep them moving, Sergeant, keep them on their toes. Another hour and then we’ll fall out, look for somewhere sheltered where we can light a fire and prepare something hot. That’s if we don’t have any more Hinds buzzing around us then.’

‘I think we’ll have to take that risk anyway. Put a hot meal and a drink inside them and this lot will work wonders. Another stop under the trees with just a sip of cold water and a nibble at an oatmeal block and we’re going to have a hell of a job getting them on their feet again.’

Revell had to agree. ‘Pass the word that’s what we’re going to do. In return I want to up the pace.’

‘Major, Major!’ PFC Garrett came sprinting back from the point, shouting at the top of his voice.

Hyde’s snarled warning got the young soldier to lower the volume but did nothing to abate his excitement. His words came tumbling out in a breathless rush that had nothing to do with his exertion.

‘Dooley’s seen something, Major. We’ve all seen it. It’s incredible. You got to come and see.’

There was little to be got out of the eighteen-year-old while he was so worked up. Revell had seen him in the same state before, when he was on the substitutes’ bench at an inter-unit football game. A rush of emotion rendered him almost inarticulate and completely incomprehensible, and it would be simpler to follow him than attempt an interrogation.

Taking Hyde with him, Revell moved cautiously to the apex of the sharp bend that had taken the point out of sight. Dooley and another man stood in the middle of the road, holding their rifles casually, just staring ahead.

‘What’s all the bloody fuss?’ Hyde punched Dooley on the shoulder, raising a miniature cloud of spray.

‘It’s all green. Can’t you see it, everything’s green.’

And it was. Ahead the road lay dead straight for several hundred meters. Trees made a canopy over its entire length and the weak light of an overcast day filtered down in a soft green light through the mass of fresh spring leaves that sprouted from each branch and twig.

Tired though he knew he was, Revell realized that his eyes were not mistaken. That gentle verdant light was the same as the others were seeing. And there was grass and other low plants growing at the roadside, making gentle avenues of soft waving colour where they flourished between the moss-covered trunks.

But that wasn’t all. Among the lush undergrowth were patches of yellow and, less obvious, swaths of delicate blue. Flowers, primroses and bluebells. And there were others, tiny delicate blooms that had no right to be there.

‘There’s no flowers in the Zone.’ Dooley gawped in total disbelief. ‘I thought I’d seen everything in this fucking oversized no-man’s land, but I didn’t think I’d ever see flowers. It’s, shit, it’s beautiful.’

They walked slowly forward along the gently climbing avenue, surrounded on all sides by the luxuriant carpet and canopy of fresh foliage. The rest of the company followed, all vigilance forgotten as they took in what they saw. Even Andrea, the hardest of them all, appeared unable to fully comprehend the sight that met them as they walked forward.

Retrieving the bird cage from the man he’d left it with, at a price, Dooley pulled down the canvas and lifted the miniature aviary high to swing it about. ‘Come on, you lot, this’ll cheer you up. It’s just like home.’

Revived by the clean, natural scent of the woods, the birds began a chorus that within seconds had an answer. A lone thrush warbled a reply, and Dooley shook the cage to stimulate his choir to greater effort, but it had the reverse effect.

Below the overhanging trees they had a respite from the rain, the overhead cover reducing it to a fine mist. Not a single plant, stem or leaf had the tell-tale blotches of unhealthy colour that would have betrayed the use of chemical weapons in the vicinity. Even the litter from the previous fall smelled wholesome and invigorating. The combined scents saturated their every breath and with revived memories washed away death and suffering and battle.
As Hyde deliberately slothered through the moulding debris, he noticed tire tracks, and called the major’s attention to them. ‘Only the one set, fairly fresh.’ Kneeling, he spanned his hand across them to gauge the width. ‘Not a Russian pattern, and certainly not wide enough for that Warpac scout car. I should think it’s likely they belong to that Hummer.’

Nodding, Revell decided not to mention that he’d recognized the track pattern. Inhaling deeply, he enjoyed lungfuls of the untainted air. Since long before, he’d thought he’d lost his sense of smell, in all but the most extreme of conditions. But now it seemed as if the months of breathing chemicals and the stench of partly consumed explosives and super-napalm had only been serving to prepare him for this experience.

Still audible, the echo of the Russian barrage reminded some of them of the danger of completely dropping their guard. Nearly all of them had seen friends killed in an unwary moment.

Gradually though, as they walked silently forward, experience reasserted itself through their awe, though they could savour what they saw. Ahead of them, a blackbird scavenged among the dead leaves, flicking them aside as it searched for insects. It held out until the last moment before flying off ahead of them.

‘Everything I know tells me this place just shouldn’t be here.’ Try as he could, Revell could see no evidence at all that this oasis of life and colour had ever received any dose of the poisons that drenched every other part of this great swath of German territory.

‘It’s like finding the Garden of Eden in the middle of the Utah salt flats.’ Garrett picked a flower and finally succeeded in entwining it among the sparse dead foliage adorning the netting on his helmet.

‘More like the eye of a storm.’ Sampson shrugged his sixty-pound pack of medical supplies higher, but otherwise his gangling frame showed no discomfort under the crushing load. ‘Listen, man, the Zone is a killing ground that’s been well turned over. The Reds push us, we dig in, then we push them and they dig in. The next time we just push and dig in different places. Result, everything gets turned over, blown up, killed off. Only we found a slice of real estate that they’ve all missed. You got one guess where all hell is going to break loose next.’

Garrett looked at the radiation counter on his belt. It registered little more than background, as if it too was reluctant to admit what they’d found. His chemical-level indicator was reading an unflickering zero. He double-checked with Thome’s meter before he could bring himself to believe it.

‘They wouldn’t do anything to mess up this place, would they? Hell, they just couldn’t, could they?’

It was as if being among the fresh greenery had revitalized them. Even Andrea caught something of the mood. She accepted a flower that Dooley half jokingly offered. To his ill-concealed surprise she picked another to go with it and threaded both through the pin of a phosphorus grenade at her belt.

Their luck changed also. They struck a road that with only minor and brief deviations kept them headed in the right direction. And it was just as well. The country through which they passed now became more rugged with each kilometre. Frequently the road was flanked by the precipitous walls of a gorge of steeply rising hillsides that were plentifully littered with outcrops of rock and scree slopes.

They emerged from a belt of dense woodland into a patch of open meadow and the sudden silence, without the patter of rain on leaves, was strange.

Before crossing, Revell made a careful sweep through his binoculars. The road was dead straight for a half kilometre, and almost level. Where there was a slight dip a shallow flood was creeping over the asphalt. On the far side of the open ground the way plunged between near-vertical slopes lightly grown with stunted firs.

‘Shit, what was that!’ Burke jumped and several rifles were levelled at a patch of tall grass. ‘Bloody hell, it’s pigs.’

A small herd of wild boar broke from cover and plunged into the concealment of the trees.

‘There goes breakfast.’ Fast as his reaction had been, Sergeant Hyde saw only a glimpse of the rump of the last animal to disappear.
'Not to mention bacon butties for lunch and pork chops for dinner.' Reluctantly, Burke lowered his M16 and set it to safe.

'Would have gone a treat with these veggies.' Scully slapped the plastic of the bulging bag slung over his shoulder.

'You are mad dragging those along.' Sampson had taken advantage of the halt to seat himself on a rotting stump. 'When you ever gon’ to get the time to cook them?'

'You’ll see. Anyway, why are you dragging about enough medicine and bandages for a battalion?'

'He sells them, I’ ve ...' Ripper stopped abruptly as he saw the anger in the black’s face.

'You shut your mouth.' Effortlessly, despite his load, Sampson got to his feet and advanced a step toward Ripper. 'And you keep it shut when you don’t know what it is you’re talking about.' With a last glare he turned and resumed his seat. 'I was only saying that’s what I heard.' ‘Well, you heard wrong, so forget it, okay?'

'Yeah, fine.' Moving away, Ripper passed their sergeant. 'Shit, that must have been a real sore corn I stood on then. But if he’s not putting them out in the black market, why bother carting them around?’

'He gives them away.’ Hyde noticed the PFC’s look of blank incomprehension.

'To refugees who need them. I’ve seen him stay up two nights in a row when we’ve been camped near one of their settlements. And he doesn’t just do basics either; he’ll tackle surgery, even an amputation on a couple of occasions.’

Altering the focus a fraction, Revell again turned his attention to where the road left the far side of the open ground. There was something there, but he couldn’t quite make it out... small white objects, of no uniform size or shape. Just scattered at random...

'We’ll cross in extended file.' Revell returned the glasses to their case. ‘I want thirty meters between each man.’

‘Any reason to expect trouble, major?’ Hyde checked that he had a full clip, and unfastened a pouch that held two more.

‘Not that’s obvious. Let’s go.’

FIVE

The leading man was halfway across and the last of them leaving the cover of the trees when they heard a vehicle coming up from behind. It was motoring fast and there was only just time for them to throw themselves down in the wet grass beside the road.

Every weapon was aimed toward the gap in the trees, as the harsh note of a diesel engine being pushed to its limit came to them. Rounds were chambered, grenades clenched, and then in rapid sequence each of them held their fire as a Mercedes Estate flashed past at high speed. The station wagon’s camouflage paint was topped by a chromed roof rack.

Only Garrett snapped off a single shot, that missed, before he recognized the Mercedes.

‘Crazy shits.’ Scully jumped up and shied a stone at its rear window. It missed and bounced sadly along in the mist of spray to roll apologetically back to the fields. ‘I hope you fucking ..’

Flame and smoke erupted beneath the rear of the Merc. Its sheer speed, so much faster than the target for which the anti-tank mine had been intended, almost defeated the device. Almost but not quite.

The powerful blast lifted the back of the Estate, rupturing and igniting its fuel tank. The flaming wreck turned a complete somersault to crash back down on its side. Echoes of its pounding impact rolled through the meadow.
‘Don’t move. Don’t anyone fucking move.’ Hyde’s drill-sergeant bellow checked Sampson as he stood to go forward.

A figure crawled from the wreckage. Hoops of flame rippled its length, then turned it to a pillar of flame as it lurched to its feet. It reeled forward a half pace, staggered sideways, and then there was a second, smaller explosion. The effect was no less horrific. A limb spun through the air, and the debris cloud of the anti-personnel mine detonation cleared to reveal the smouldering hulk of what had been a human being.

‘Where the hell is the bus?’ Using extreme caution, Burke retraced his footsteps to the road, as the company moved forward using the faintly visible wheel marks as safe paths.

When they came to the partially flooded section, those who walked in the nearside track had the nerve-wracking experience for several meters of being unsure whether or not they were still precisely on course.

Garrett stood retching for a minute after safely regaining the barely visible trail beyond the ankle-deep water. ‘Fuck the bus. I’m just thankful that old bastard Klingenberg showed us we were in a mine field.’

‘Yeah, it was very kind of him.’ Dooley was having to sweat more than the others as his large feet with each step came dangerously close to overlapping the safe lane. ‘I’ll tell you something, though. I don’t think the old guy meant to do it.’

Revell paused a moment to wipe water from his eyes. As he did his fingers brushed the edge of the camouflage cloth covering his helmet, and the part of the brim that felt brittle, and broke into dark flakes at his touch. It was a reminder of how close a twenty-millimetre cannon shell had come to scattering his brains. The cloth still held the pungent tang from its brush with the tracer base of the shell.

‘If I was feeling charitable I’d say that Klingenberg got separated by accident from his wagon-load of civvies.’ While he was speaking Revell did not for an instant take his eyes from the narrow path he followed. ‘But having had to deal with that old louse a few times, I’d say it’s much more likely he ran out on them.’

Speculation on the fate of the civilians, though, Revell knew to be pointless. What mattered now, all that mattered now, was getting the survivors of his company back to the new NATO defence line. Wherever that might be. But still he could regard it as some small mark in his favour, a sign that there remained a spark of humanity within him, that he could feel a fleeting moment of sadness at what might be the fate of those civilians.

Death, fast and painless if they were hicky. If they were not, then months of gradual starvation, disease and lingering death in a squalid refugee camp. And there were a thousand gradations of suffering and degradation between those two unsought options.

‘So that’s what they were!’ Almost saying it to himself, Revell filed one more snippet of knowledge of the Zone into his mental survival kit. The white objects that had puzzled him were bones. Not with the readily recognizable outline of human shape, but the scavenger-scattered remains of several boar. The automatic killing devices that had slaughtered those lumbering wild hogs had not been triggered again by the foxes, rats and carriion feeders that had alighted on the feast.

‘A little more speed and he might have got away with it.’ Thorne had reached the edge of the shallow crater that marked the end of the tire tracks.

‘I don’t think so.’ Clarence pointed to a dull-coloured tube supported on tripod legs.

The blast from the explosion had blown camouflage from it and now the off-road mine stood fully revealed.

Scanning the slopes on either side of the road, Revell identified ten more of the sophisticated self-activating weapons, and as many claymore mines. Several trip-wires criss-crossed the road and laced the trees on the lower slopes. Immediately beyond the crater, at random intervals, slim antennae marked the position of more buried mines. They waited only for the brush of a tank’s belly plates passing overhead to unleash their huge charges and the semi-molten slugs of super-hard steel into the weakly defended underside of the fifty-ton machines. Igniting ammunition and fuel, they worked with devastating effect.
‘Get Carrington up here.’ For Revell it had not been a difficult selection to make. No other among them knew as much about mines, but Carrington had another, special talent. He appeared not to have a nerve in his body. Revell had seen others spring the most diabolical stunts on him, in an effort to make him jump, or lose his temper, or show some reaction, but they’d always failed. Even a thunder flash under his bunk had failed to elicit much of a response. According to Dooley, who’d been present, if not the actual instigator, Carrington had opened his eyes, watched the thick smoke drift to the ceiling, then turned over and gone back to sleep.

‘Problem, Major?’ With the tip of the barrel of his Colt Commando, Carrington scratched his tangled black beard.

‘You might say that. We need to get past this lot, fast.’ Borrowing the binoculars, Carrington examined the various evidence of the extensive minefield. ‘Very amateur. What we are faced with here is a massive overkill situation. That makes it harder. A regular minefield would be more logical and so predictable, give or take the odd new wrinkle some genius manages to introduce.’

‘So?’ Revell didn’t find it easy to cope with Carrington’s laid-back manner. ‘I said we want to keep moving.’

‘Quickest way would be to lay down a firestorm. But that depends on how much ammo we’ve got to waste, and even then there’s always something that gets missed. Or maybe aimed fire. Clarence could take out everything we could see with single shots, but it’d take longer.’

There was sense in both suggestions, but Revell was forced to take into account another factor. He shook his head.

‘It’s tempting, but the way that scout car was operating we’ve got to reckon the Reds are interested in coming this way. We can’t take out what might be the only decent roadblock likely to slow them.’

Lips pursed in thought, Carrington again examined the road, and the nature of the ground around it. ‘There’s another option. That Merc bounced a good way. I’d say there is a fair chance that we’d be all right as far as that. Just past it there’s about the only section I’ve seen that we’ve got a chance of scrambling up without resorting to rock-climbing techniques.’

‘That still leaves us in the middle of a minefield.’

‘Maybe not, Major. From the way it’s laid I’d say this load of nastiness was emplaced in a hell of a hurry. If I’m right, then they wouldn’t have had time to do the mountain goat bit and do the higher slopes. Once that climbable section is cleared we can scoot around the rest. That’s the best I can offer.’

‘What do you need?’ There was no decision to make. They had no choice.

That was underlined by a stray shell from the barrage constantly passing high overhead. Tumbling far off course, it plummeted down among the trees of a distant hillside. A mushroom of grey-streaked black smoke soared above the treetops. The reverberation carried clearly and its echo took seconds to die away.

‘Just someone to follow and improve the route markings I make, as we haven’t any tape.’

‘Take Taylor. And as we haven’t got tape, get a few rolls of bandage off Sampson, to mark the worst places.’

Glad to be lightened of his pack for a while, Taylor otherwise showed no emotion; not so Sampson. It took an order from Revell to get him to surrender four large rolls of cellophane-wrapped bandage.

As the medic handed them over he scowled at Taylor. ‘You get yourself blown up, you’re going to be sorry you laid these in the dirt.’

Scanning every inch of ground before taking a step, the pair started off. Through the crater and its litter, past a scorched door torn from the Estate, they edged forward. A slim silver pen lay among sodden scraps of paper. Carrington ignored it and knew his follower would do likewise.

Both had seen too many men killed or maimed in the course of mindless or even pointless looting. In the Zone the art of mine warfare and booby-trapping had reached new heights of ingenuity and calculated frightfulness. But never
before had either of them seen such lavish use of the weapons. Well-sited and concealed, a dozen assorted mines spread out over a half kilometre of road could stall an armoured column for hours, unless they were determined to press on regardless of the casualties. Here at a glance they could identify three times that number.

They were nearing the Mercedes. Waves of fierce heat and smoke swept over them with an eddy of wind trapped between the hills. They froze as the acrid cloud bit into their eyes and blinded them, not moving on until they had blinked them clear of tears.

Several of the automatic anti-tank launchers stared from among the lower heaps of boulders and from among sparse clumps of firs. Carrington knew that the little logic boxes bolted to each tube would be registering their progress, electronically gauging what they were by shape, size, infra-red signature or any one of a whole host of methods. Right this instant they would be crossing at least one beam, maybe sonic or laser. Or perhaps the careful impact of their steps was being compared with the memory bank of a seismically activated mine.

The anti-tank mines would not be interested in them, but buried at the roadside or lodged on a rock shelf there might be a shotgun mine silently ticking off their progress. Many now were set to detonate only when several bodies had passed, calculated to knock out patrol commanders, who rarely took the point and could be caught farther down the line. Well, there was nothing he could do about them. That was down to luck.

That word played a big part in the so-called science of mine clearance, but Carrington had never had any time for it. He was a fatalist. He didn’t court death, even took what steps he could to avoid it, but he saw no point in worrying at every turn, every time a shell passed by so close he felt the draft of its passage, or when a grenade fragment rapped hard against his helmet or flak jacket. No, when it was his turn it would happen, and until the instant it happened he could savour every pain-free breath he took.

Through the roar of the flames Carrington thought he heard another sound, but couldn’t place it. As he took another step it came again, but once more just too indistinct to label.

He unslung his weapon and looked around. There was nothing. Just the rocks and trees and the blazing auto. The slopes held nothing he hadn’t observed previously. Those mines in sight were exactly as he’d noted them only thirty seconds before.

There were the pair of launchers by the big rock with the prominent quartz seam, another propped in the lower branches of a gnarled pine, the claymore mine at the bottom of the scree slope just below that chunk of panel from the Merc… ‘Down!’

It was pure instinct that made Carrington hurl himself full length, even then though with the presence of mind to turn and dive into his own footsteps.

A sheet of flame erupted from the concave cast face of the claymore. It unleashed thousands of fragments at a broad arc of the road, while it’s less powerful but still devastating backlash made multiple perforations in the sliding wreckage that had triggered its anti-handling device.

Carrington felt a numbingly heavy blow in his side, and an instant drenching in warm, pulsing blood.

SIX

The blood that soaked him was not his own. Carrington lifted his head to look at the savagely torn remains that had been thrown against him. A wisp of steam rose from ribbons of bowel that trailed from the legless torso.

He knew that Taylor had been only a few paces from him, and only fractions of a second slow in taking cover. There was a persistent tinny ringing in his ears, the aftermath of the masses of impacts against the hulk of the Estate. It had been that which had saved him.

Inches from where he’d lain the road was scored with a mass of tiny furrows that were quickly filling with water.
Revell had seen the burst of red mist that had marked Taylor’s end. It was only a moment, but it seemed an age before Carrington got to his feet. Without any gesture to indicate he was all right, he took a roll of muddy bandage from the grasp of the dismembered hand beside him and started up the hillside.

‘There’s something wrong with that bloke.’ Burke watched a tripwire being carefully marked. ‘No wonder he didn’t bother to check if he was hurt. If he loses any of the ice he’s got in his veins he can always top up with a glass of water.’

‘Well, at least he hasn’t got the worry of that Red artillery.’ Garrett cocked his head to listen. ‘They’re putting down a heck of a plastering to either side and ahead of us but we seem to be in the clear so far. Gives him a chance to concentrate on what he’s doing.’

‘What sort of a nerd are you, boy?’ Ripper, after rummaging through every pocket, produced a bullet-hard, fluff-impregnated wad of chewing gum. ‘Anybody with half an ounce of the sense they were born with would know why that is, and it sure ain’t good news.’

‘It’s not coming down on us.’ Garrett felt the colour rising to his cheeks. ‘So that’s got to be good, hasn’t it?’

‘Use your brain, boy. It ain’t just for holding your eyes apart, although maybe in your case…’

‘Why don’t you just tell the kid.’ Hyde interposed to prevent friction.

‘I was going to, in my own way.’ Giving the wad a cursory inspection and nothing else, Ripper popped it into his mouth. ‘As I was saying before the Sarge butted in, what we’ve got here is a pail of crap held over our heads. That ordnance going down ahead of us ain’t the sort of stuff that’s heavy enough to break a rail bridge but it kinda sounds like it’s ample to stop traffic on it. And that works two ways—stops us getting out or help coming over. You with me, boy?’

‘The rest of the barrage is still way off to the left and right. It’s no bother to us.’

‘What do they teach you in basic? What we have here appears to be a classic case of a three-sided box barrage. Boxes do two things, keep people out or keep ’em in. This one is thrown by the Reds. It’s meant to keep our boys out, but it’s gonna keep us in as well.’

Listening more attentively, Garrett could now make out the three directions where the deluge of explosive was crashing down. ‘So what’s behind us?’

‘Well, as the commies seem to want to keep this slice of territory for themselves, I’d say that what’s coming up behind us is a touch more than an army of guys wearing red stars.’

‘Shit.’

‘Shit indeed, good buddy. That’s what I’m gonna do when they arrive.’ Ripper spat out the recycled chewing gum. ‘What have I been doing in my pockets?’ ‘On your feet!’ Hyde passed among the company, prodding awake those who had been able to rest despite the rain that now lashed the road where they waited. ‘Come on, pull yourselves together. We’re about to take a hike through a minefield, not stroll to the PX or NAAFI. Anyone who does something stupid is making trouble for his mates as well as himself. If you cause your own problems you’ll be left behind, and I’m not kidding. We can’t carry you. Best we’ll do is leave you a grenade so you can make the big decision for yourself. Move!’

‘Where the hell can they all have come from?’ Dooley had tried keeping a count of the anti-tank mines they had passed. He’d quickly given up when the difficulties of negotiating the slippery rocks and grass had made it more important to watch his footing than keep a tally.

‘Who knows.’ Burke tried to pull together the torn edges of material on his sleeve, where he’d slid the last few meters to level ground once more. ‘I do know that I haven’t seen gear used on that scale for eighteen months or more. Bloody hell, in the past we’ve been lucky to have ten to lay in front of a position, and we’ve had to lift those for re-use before pulling back.’
Scully too had been thinking it over. ‘How come in the middle of nowhere we stumble on a mass of state-of-the-art nastiness, but when we’re pulled out of the line for delousing and clean underwear we can’t get our hands on so much as a decent T-bone?’

‘Because everywhere out of the line is packed with all the guys who don’t want to be in it, and they scoop all the goodies before we get there.’ Sampson opened his mouth to catch a drink, but turning his face to the sky sent rivulets of water down his neck and inside his rain cape. ‘Since we’re in a minority out there there’s got to be a better than even chance we’ll trip over any shit that’s lying around.’

They reached a crossroads, and halted as a set of tracks were examined.

‘Four-wheel utility, quite recent.’ Even as he watched, Hyde saw the steep-walled ruts crumbling and becoming less distinct. ‘Could be that Hummer again.’

‘If it is, then they must have known about that minefield. The tracks run off down that little side road. The way we’ve come would certainly have been the quickest, the most obvious route to where they bumped into that reception committee.’

‘Knowing about it didn’t do them any good. One dead and one in the cage, or worse.’ With the toe of his boot, Hyde idly made a dam of leaves where water was overflowing from a puddle into the tread-patterned rut. ‘They came from the direction we’re heading.’

‘I hope our luck holds better than theirs.’ Burke muttered that under his breath. The novelty of the unspoiled scenery had worn off for him.

As they moved off, Scully cut a slice from the turnip he had washed in a shallow stream beside the road, while the others had refilled their bottles. He’d hacked the skin from it in a series of thick chunks, reducing its weight by nearly half. He bit into it, and grimaced. ‘It’s fucking terrible.’

‘You’re supposed to cook them.’ Sampson enjoyed their self-appointed cook’s disappointment. ‘Why didn’t you try a carrot? You can eat them raw.’

‘I know that. I was a chef in civvie life …’

‘Wouldn’t have know that from the last meal you did.’ As he walked, Garrett broke tiny pieces from a chocolate bar in his pocket and surreptitiously slipped them into his mouth.

‘What was wrong with it? That was borscht, and it came out all right, considering the conditions under which I was making it.’

‘What were those little bits of meat floating in it? They were tough as old boots.’ Finishing the last of the bar, Garrett balled the foil and wrapper together, and when he thought he wasn’t being observed, flicked it away.

‘Cat.’

‘Oh, you’ve got to be kidding.’ Garrett tried to recall the taste but could only remember the texture, or lack of it. ‘The only cat I’ve seen in the Zone in the last six months is that one the major’s APC went over … Oh, sweet Jesus, you didn’t, did you?’

‘Why not? Think what it would have been like if it hadn’t been tenderized that way. Made skinning a bit messy though.’ Scully crammed the remains of the turnip back into the bag. ‘Hey, Boris!’

Farther down the line the conversation had been hardly audible to the Russian.

‘Yes?’ He was surprised to hear his name called.

‘What did you think of my cabbage soup?’
Hesitating, Boris considered his answer. He could not be sure that Scully, who had never talked to him before, was not simply involving him so as to score some obscure point. He hedged. ‘I did not have very much, but... it was quite good.’

And it had been, too. Boris had been surprised. Of course it did not have the special touch that made the dish so distinctly Russian, but it had been close enough to bring back many memories…

‘Pity I didn’t have any sour cream.’ Scully sought to excuse Boris’s slightly less than enthusiastic response, for the sake of appearances in front of the others. ‘Wouldn’t you say?’

‘Yes…’ Sensing what Scully wanted, and pleased to be involved in any conversation, Boris sought the right answer.

‘But then every cook in Russia has his own recipe, and your cabbage and beetroot were perfect.’ That was not the perfect truth, but Boris had been so glad to be taken off the permanent cooking detail he would now have said anything to maintain the current happy arrangement.

It had been hard for him, after he had settled down in the post of signaller for the company and had begun to gain the men’s grudging respect, if not Andrea’s, to be taken off such sensitive work because of orders from headquarters. There was still so much distrust toward those who had changed sides. Yet they were the ones who had most to fear from a Communist victory. A NATO soldier, if he was lucky, might survive as a prisoner; for him that was not an option.

The talk of food had reminded him of his hunger, and his mind drifted back to the last time he had enjoyed a steaming bowl of borscht at home, his last leave before ... His mother must have saved coupons for several months to make the meal.

With the borscht had been a cheese pie as delicate as only she could make it, and there had been fresh black bread and from heaven-only-knew-where she had produced ice cream, and homemade kvass on which, with several glasses of cognac, he had become quite drunk. He pushed the recollection from his mind. He no longer knew if she was alive or dead, or among the living dead in a labour camp.

They crossed a single-arch stone bridge. On the far side, partially overhanging the road and the water, was an old flour mill. Scaffolding and the rotting boards of working platforms surrounded it on three sides. The attractions of its beautiful setting among the rugged tree-covered hills had not been enough to tempt its owners back into the Zone to complete the restoration.

For several hundred meters beyond the lone building the road climbed steeply to a brow that gave a rare panoramic view. In the middle distance, perhaps two kilometres in a straight line, a great column of bare granite thrust high above the trees that masked its base. Topping it stood a Disneyland-style Gothic castle.

Its grey stone walls soared to intricate turrets, spires and battlements. Wisps of cloud threaded between its highest features.

Clarence unslung his rifle and used its powerful telescopic sight to examine the ancient fortress. The masonry seemed to grow directly out of the rock and in places it was hard to determine the point of transition.

‘There sure is a lot of shit going down around us.’ Ripper listened, and recognized the thundering report of an artillery missile impacting. Ages after the heavy report of its one-ton warhead came the distinctive double ‘boom’ of its recent supersonic passage.

There was no time to take cover when the scream of jet engines filled the air. A contour-hugging MIG fighter-bomber flashed past close overhead and the clouds were lit with the glare of its afterburners.

‘He won’t get very far.’ Clarence rejected the instinctive but futile urge to send a bullet after the aircraft. ‘At the rate he’s burning fuel he is going to have to come down soon. One way or another. Something must have scared the hell out of him…’

Flares ejected as decoys drifted down. The last was barely brushing the treetops when a slim flame-tailed missile
lashed under incredible acceleration from the vicinity of the castle and hurtled after the plane. Ignoring the flares, it screeched past and bored into the cloud in pursuit.

‘Go on boy, go get him.’ Ripper cheered the Rapier. ‘It’ll get him. It ain’t even a contest. That’s one Warpac pilot who won’t be fretting himself over his fuel consumption for long.’

‘Did anyone pinpoint the launch site?’ Even through the field glasses Revell could make out nothing that would betray the missile’s lift-off point. Not for the first time he regretted his thermal imager had been lost with the APC. With it the location, bathed in the residue of the hot exhaust gasses, would have stood out like a neon sign.

‘Pretty close to the castle, I think.’ Lowering the rifle, Clarence used his keen sight in an attempt to decide if a smudge he saw among distant high ground was a trick of light or the faint remains of rapidly dispersing smoke. He couldn’t be certain. ‘I’ve got an idea it came from within that circle of hills. If you look, the road runs along the base of its plinth of rock, and the circle of hills is on the other side of it.’

‘That’s close enough. So somewhere down there is one of our air-defence batteries, or at least part of one. Their transport allocation is usually generous; maybe we can hitch a lift.’

Taking the point, Revell was disappointed when they lost sight of the castle the moment they started downhill. The trees prevented more than an occasional tantalizing glimpse. But at least each one showed them that little bit nearer.

Setting a fast pace, he maintained it even when he began to feel the strain himself. They had to make contact. Even if like themselves it was another bunch of strays, there had to be benefits from their falling in together. For an anti-aircraft unit the advantage would be increased infantry to protect it. For his men it was a lifeline. Transport meant a chance to recover from their weariness, perhaps the opportunity to get sufficiently far ahead of the Russian advance to prepare some hot food. But most of all it offered the opportunity to move fast enough to escape being encircled by the enemy and killed or captured. And being captured by the Warpac forces was merely death postponed.

Looking back, the major saw that some of the company were straggling. ‘Sergeant Hyde, have them close up, regular intervals. If anyone falls out they’re to be stripped of ammunition and left behind.’

It worked, as nothing else would have done. Those to whom each step was agony found the strength to withstand the pain; those who felt they were about to drop from sheer exhaustion found untapped reserves of energy.

Like walking zombies they kept moving. With almost mechanical strides and with laboured breath whistling between gritted teeth they kept going. They knew they had to.

SEVEN

Rain dripped from great banks of razor-wire flanking a high spike-topped steel mesh gate. The massed coils of serrated metal strips had been added to at different times. Most strands were heavily rusted; others, though streaked or spotted with the same dull encrustments, could still show lengths that gleamed brightly. A moss- blotched reinforced concrete guard post flanking the gate was unmanned, and the gate itself hung open.

Above soared a towering cliff of dark granite. The walls of the castle extended it still higher. Tire marks showed a single light vehicle had been through that day.

‘Do we knock and wait for the butler.’ Scully felt nervous, overpowered by the sheer scale of the rock face.

‘There can’t be anything special in here.’ Checking quickly for booby-traps, Carrington went forward a few meters, but could see the side road for only a short distance where it followed the base of the cliff. ‘They wouldn’t leave the post unmanned and the gate open if there was.’

‘Maybe the two guys in the Hummer were the last to leave.’ Ripper also felt oppressed by the sheer scale of their surroundings. When he looked up he had to fight down the fear that the whole mountain was looming over him, falling to crush him.
‘Wouldn’t it be great if this was the entrance to that Paradise Valley?’

‘You think they’d leave the gate open if it was?’ Hyde snorted. ‘A place like that would be protected by a battalion at least.’

‘We’re never going to find out by standing here.’ Revel checked he had a round chambered and with Andrea at his side led in through the gate. Carrington tagged close behind them.

Andrea loaded a smoke round into the grenade-launcher slung beneath the barrel of her M16. ‘When I was in the camps there were many stories about a special place that held vast stocks of everything we could ever want. All that we so desperately needed was supposed to be there. Food, clothing, medical supplies, arms, everything.’

Though she talked as they walked, Andrea never for an instant relaxed her vigilance. Revel made no response, giving all his concentration to trying to anticipate what lay around the next bend.

‘An old man came to one camp I was in. He was crippled and almost deaf and covered by many great scars. Always he spoke of a wonderful valley where anything could be had. If you could get in. Eventually he persuaded some men to go with him. He would not tell them the location in advance, only that it was in this general area. We never heard of any of them again.’

Still between high frost-cracked walls of granite, the road curved around the base of the cliff. Beside the road there was room only for a shallow stream that crossed and re-crossed the metalled surface, and where they had to wade through it the water lapped ice-cold to their ankles.

Throwing himself against the illusory cover of the rock, Revel edged back a few paces. ‘No wonder they didn’t bother with the guard post.’ His breath came in gulps and he could feel his heart hammering inside his ribs.

He had seen it for only a second, but it was locked vividly in his mind’s eye. A massively strong bunker seemed to grow from the rock itself. Perhaps a meter of concrete faced with inches of steel, the snouts of machine guns protruded from step-sided embrasures. The weapons could sweep a hundred-meter straight stretch of road that offered no shred of cover. Even attempts to rush the position using smoke would have been doomed. Firing blind, the guns could not have failed to hit anyone attempting that suicidal run.

Armour would have been no protection. Niches cut in the rock held well-protected directional anti-tank mines. At point-blank range the hull sides of the toughest main battle tank would be penetrated effortlessly.

‘Maybe the Russians are here before us.’ Carrington too had seen what lay in their path. ‘Anybody who strolls that way is going to get creamed. I’m impressed.’

Revell was too, but someone was going to have to go out in the open and ... ‘You can come forward.’

The bull-horn blared into life without cracking a pre-warning. ‘I promise you are quite safe.’ Each heavily accented word bounced back and forth in echoes that gradually diminished to a confused babble.

‘It is no trick. We are on the same side. We have been watching your approach on remote cameras, but only in the last few moments have we picked you up on our microphones.’

There was a pause, and Revell made no move. He laid a restraining hand on Carrington’s arm. ‘We’ll take no...’

‘I see that you doubt me.’ The disembodied voice blasted out again. ‘That is understandable. I shall expose myself.’

Dooley tittered. ‘That’s supposed to set out minds at rest?’ He had to shove fingers in his mouth to comply with Sergeant Hyde’s order for silence.

There came an electronically amplified thud and then a resonant ‘click,’ as if the bull-horn had been put down while still switched to full power. There was a brief period of dead silence and then from behind the machine gun nest strolled an unarmed officer. Walking into the open, he turned to beckon behind him and was joined by three young soldiers. Their battledress was immaculately new, but long hair straggled from beneath their helmets.
The trio lounged against the blockhouse, masking the machine guns. Reassured, but still maintaining a degree of caution, Revell went forward with Andrea and Carrington. Advancing to meet them, the first man made a careless salute.

‘Lieutenant Hans Voke, commander of Dutch Pioneer Company seven four nine.’ He grinned a broad grin that exposed a gold tooth. ‘I am welcoming you to NATO supply depot number twelve. You may have heard of it; the unofficial name is Paradise Valley.’

‘Doesn’t look much like paradise to me.’ Keeping a tight grip on the side of the truck, Thorne was bumped by others as the eight-wheeled Foden wallowed through huge potholes.

The basin of land dominated by the castle was over two kilometres in diameter. They were nearing a small village set in its centre, and dwarfed by the jagged ridges and precipitous slopes around it.

Apart from the straggling collection of about twenty houses and a small church, the only other sign of habitation in the valley was a picturesque farm on the slopes opposite the castle.

All of the buildings were from another and gentler age. Half-timbered for the most part, some with shutters and fenced gardens, the only sign that the twentieth century had created any impression on the place was the abandoned hulk of a farm tractor beside a rotting woodpile.

Pulling into the yard of a small sawmill that was little more than an open-sided shed beside a house with blue shutters, the truck came to a stop with a hiss of air brakes. When they’d all dismounted it drove forward beneath the shed.

‘So where are all the goodies that are supposed to be stashed here?’ Looking about him, all Dooley could see was a typical abandoned West German village, scruffy from long neglect.

‘You are standing on them.’ Voke displayed his gold tooth again. ‘But perhaps it is improper of me to say that. You are standing over them, a small part of them.’ Beside him stood an electric saw bench. The drive belt had perished and fallen off. He pressed the start button.

There came the subdued hum of a well-maintained pump starting up and the sigh of powerful hydraulics. The Foden began to drop smoothly as the floor beneath it sank.

‘What you tell me about the two men in the Hummer is a cause for worry.’ Voke led the major down a long well-lit corridor that smelled of gun oil and linseed.

‘They were two of my men; they deserted early in this morning, I think.’ He tapped the side of his head. ‘Here they have knowledge of this place. You can be certain one was taken as a prisoner?’

‘My sergeant saw it happen. The man was wounded, but he thinks not fatally. But what can your man tell them—just what have you got here?’

‘It would be more quick to show you while my men’ show yours where fresh clothes and boots are to be found. Of course they are not mine to give, but the provost sergeant and the last of the stores clerks were evacuated by helicopter last night, and you can see,’ he indicated his own impeccable turnout, ‘I am not in a position to tell on you.

They turned a corner and with a sweeping wave of his arms Voke announced the huge subterranean hangar they’d entered.

For a battle-weary commander like Revell, who for a long time now had almost given up hoping for, let alone trying to get hold of replacement equipment, it was an Aladdin’s cave.

In the great cavern beneath the floor of the valley were row upon row of factory- fresh wheeled and tracked armoured personnel carriers, armoured cars and armoured re-supply vehicles. In the distance was what looked like a small mountain of crated engines and other spares.
Voke tried to hide his amusement at the major’s open-mouthed amazement. ‘There are seven more rooms like this.’

‘All filled like this?’

‘Certainly all filled, but not all like this.’ Voke led the way out again and talked back over his shoulder. ‘Another holds pieces of light and medium artillery, another contains engineering equipment. Two are filled with soft-skin transport; I cannot recall what is in the others. But that is not all. There are other storage areas for electronic equipment, radar spares and the like. And then yet more for clothing, small arms and ammunition. All on the same scale.’

They were passing a series of large rooms whose fireproof doors had been strongly wedged open. Looking in as they passed, Revell could not identify all that the various crates and racks held, but he saw sufficient to be more impressed and more bitter with each he hurriedly scrutinized.

‘Why the hell hasn’t any of this stuff ever been issued? There’s enough here for two or three battalions. We’ve been screaming for it for months.’

‘Actually, a clerk told me that here there is enough to equip at least a brigade, or even to refit a division. One of my men swears he has even seen several crated gunships. I do not disbelieve him.’ Voke’s tone had an edge to it now, and he was no longer smiling.

He led into a large circular room. The centre was dominated by a crescent of computer terminals and telex machines. Leaving only space for two or three doorways, the walls were lined with filing cabinets. Voke tugged at the handle of the nearest. It was locked. ‘You see, for a bureaucrat the turning of a key makes everything safe. We should have fitted the Free World with a lock, and kept communism out that way.’ He unleashed a massive kick at the cabinet, denting its front. ‘We give them the latest machinery, the best computers, and still they only feel happy when they are pushing pieces of paper from tray to tray.’

‘Doesn’t any of this material ever get issued? The road in hasn’t seen real traffic, maybe not all winter.’ Tapping at a keyboard, Revell was surprised when the screen glowed to life, displaying the gibberish he’d typed. Its green glow was eerie in the dimly lit room.

‘I have not been here even that length of months. All I have seen is perhaps five or six small loads being taken out by Chinook. High-value specialized equipment, radar, that sort of thing. Not enough to keep the cobwebs off the stacker trucks.’ ‘Is that your task here, materials handling?’ ‘No, Major. I was sent here to prepare all this for destruction.’

EIGHT

Tugging open the elevator gate, Voke led across the dusty interior of the shell of a house and out into the rain.

Looking back as he instinctively closed the street door behind him, Revell could see nothing about the property, even at this distance, that would betray its real purpose.

Voke noticed the inspection. ‘It is good, isn’t it? As far as we know it has fooled all the Warpac sky-spies, surveillance satellites and reconnaissance aircraft. Certainly they have made no attempt to destroy this very tempting target.’

‘You think they still don’t know it’s here?’

‘Well, perhaps by now they do. I understand their interrogation techniques are crude but effective.’ Voke shrugged. ‘I expect by this time our man has told them everything. We shall have to hope they do not arrive quite yet. It would spoil my preparations.’

‘What are your plans for getting out?’
‘We were due to be picked up at about the time the jamming became so bad.’ Rain plastered to Voke’s face the long blond hair that made a fringe below the brim of his helmet. ‘The chopper did not arrive, so we altered our plans.’

‘Reckon they forgot about you?’ Revell noticed that the road was not the soft asphalt it appeared, but concrete thick enough to take the biggest trucks. It had been washed over with tone-down paint, but a small patch that had been missed revealed its true colour.

‘Forgot? Yes, certainly it is possible. At this time a company of pioneers will not rank high in the list of transport priorities, especially as many of my men are too old for combat duties. Old William admits to fifty-six, but I think he could well be sixty, or even more. There are about five of us under the age of thirty, out of ninety-six. No, it is ninety-four now, isn’t it?’

‘So what are you going to do, gas up a few of the Bradley’s and make a run for it?’

‘Surely you are familiar with the ways of the Dutch army, Major.’ Voke laughed. ‘Even in battle they have to vote on everything. My men discussed the position this morning, when it became obvious the pick-up was not going to happen. I was not invited to the meeting. There I was kicking my heels expecting them to produce a demand for overtime pay, and instead they said that they wished to stay and defend this complex.’

‘With less than a hundred men?’ Revell tried to keep the amazement out of his voice. ‘This place is vast. You’d be spread far too thin. Sure you’ve got limitless ammunition, and if it was just a case of holding that narrow pass we entered by I’d say you could hold out for some hours. But there’s nothing to stop them pushing infantry through these hills at any one of a dozen points. The ground may be rough, but it’d only delay them, not stop them. Or they could come in low and fast and drop a few chopper loads before you could get Stingers on to them.’

A smug look came over Voke’s face. ‘For air-defence there is an RAF regiment battery dug in at that farm. They too were due to be air-lifted out this morning, so we are not alone in being overlooked.’

Revell had forgotten the Rapier they’d seen chasing the MIG. He had to concede that point. ‘But you still haven’t the manpower to defend the whole area. You’re just wide open.’

There was disappointment in the lieutenant’s expression. ‘I had hoped we could persuade you and your men to stay, but we cannot force you to join us. Look, Major, I know that time is precious, but will you give me just thirty minutes, that is all I ask? Just thirty minutes to show why I believe we can defend this place against whatever the Russians throw at us.’ He could see he was not winning the argument. ‘Listen, it will take at least that time to bring some transport to the surface and fuel and load them with ammunition. Tell me what you need and I will have my men do it right away. When we get back, if you still wish to go, then no time will have been lost.’

‘I suppose I’ve nothing to lose.’

‘You just can’t fucking do it.’

‘And why the bloody hell not?’ Scully resented Garrett’s objections. ‘What’s so fucking wrong with it, that’s what I want to know?’

‘It’s ... it’s wrong. It’s not decent. You can’t cook a meal in the oven of a mobile crematorium.’

‘You are picky, aren’t you? Look, this place has a cold store the size of a house. It’s packed full of food I had forgotten existed. The only kitchens I can find here are run off a ruddy great LPG tank that’s bone-dry.’ Scully patted the steel flank of the trailer-mounted field crematorium. ‘This little beauty has its own bottle already connected. It’s never been used to burn bodies, so where’s the harm in me using it to womp up a meal?’

‘Like I said, it’s not proper.’

‘Well then, you don’t have to eat what I cook, do you?’ Refusing further discussion, Scully finished levering apart great slabs of frozen steak. He threw the last frost-covered chunks inside. Partially closing the heavy semi-circular door, he played with the setting controls until he had a low steady flame.

He turned his attention to hammering the contents of the sacks of frozen vegetables into more manageable-sized lumps. ‘Same as usual.’ He grunted as he swung another over arm mallet blow. ‘All welded together. Those civilian
contractors must make a fortune out of pushing the old stuff onto the army. It’s probably from the bottom layer of one of the first EEC food mountains.”

‘How long is it going to take?’ Hyde tapped the metal tip of his toecap against a portion of meat that had fallen into the mud. It rang, as if it too was metallic. ‘Looks like they’ll take a week to thaw.’ ‘This is not what you’d call a standard catering kitchen.’ A slight touch on the flame control and Scully jumped as they instantly transformed to roaring blue jets. He made a hurried readjustment.

‘I asked how long.’

‘Give me a chance, Sarge.’ Having finally satisfied himself that the flame was about right, Scully carefully closed the door and secured it. He had to go on tiptoe to see that all was well through a small thick glass porthole in the side of the oven.

‘When the major went swanning off he said thirty minutes. I’ve still got twenty left.’ Filling two buckets with assorted lumps of glistening vegetables, Scully added a gallon of water to each and then they too went in. ‘This lot should be done just before he gets back. It won’t be cordon bleu, but it’ll be done. Salmonella special coming up,’ he muttered under his breath, and then out loud, ‘It was never like this at The Dorchester.’

The rest of the company were asleep in an underground barracks. A couple of the hardiest had showered but the others had not bothered when they’d discovered there was no hot water. They’d been content with clean clothing. Scully had left them down there as soon as he’d kitted himself out. Even in the lift going down he’d experienced the all-too-familiar sensation of claustrophobia. Volunteering to prepare a hot meal had got him out without having to explain. As much as any of them he needed rest, but not in that stark warren with its hollow sounds and the perpetual thumping of the air conditioning.

Satisfied he’d done all he could, he sat on a pile of boxes containing more of the ice-encased steak, shifting to an upturned pail when the cold struck through to him. In under an hour they’d be trying to fight their way out through a tightening ring of communist armour and artillery, groping almost blindly in closed-down APCs from one desperate situation to the next. And then there was still the river. At least the Bradley’s’ new water-propulsion system might give them a chance in the strong currents, if the bridge was down, as by now it most likely was. In the elderly M113s they wouldn’t have had a hope. Pushed and spun by the currents, they would only have been target practice for Warpac gunners on the banks.

Shuddering at the thought, Scully tried to blank it from his mind, but failed. All he could see was the cramped inside of that horrid aluminium box as they were tossed and drenched and hurt and gradually sank. ‘God, don’t let me die in one of those tin cans.’

‘I know exactly how you feel.’

Scully hadn’t realized that in his abstraction he’d been staring past the sergeant at the first of the Bradley APCs to be brought above ground, and had spoken out loud.

‘I learned to hate them a long time ago.’ Tentatively, Hyde put his fingertips to his face. The scar tissue and layers of grafts meant that he sensed rather than actually felt the touch. It was unreal, not a part of him, feeling as it might have done after a local anaesthetic. Only he lived with that sensation all the time. He gave a start as fat spat loudly in their improvised field kitchen. There was a slight tremor in his right eyelid. That always came on when he was exceptionally tired.

Hyde looked for a distraction. He walked down a pathway between the church and a house whose ground floor appeared once to have served as a small general store. From that side of the hamlet a narrow road ran between unkempt fields and pastures to the slopes beneath the castle. It then climbed steeply through a series of hairpin bends to the gate of the ancient fortification.

Looking that way, he could see the West German countryside as it used to be and could imagine himself back in time. Back to when you could drive all day and not see a single burned-out tank, a ruined town or masses of decaying bodies. A time when men were not astounded by green leaves on trees, a time before shells, nukes and
chemicals had transformed almost every part of it into a land fit only for the warriors of hell, and him into one of them.

Revell wasn’t in the least surprised when the lieutenant drove the unissued Range Rover staff car straight up to the castle. He’d been more than half expecting it.

The steep and twisting approach road was the only way to it. With a sheer drop of at least a hundred meters on every other side, combined with the building’s massively thick walls and commanding situation, it certainly had an air of impregnability. But it had been constructed in another and far distant era. It was possible the architects might have envisaged future wars when ways might be discovered of delivering blows against the fabric from a greater distance off, but in their wildest dreams they could never have imagined the power of those new projectiles.

They drove through a narrow double gateway and into a small courtyard. Voke was the first to alight. ‘If you will come with me, Major.’

‘You two stay with the transport.’ Revell made to follow the Dutchman. ‘And Dooley, don’t go wandering off on one of your famous scavenger hunts.’

‘Who, me?’ Dooley adopted his hurt look, but at the same time could not resist casting a speculative eye over the property.

Andrea didn’t even bother to acknowledge the order. Pulling the hood of her rain cape forward over her helmet like a monk’s cowl, she cradled her rifle and, not bothering to take shelter, watched them enter the ground floor.

Checking his watch, Revell resisted the urge to hurry his guide. He was led through a series of spacious panelled rooms, through a magnificent oak-beamed banqueting hall and into what must once have been the kitchens.

‘Nearly all of the furniture has been removed, quite legitimately, but I understand a few choice pieces did disappear between here and the West. I find it amusing that perhaps there is somewhere a refugee hovel furnished with priceless antiques.’ Voke took a large key from an inside jacket pocket. ‘More likely, though, it has already passed through the hands of several dealers in London and New York.’

The door he unlocked was set in an angle of the wall at the back of the kitchen. Despite its obvious age and heavy construction it swung open smoothly and almost silently on well-lubricated hinges.

Reaching into a small recess just inside, the lieutenant flipped a switch, and from deep below them came the sputter of a generator coughing into life. A widely spaced row of lights glowed into life to illuminate a steep stone stairway.

Taking another quick look at the time, Revell then had to give his undivided attention to the worn and slightly damp steps. ‘We’re running out of time, Lieutenant.’

‘I know that, Major. For me and my men it is running out very fast.’

NINE

There were at least thirty cellar rooms and vaults, ranging from little more than a cupboard-sized space to the three or four that would have garaged comfortably a brace of Challenger main battle tanks.

Most were lined with racks of small arms of every description, including mortars and anti-aircraft missile launchers. All were accompanied by stacks of the appropriate ammunition. The largest was filled with anti-tank weapons TOW’s, already uncrated and assembled.

Several times Voke talked down the major’s comments or criticisms. ‘Wait until I have shown you everything, then tell me what you think. I am being as quick as I can,’ he added to forestall that objection.

‘There is ample fuel for the generator, and its standby. Water, rations, chemical toilets - even a well-equipped
dispensary. See, you can enter the cellars from several places inside the castle, but this is the only entrance or exit outside the walls.’

Drawing back three huge bolts on a studded door, Voke pulled it open with an effort and a gust of wind slapped rain into their faces.

For the first time Revell didn’t mind; it was very cool and refreshing after the exhaust-filled fetid atmosphere of decay in those catacombs.

As they stepped out, behind and above them soared the castle wall. To their left a narrow path hewn from the rock started down across the cliff face. It was slippery, and overgrown in places. Between them and a long drop to the trees far below was a ruined wall that bore faint signs of once having been crenulated, to offer its defenders firing positions. Now it was mostly gone. Unlike the main body of the castle this small outwork had been allowed to deteriorate. As they cautiously worked their way lower they passed several small towers built around natural fissures and caves in the face. Covered with creeping weeds, walls sagging, their interiors were dark, forbidding caverns they did not investigate.

Once Revell fancied he heard something behind them, but though he paused to listen, the sound wasn’t heard again and they restarted.

The path ended in a tower more substantial than the other, set with a gate made of timbers that could have been hewn only from whole trees. With some difficulty they scrambled up the inside of the tower until, by bracing their feet against the stubs of roof beams projecting from the stonework, they could look out over the parapet.

‘Just one minute more, please, Major. Then we shall start back.’ Voke pointed down toward the pine-woods. ‘Look there.’

Barely visible between the close-spaced trunks, Revell could make out shapeless bundles of cloth. Though the material had not yet begun to fade, already they were disappearing beneath the perpetual shower of needles and cones.

‘A couple of dozen dead civvies. So? It’s hardly anything out of the ordinary in the Zone.’

‘At various other locations around the valley there are several hundreds more. And not just ordinary refugees. Many of them were members of deserters’ gangs and other similar bandits.’

‘How come?’

Voke grabbed the opportunity offered by the major’s curiosity. ‘Until yesterday this complex was under the command of a captain in the Royal Engineers. He had passed up promotion to stay here. He was too old for a field command and felt that this was the closest he could get. He was very reluctant to leave. He had been here since shortly after the outbreak of war. I had several long talks with him before he left, and of course he showed me over the whole site.’ Sensing Revell was about to look at his watch again, he went on faster, gesturing with wide sweeps of his arms so that Revell had to look up to see what he was indicating.

‘During his time here a vast amount of ammunition and equipment had to be condemned. Either obsolete or at the end of its shelf-life, it could only be destroyed. There was in fact so much to be got rid of that an ordnance disposal section was stationed here permanently. I am not sure I remember all the figures correctly but in total I believe there to be about two thousand tons of shells, mines and bombs in the valley.’

‘I’ve seen waste on the sort of scale you’re talking about.’ Revell’s thoughts went back in time. ‘And not just in this war either. My uncle was in ‘Nam during the last months. He said one of his regular duties was guard on a dock where they loaded ships to dump ammo in the gulf. There must have been thousands of tons shipped out.’

‘The waste here would have been in proportion.’

‘How does that explain those stiffs?’
‘Very simple.’ Voke could not repress a chuckle. ‘He hated waste. There was a disposal site in the hills, but it was never used. Every unwanted mine, rocket, bomb, shell, and grenade has been used to construct a wide killing zone around the valley.’

‘We passed through a roadblock in a gorge about six, maybe seven kilometres from here. On the road out past the old mill. Was that some of his work? If it was, it may be formidable, but it wouldn’t stall Soviet combat engineers for long.’

‘That?’ Voke laughed outright this time. ‘My men laid that in a couple of hours. Think what it would have been like if we had been adding to it and refining it for two years.’

‘And it’s all unofficial?’ Revell tried to picture the ordnance experts using all their skill and ingenuity over the months and years to lay thousands, perhaps millions of mines and booby-traps.

‘It is all very unofficial. The captain was very unhappy when he was ordered out. He wished to stay and see his plan put to the test. Of course, during his time here it was, on a fairly small scale.’

‘You mean refugee gangs like those down there.’ Revell found the whole concept fascinating but flawed, deeply. ‘Knocking off a few civvies, even when they come at you mob-handed, is very different from trying to stop a Soviet Guards Army with all their resources.’

‘I am aware of that; so was the English captain. His theories were well tested. Gangs have tried to break in using vehicles and armour salvaged from the battle-fields. Once it was a single Challenger backed by several APCs. Another time a large group of deserters tried it with Leopards and T72s. All were stopped. And there is more than just explosive devices, machine-gun-rigged to sweep avenues of approach, gas shells, flame throwers...’

‘What’s that low concrete structure at the bottom of the cliff?’

‘That was one of the captain’s favourites; there are two others positioned where they’d be appropriate.’ Although Voke knew exactly where to look and what he was looking for, the camouflage of the bunker was so good it took him a moment to pinpoint it.

‘In there mounted on an old semi-trailer is a large generator. There is a spring down there and the ground is wet all the year ‘round. Triggered by the approach of infantry it will start up and push a very high voltage through the ground.’

Impressed, Revell tried not to sound it. ‘The instant it starts up it’ll stand out on the IR screen of every Soviet tank and SP for miles, and be picked up instantly by every Warpac electro-emissions detector truck.’

‘So what, quite frankly?’ Voke was not about to be put down. ‘The concrete is two meters thick and the air intake and exhaust pipe are well protected. It has fuel for two-and-a-half days. Tell me, how would you walk up and switch it off? It cost the captain his spirit ration for two months to bribe helicopter pilots to lift in the trailer and concrete, a load at a time.’

Seeing the advantage he had gained, but sensing the major was still not convinced, Voke pressed on. ‘You must understand, that is just one tiny part, almost an afterthought among the mass of defences. And every precaution has been taken against countermeasures. A high proportion of the mines are resistant to the overpressures of fuel air explosives if the enemy uses that method, and of course most of the ground is highly unsuitable for the deployment of mechanical means of clearance.’

In the distance a gunship beat fast across country. It trailed a tail of black smoke from its cabin. Too far away to identify, Revell knew it had to be a Warpac machine. No NATO helicopter in trouble would be heading in that direction. The source of the smoke suddenly showed a bright speck of flame and the chopper dipped from sight behind a ridge. Moments after, a puffball of dark smoke rose to be lost among the rain clouds.

‘Look, Lieutenant, you’ve been trying to impress me and you’ve succeeded, but - and it’s an insurmountable but - you’re basing your defences on the castle. That makes it a non-starter. That great pile is a dream target for any gunner, and it wouldn’t take long for some commie missile battery observer to pass the coordi- nates back to his
commander, and then they’d bring the roof right down on our heads.’

At the sound of a light footstep Revell swivelled around to level his combat shotgun. He checked himself in time. It was Andrea. He was frightened, relieved and angry all at the same time. ‘I- told you to stay with the transport.’

‘It is as well I did not; there is something you should see.’

Halfway back to the castle’s postern door a body sprawled across a pile of rubble. Its legs made a partial dam to the water sluicing mud down the steps in a series of tinted cascades.

‘Spetsnaz.’ Andrea made the word an obscenity and rolled the corpse onto its back with her heel.

The man’s head lolled at an unnatural angle and blood still pulsed from a gaping neck wound so deep a sliver of spinal column showed between the parted tissue.

‘I was following you down when I saw him. He came from one of the little towers. He was too intent on watching you to notice me. Come, there is something else.’

They stepped over the body. Rain was washing spattered blood from its face, revealing Slavic features and eyes still open wide with the shock and terror of sudden death.

Retracing their route, Andrea indicated the interior of a tower. ‘Look in there.’

Jutting in a half-circle from the rock, the structure was in better condition than most. Clambering over the rotted remains of its broken door, Revell entered. It was dark inside and lightened only gradually as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. The two floors above had rotted through and their crumbling remnants littered the floor. By the sparse illumination shafting through an arrow slit he saw that the defence work had been built around a fissure in the cliff, which had been widened to form a small room.

Andrea pulled aside a debris-covered ground sheet. Beneath it lay a rolled sleeping bag, a stack of Russian ration packs, ammunition, and a radio. Quickly checking that it was not rigged with a booby trap, she flicked a switch. Turning the tuner, all that came through was a selection of oscillating whines.

‘Those jammers of theirs are pumping out so much power it’s even queering their own channels.’ A heap of dead branches in a dark corner caught Revell’s attention and he pulled them aside. ‘I thought I might find one.’

His actions revealed a small microwave dish complete with transcriber unit and headphones.

‘What does this mean?’ Voke examined the bowl of the satellite link.

‘With this he could have kept in constant touch with his base. So long as he kept transmission time to a minimum there was virtually no chance of detecting him.’ Looking about, Revell went to a corner that appeared largely free of the rotten boards and joists. He dragged his boot back and forth, raking up the deep layer of compacted rubbish. At the second attempt he exposed the crushed remains of empty ration cartons and cans.

‘There’s a lot of them. So, Lieutenant, it would appear the Reds know all about Paradise Valley, and have done for a long time. That Special Forces man of theirs must have been hanging around to report on the movement of supplies and additions to the defence measures. If they’ve been taking that sort of interest, then I can tell you why that billion dollars’ worth of gear hasn’t been bombed. It’s because they want to capture it intact, for themselves.’

Voke almost had to run to keep up with the major. ‘Knowing about the minefields is not the same as clearing them.’ He got no response. ‘Wait, Major.’ He grabbed Revell and held him back at the postern door. ‘I know how vulnerable the castle is while still whole. The first task I had in the field was salvage work at Anholt castle, almost on the Dutch border. That Canadian battalion took shelter there during the second advance by the Soviet Second Guards Tank Army. We pulled out only two or three alive, out of six hundred.’

‘Then you see why this place is a death trap…’
‘Yes, Major. That is why the top floors are already rigged with several thousand kilos of explosives. The ground and first floors have walls up to seven meters thick. On top of that our demolition will put a layer of rubble of not less than the same depth.’

‘Twenty feet of solid stone?’ Even after years on the continent it still took Revell that moment of time to convert from metric.

For an instant Voke’s hopes soared, then plummeted once more as the major’s next question veered to a tack.

‘How have you got the valley rigged for destruction?’ Revell recalled the huge caverns filled with unfuelled transport. ‘There’s several acres of storage down there. Have you been as thorough with that?’ ‘We have had only six days. The fuel and ammunition dumps presented no problems but they are a long way from the transport and other less flammable equipment...’

‘So if you tried to hold out and failed, the Reds are going to get a present of sufficient goodies to re-equip most of their front line in this sector.’

‘Not necessarily. Like the captain, I resorted to unconventional measures. I ran a pipe from the Av-gas tank at the landing ground to the air-conditioning inlets.’ Voke allowed himself a weak smile, even though he felt sure he had lost his argument over defending the valley. ‘Turning a valve wheel will flood every part of the complex with aviation fuel. We have wedged all the fire doors open; you may have seen that. Ignition will blast open the floor of the valley and turn it into a sea of fire.’

TEN

‘Have you a large-scale map of the area?’

With a reluctant sigh, taking a hand from the wheel, Voke reached into his jacket and handed one over. ‘Keep it. I shall not be needing it.’

No one spoke as the Range Rover left the courtyard, negotiated the tight turn onto the road and started down. Voke because he had failed in what he’d hoped to do, Andrea because that was her way. Dooley’s silence had yet another reason. When Andrea had gone off after the officers he’d spent some minutes in searching several of the castle’s lower rooms, and found nothing worth looting.

Revell studied the map, making notes on the soiled margin, having to brace himself against the vehicle’s roll on the steeply cambered corners in order to keep his writing legible.

For Dooley, even the sight of the three exhaust-pluming Bradley’s in the village street, bringing with them the prospect of their being off soon, did not cheer him. He stayed sullen, head bowed. He’d thought the great castle would have held a fortune in valuables. Instead it had been stripped as bare as any refugee shanty town after an enforced move. Shit, how the hell was he supposed to build up funds for when he finally got out of the army? That creep Cohen* had been full of bright ideas, but he’d bought it before it could do him any good. So he’d lasted longer, big deal. His wealth at that moment amounted to maybe ten thousand in back pay and a handful of rings, gold teeth and assorted scrap gold jewellery worth perhaps another two thousand. Fuck it, if he ‘was going to batten on some rich old dame in Miami then he’d need at least three times that for some smart threads, a flash car and the right sort of watch and accessories. He was jogged from his thoughts by their arrival back in the village, and the smell of cooked meat.

With a self-satisfied smirk, Scully was using an ash rake to drag the steak from the furnace. Each man in the company was given a part-burned slab weighing about a kilo, and a large ladleful of soft cooked vegetables. Nothing else would have roused them from sleep.

‘All ready to move, Major.’ Hyde’s report was rendered almost indistinct by the massive bite of sirloin he was chewing. ‘I’ve checked them over.’

‘Right. I’ll want that one.’ He indicated an APC whose turret-mounted Bushmaster cannon had been supplemented
by a pair of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles instead of the more usual twin TOW launch boxes.

‘So you are going, then?’ There was no pleading in Voke’s voice but he could not keep his disappointment out of it.

‘Not far. I want to meet the commander of that Rapier battery. If we’re going to hold this valley then we’d better get our acts together.’

Voke’s wide grin exceeded by a considerable margin any he’d produced so far.

‘We need to buy time.’ Revell looked up. The cloud ceiling was down even lower. The topmost towers of the castle were now hidden for much of the time. ‘It’s what they push up by road we have to worry about most, at present. If we can push that stone bridge down that should hold them for a while.’

Voke looked at the map. The old mill was marked in also. ‘Of course when we blow the top off the castle much of the wreckage will fall onto the road, and of course the way into the valley will be blocked at the same time. It would take the heaviest earth-moving equipment some time to make them passable even for tanks.’

‘That’s fine, but I’d like to hold them off a bit farther away than on our own doorstep. Have your men throw an assortment of mines and demolition gadgets aboard a truck. We’ll try to get to the bridge before them and see if we can’t blow it up in their faces.’

‘No problem, Major.’ Voke called in Dutch to one of his men, who immediately dashed for the church. ‘Before the order came to complete the setting of charges and evacuate we had prepared such a load. There was no point in unloading so we parked it under camouflage behind the church.’

As he finished speaking there came the bellow of a powerful diesel engine starting, and out from between the buildings came the great slab front of a Scammel eight-wheeler.

Revell was relieved to see it was a version with an enlarged crew cab. ‘Perfect. Sergeant Hyde, pick two of our bunch and take two of the lieutenant’s men as well…’

‘I have two who are good with explosives, and can speak some English,’ Voke butted in.

‘Okay.’ Revel cast an eye over the partially sheeted load on the Scammel’s long cargo deck. ‘And grab a fifty-calibre for the ring mount and take a couple of Stingers if you can find the room. We’ll blow the castle in…’ He glanced quizzically at Yoke.

‘It is ready now. The detonator box is in the timber yard.’

‘…one hour, so you’ll have to shift. We daren’t leave it longer.’

‘I’ll take Burke as driver, and Ripper. I’d like Andrea, as well. She’s got the best eyesight and her accuracy with a grenade thrower could make all the difference if we run into trouble.’ He watched the major’s face at mention of the woman, but saw nothing to betray any emotion.

‘Fine.’ The word did not come easily. Revell would have preferred her to stay with him. As he said it he saw her climb into the cab and struggle with the weight of the heavy machine gun Ripper handed up. ‘Remember, one hour. Once the fort comes down and blocks the road in, the only way back will be through the minefields. It’s not really an option; I’ve seen them.’

From a low growl as it idled, the motor sent its exhaust note rising in volume until with a last stab at the gas pedal Burke sent a spout of carbon-laced smoke high above the vehicle.

Not waiting to watch it go, Revell turned away. He pointed to the Bradley. ‘Thorne, driver. Clarence and Carrington in the turret.’ He paused, and held the map out toward Voke.

‘I know you didn’t have time to show me everything, but I made some notes in the margin of things we might need. If they’re not already up there, can you move them inside an hour? If not, we’ll have to manage without. Minutes
after we press the button I want us tucked up inside.’

Scanning the spidery writing, Voke nodded. ‘The grenades are there in large quantity, and terminal-guided rounds for the mortars.’ He pursed his lips. ‘I should have thought of thermal imagers, and I’ll see if I can find some drum magazines for that ferocious .357 shotgun of yours. Fire extinguishers and NBC suits and respirators I have not seen here, but with so many ... I will put as many men as I can spare on to searching for them.’

‘Do your best. You seem to have everything under control.’ Revell added that, feeling the lieutenant deserved a pat on the back, but more especially because he had appeared so crestfallen at having those omissions brought to his attention. It must be hard for him too, to hand over when this might have been his first independent command in a combat situation.

It took the young Dutch officer only a moment to regain his spirits. As Revell boarded his transport he could already hear an indecipherable gabble of orders being yelled. As the door closed Scully risked a traumatic amputation and shoved a huge slab of steak into his hand. It was nearly cold, but his teeth were in it almost before he’d registered the fact.

Not taking the chance of bogging in the waterlogged fields, Thorne stuck to the side road to the farm. Even so there were sections where the tracks slewed out of line when the loose surface failed to offer traction.

There was no conversation over the internal circuit, only the sounds of energetic chomping and swallowing. Revell welcomed the silence. It let him finish the food, and gave him a little time to think. He would rather have taken longer over his steak. How the hell Scully had done it he couldn’t imagine; it tasted as good as the best he’d ever had. But then field rations made you feel that about any food eaten immediately after you’d been on them for a prolonged period.

For the short drive to the farm he’d almost relinquished responsibility. Thorne was a driver who could be trusted, though he was not a patch on that goldbricker Burke. And Clarence and Carrington in the turret were a duo he’d back against the best from any nation. So he could sit back, enjoy the aftertaste of the meat and relax. Relax—it was in truth a word whose meaning he’d virtually forgotten, and a practice he’d long gotten out of. Strangely apt that they were going to a farm. In just a few hours some, or most, or perhaps all of them would have bought one.

What they were doing was crazy, Revell knew that. Stark raving mad. Everything they knew, the type of barrage, the Spetsnaz infiltrator, the determination of the crew of that scout car to take a prisoner: they all pointed to a fixed determination on the part of the Warpac forces to capture the valley and all it held.

And to oppose them, what could he offer? A fifteenth-century castle, a hundred elderly pioneers, his own thirty or so battle-weary men, and one small RAF air-defence battery.

Why the hell was he bothering, why... He broke his train of thought as he sensed that both tracks had begun to slip, then heard water cascading against the steel-covered aluminium hull. For a moment the APC skidded bodily sideways, then the tracks found their grip again. It took him a few moments to regain his train of thought.

Yes, why should they hang on around here? They could have grabbed all the armour they needed, topped it off with a handful of combat engineer tractors and been fit to punch their way out of most anything the Reds would have had this far forward by now.

He couldn’t even put it down to Voke’s enthusiasm and persuasiveness. No, he’d stayed because he’d wanted to, because of his desire to dig his heels in, to turn around and face the Russians and show them they were going no farther. He and his men had taken enough, more than enough. If the politicians were content to fudge and compromise, he wasn’t, not anymore. Europe was being nibbled away piece by painful piece. Well, not anymore, not any fucking more. They were going to be stopped, and they were going to be stopped right here.

Ripper stood with his upper body out of the roof hatch. He kept one hand on the traverse ring holding the Browning and the other he rested against the launch tube of the Stinger missile where it nestled between the back of the cab and the folded arm of the onboard loading crane. Often he had to duck to avoid low branches, and after each occasion had to clear foliage caught on the machine gun. All the time he kept watch for enemy gunships, working
mostly by touch so as not to relax vigilance for a second.

Picking a shred of steak from between his teeth, Burke made appreciative lip-smacking sounds as he flicked it out through the side window. ‘Don’t you tell him I said so, but considering it was done in a bloody crematorium, that meat were good.’ He shifted down through two gears as a sharp bend before an incline gave him no chance to take a run at it.

‘Hey, Ripper.’ Burke shouted to make himself heard by their roof gunner.

‘You’re always spinning stories. Tell me, how do I ever get people to believe me when I tell them I’ve had a dinner cooked in the oven of a crematorium?’

There was no answer, but Burke had hardly expected one. The Southerner was always touchy when anyone cast the slightest doubt on the veracity of his homespun stories.

‘The bridge is just over this next rise. Take it slow.’

All his training, all his experience, all his common sense told Hyde they should stop short of the crest and go forward on foot to reconnoitre the brow of the hill and what lay beyond, but their schedule was too tight to allow such caution.

At the back of the cab the two middle-aged Dutch pioneers were deep in whispered conversation. Hyde took no notice, until it appeared to become heated, and voices were raised. He turned in his seat.

‘What’s up?’

‘We are having to argue, thank you.’

‘I can hear that. What about?’

Again there was a gabble of Dutch between the pair, then the other spoke up, scowling first at his compatriot. ‘I do not think we should blow the bridge. It is my thinking that we should instead drop the mill onto the road and bridge as the Russians pass.’

In bottom gear Burke crawled the truck over the brow, and there below them the view was exactly as they’d last seen it.

‘It’s very tempting and I’d love to see it happen, but we haven’t the time for fancywork like that. Okay, Burke, what are you hanging about for? Put your foot down.’

The Scammel surged forward, and was doing sixty before the brakes were applied. For a moment it seemed the back end was going to break away, but Burke corrected before a skid could develop. ‘Where do you want it?’

‘See if you can turn it around without any more bloody dramatics. Then park it out front of the mill.’ With the motor now warmed and running quietly, Hyde clearly heard a distinct new sound against the background thunder of the barrage.

Andrea heard it also. ‘Mines.’ She listened again. ‘And ammunition. The Russians have run onto the minefield where Taylor was killed.’

They jumped from the truck, Hyde shouting to Burke before slamming the passenger door. ‘Get a bloody move-on, and don’t ditch it.’

‘Fucking great.’ Burke took the precaution of speaking after the door had closed. ‘I’ve got a wagon longer than the road is wide and he wants me to try for the world’s fastest three-point turn.’

‘If you reckon you ain’t up to it, boy, I’ll always have a go.’

‘Shit,’ Burke muttered under his breath. He’d forgotten Ripper still manning the anti-aircraft mount. ‘You just
concentrate on what you’re supposed to be doing. If we get jumped by a gunship we’ll be in worse crap than if I drop a couple of wheels off the road.’

Before the Scammel finally rocked to a halt facing back the way they’d come, boxes and cases were already being hauled from the back and broken open on the road.

The Dutchmen had made a hurried survey of the bridge and when they returned to Revell they were arguing again. ‘So what is it now?’

Grudgingly they broke off their acrimonious exchange.

‘It is stronger than we expected. With the charges we have they will need to be placed right underneath to be sure of bringing down the span. Anywhere else and …’

‘How long will it take?’ Even as he said it, Revell knew he’d made a mistake by addressing the question to both of them.

‘One hour, not more…’

‘At least two…’

‘I say one…’

‘So help me if you two start up again I’ll leave both of you here.’ Hyde’s bellowed threat cut them short. He stabbed his finger into the chest of the older man. ‘We’ll go for your idea. How do we drop the mill?’

He looked smug and was about to make a sarcastic aside to his companion when he saw the NCO’s expression and decided against it. ‘That is a fuel-air bomb.’ Gesturing at a tarpaulin-shrouded hump aboard the Scammel, he began to unfasten a securing rope and then tugged at the heavy waterproof material.

It fell away to reveal a drab-painted cylinder about two meters long and half as wide. This was the first time Hyde had seen one close-up, though he’d witnessed their tremendous power from a distance.

‘Get it emplaced as fast as you can. Time’s running out on us.’ Taking up a heavy case of claymore mines, Hyde went to join Andrea and Burke, who were setting various anti-armour and anti-personnel devices to cover the approaches to the bridge.

They worked quickly, hardly needing the prompt provided by the distant reports of mine explosions. Cannon fire blended into the destructive chorus and told Hyde that the Russians were putting down a firestorm in order to blast their way through.

Hurried though the preparations were, they were thorough. Mines and launchers were set where they would be protected by the devastating sweep of shotgun mines and these in turn by smaller ones scattered among the undergrowth.

Those hidden most carefully were fed instructions to delay detonation until a certain number of armoured vehicles had passed, in the slight hope of catching a command APC or even a bridge-layer. In any event their discharge over a period of time into the flanks of the enemy advance column would be bound to disrupt it, if not bring it to a halt while the area was cleared.

‘Right. That’ll have to do. Back to the truck.’

The fat pressure tank was just being lowered behind a low wall beside the mill. In the shadow of the building, with the added embellishment of a few broken planks and sheets of corrugated iron, it blended in perfectly.

‘About five minutes to make the connections, Sergeant.’

‘Six,’ muttered the other Dutchman.
‘Seems a pity.’ Looking wistfully at the building, Burke gave a heavy sigh.

‘Whoever was doing that up must have been sick as a pig when they had to abandon it. A bit of sympathetic restoration and it would have made a lovely home. I could retire to a place like this. Look at the setting.’

Andrea was arming small mines and throwing them to lodge among the crevices of rock below the bridge. ‘None of us will live long enough to retire.’

That was virtually the first time she had ever spoken to him directly, and then it had to be that. Shit, Burke had been happy with his delusion. Why the hell did that hard-faced bitch have to bring him back to the reality of this nightmare?

ELEVEN

With his hands cold and wet it took Hyde a while to strip the insulation from the ends of wire. He handed them to the Dutchmen fussing about the still sentient bomb and clambered over the wall to the road, unreeling the small cable drum as he went. ‘In theory this should stop those commies dead, for a while anyway.’

‘I had an uncle who was big on theories.’ From his lookout post on the cab roof, Ripper watched the sergeant carefully conceal the first few meters of twin wire along the base of the wall, weighting it with chunks of rock and other litter.

‘You want to hear about him?’

‘We’re going to anyway, aren’t we?’ Burke realized as soon as he’d said it that he’d made a mistake by drawing Hyde’s attention to him.

‘Since you’re not doing anything,’ - Hyde thrust the reel into their driver’s hands - ‘you can run this up the hill to the crest and connect it to this.’ He placed a small but heavy matt-black box on top of the drum.

‘Me? Run? All the way up there?’

‘Don’t piss about, move. And you can stay up there. I’ll bring the transport.’

Watching the ace goldbricker of the Special Combat Company break into an ungainly trot, Ripper tried hard not to giggle and almost succeeded. He failed completely to hide a laugh when a snag in the wire almost jerked Burke off his feet.

‘You boys can listen if you’re not too busy,’ Ripper called out to the pioneers.

‘Like I was saying,’- he shook his head and a bead curtain of raindrops flew from the brim of his helmet -‘this uncle of mine, he used to screw with a crazy dame from the county funny farm. His theory was, if she ever upped and told on him, who was going to believe a crazy lady. And it worked a treat, for a couple of years. That is until the old shrink who ran the place got himself run over and squashed flatter than Scully’s tenderized cat.’

That he didn’t appear to have anybody’s attention didn’t bother Ripper. He ploughed on.

‘The new boy they brought in was fresh out of medical school, full of new ideas and fancy notions. First thing he did was to halve the number of pills being swallowed. The old boy had kept all the crazies doped so he could have a quiet life. So just after that my uncle comes sneaking around, looking for his weekly blow- job. First he knows that everything ain’t all it was is when his crazy lady throws a fit and bites the end of his pecker. I heard tell that his yell carried clear across to the next state.’

‘How did he explain that?’ Despite himself, Hyde had to ask, though he knew he’d regret it.

‘He kinda tied a bandage on it, only needed a little one, and goes staggering home. The fool tried telling my aunty
that he lost it to a snapping turtle while crossing the creek. He must have been in shock because that was a mighty foolish story to come up with, seeing as how it had been dry for the best part of a month.’

Andrea looked over the parapet of the bridge. The water was churned white as it butted the piers. A coping stone she dislodged disappeared with a noticeable splash in the turbulence.

‘Destructive.’ Despite what they were about to unleash on this idyllic spot, Hyde resented the act of minor vandalism.

‘I have become used to destroying things. Perhaps it has become a habit.’ Shouldering her rifle, she sent a spray of tracer-laced bullets into a dovecote built in beneath the mill’s eves.

The flaking cream-painted woodwork burst apart in a welter of blood and feathers and tumbling bodies as the rotten structure disintegrated under the impacts.

‘You’re bloody mad.’ It was a moment before Hyde could bring himself to comment on the senseless action.

‘Of course. We all are, as insane in our decision to stay in the Zone as others are in their determination to get out. While we stay we kill. They would kill to leave. For me there is no distinction.’

There was no inflection in her tone, and Hyde saw no change in her expression either as she clipped in a fresh magazine. To her it was a simple statement of what she saw as fact. But he couldn’t debate it with her. Inside himself he could detect some of the same ingrained sense of combined resignation and determination to keep hurtling from one danger to another. As yet though, the urge had not stifled his instinct for self-preservation.

That he couldn’t argue with what she said made him angry.

‘I don’t give a fuck about your dangerous urges to destroy everything about you, but don’t do bloody stupid things that can drop the rest of the squad right in it, including me. If the commies have managed to push elements past that minefield they could be close enough to have heard that demonstration of mindless venom.’

His words were undercut by a ripple of blended cannon fire and secondary explosions. Though on that point his mind was put at rest, he still felt the rage burning inside him.

‘Get in the truck.’ If he couldn’t take it out on her, perhaps he could take it out on the enemy.

They needed a backup in case the fuel-air bomb didn’t function. He’d already fused several bar mines, and now he laid them on the bridge, just over the brow where an approaching vehicle wouldn’t see them until it was too late. Especially if they were closed down and racing to make up lost time.

But it wasn’t very likely they’d charge onto so obvious an ambush site without checking it first. There were times, though, when the obvious could be the hardest to deal with. The Reds wouldn’t be able to dispose of the bar mines by gunfire for fear of damage to the bridge, and removal by hand meant more delay. Even then he’d chosen mines with a variety of anti-handling mechanisms whose assorted difficulties would tax the ingenuity of the most experienced assault engineers.

The last in place, he ushered the pioneers on board and climbed into the high-set driver’s seat. ‘Right. We’re ready to start killing again.’

Looking straight ahead, Andrea’s lips hardly moved. ‘I did not know we had ever stopped.’

As the Scammel moved off, its tailboard clipped the brickwork and sent another of the coping stones end over end into the water.

With the truck parked just beyond the crest of the hill, they gathered about Hyde as he lifted the safety cover over the firing switch. His thumb was actually brushing the short slim stick of bright metal when they heard the approaching motor.
‘Say, someone has their foot hard down.’ Ripper screwed up his eyes to be first to see the lead element of the Russian column. ‘Hell, that ain’t no …’

‘Oh God. No, no!’ Hyde screamed at the top of his voice, but the effort was wasted. They were too far away.

The luck that had brought the bus around the minefield on its wildly circuitous journey had finally run out, and brought it to the bridge. There was no attempt to check its speed as it started across.

A massive explosion erupted beneath the driver’s position. The front of the vehicle burst apart, propelled outward by a huge bubble of flame. Aluminium panels, seats and showers of glass fountained high in the air. A legless body soared in a slow cart wheeling arc to be lost in the river.

Its impetus carried the shattered bus onward and a second bar mine was triggered by the impact of the tangled metal. This blast hurled the vehicle sideways, to slew in a mass of sparks into and almost through the parapet.

Through his field glasses Hyde could see that half the length of the interior was piled with bodies, some moving feebly. The rear window had been forced out by the blast and lay in the road unbroken, complete even to its rubber and chrome strip surround.

Survivors began to climb from the wreck, some handing out blood-covered children to those who had been first to exit.

‘Someone get the dressing pack from the cab.’ Hyde put down the control box. ‘Come on, we can’t leave the poor buggers.’

‘No, we haven’t the time. They will slow us.’

‘Piss off.’ Hyde tore Andrea’s fingers from their grip on his arm. ‘They’re your bloody people. Now get that first-aid kit…’

As she grudgingly obeyed, he looked again at the distant scene. Panic appeared to have set in among the injured civilians; some tried to claw their way back into the bus, others ran in frantic circles. One of them collapsed and lay still, and then another and another.

‘What…?’ Panning the ground with binoculars he saw the cause. ‘The Reds are through the minefield; they’re shooting the poor bastards.’

From the partial concealment of a bend in the road, where it emerged from the woods, a lavishly camouflaged, squat-hulled tracked APC was hosing long bursts of machine-gun fire at the refugees.

Trapped on the bridge, their escape blocked by the hulk of their earlier transport, the women and children flopped to the ground. Even when the last was down the firing continued, sending hundreds of rounds into the heaped bodies until there was no more movement.

‘No! They haven’t seen us.’ Barking at Ripper, who was traversing the Browning, Hyde choked down his own urge to retaliate, but not his revulsion at what they’d witnessed. He checked his watch. They had still a few minutes to spare before they’d have to start back. So they’d be cutting it fine, so be it. He wanted to pay those shits back tenfold.

The reconnaissance vehicle edged cautiously forward. Very slowly and hesitantly the turret roof hatch opened and its commander appeared. He seemed unwilling to expose himself to danger and stayed so low that his nose appeared to rest on the turret top. The hatch made an angled roof over his head.

Traversing slightly, the turret brought its main armament to bear on the bridge, but it was not with its 73mm gun that it opened fire, but with the anti-tank missile mounted above it. The commander ducked back hurriedly only a second before the launch.

Riding a bright tail of flame, a threshing coil of fine wire unreeling behind it, the chunky broad-finned rocket soared
along the road. Twice it veered abruptly to correct its trajectory.

Powerless to interfere, Hyde watched and recognized the lack of training or experience of the operator controlling the flight. A good man would have kept the transit time shorter by manipulating the controls more smoothly. The fact that he was going for a stationary target at short range should have made it a textbook exercise. He was not surprised when at the end of the missile’s erratic course its impact was several meters short of the bus.

Lashed by the hail of fragments, the grotesquely stacked bodies leaped into macabre animation as the powerful warhead pounded a hole through the road deck.

Reappearing, the commander surveyed the damage. As the smoke drifted to give him a clear view, the vehicle’s co-axial weapon again sent ripples of tracer at the bridge. A crew member climbed from the loader’s hatch and began to reload the launch rail.

‘A perfect target.’ Andrea sighted for her grenade thrower, then turned and snarled at the sergeant as he punched the weapon toward the earth. ‘Why?’

‘Because, you stupid cow, the major may love you but I don’t. With me you get away with nothing. You try something like that again and I promise I’ll see that you go in the cage with all the other rubbish, the other East German border guards. Understand?’

His fist stinging from the hard contact with the barrel, Hyde was forcing himself to bide his time. From what he had seen of the overcautious, even timid, performance by the Russian advance guard he concluded they were either from a freshly formed unit, or an old one so leavened by replacement drafts as to be little better. And if he was right in that, then the losses they sustained in their recent encounter with Voke’s minefield would also be having a marked restraining effect on them.

But still it took an effort to hold back. He again had the control box in his hand. He longed to throw the switch, but after what they’d done simply blocking their route was not enough. Not by a long way.

That the bus had driven onto mines he’d laid he would have to live with for the rest of his life, but he’d never intended that as the outcome. The communists’ act of shooting down those wounded women and children had been cold-bloodedly deliberate. It was not something he would shrug aside as a fortune of war.

‘Better keep our heads down. They’ll start a bit of probing in a minute.’

‘I’m already underground, Sarge. I’ll send you a postcard with a kangaroo on it.’ Using an entrenching tool with more energy than was usual for him, Burke had hollowed a scrap at the roadside. Sparks flew from the tip of the entrenching tool as it struck flint below the topsoil. ‘I hope they don’t use mortars. A couple of tree bursts and we’re all fucked.’

Ripper had to duck as heavy machine-gun fire stitched a path across the crest of the road. A ricochet zipped past, clipping the ring mount and sending splinters of fine lead particles into his hand. Blood welled instantly from the multiple flesh wounds.

‘Aw shit.’ Wiping the back of his hand on his jacket, Ripper examined the mass of almost invisible punctures. ‘I’m real cheesed off with using eyebrow pluckers. Last one like this was in my face and I was shaving out bits of metal for a week.’

He lowered himself into the cab and released the brakes, waiting for the Scammel to roll a little way before reapplying them. ‘Now the only thing they’re gonna see of me is the lead I’m throwing.’

Its tracks fanning spray and mud, a T84 rocked to a halt beside the APC. Hyde could make out the slab features of an officer who appeared immediately to start shouting at the APCs reluctant commander. The tank man unholstered a pistol and waved it wildly.

‘He’s giving the poor bugger hell, and I bet it’s not for killing civvies either.’
Perhaps it was his imagination, but Hyde thought he saw the commander’s face pale as he reluctantly climbed out and was clearly ordered to stand in full view on the tank’s engine deck.

‘Wouldn’t Clarence enjoy a target like that.’ Hyde could imagine the quick precision with which their sniper would have eliminated both men. He would hardly have needed to move to shift the graticle from his first victim to his second.

‘If he could be patient he would only have needed to fire once.’ With her sharp eyes Andrea could see almost as clearly what was happening as the NCO with his aided vision. ‘Watch for a moment and you will see what I mean.’

The tank man appeared to be working himself to a frenzy, making extravagant gestures with the pistol. Suddenly the APCs commander crumpled onto the deck of his machine.

‘Oh jeez, will you look at that.’ Ripper heard the faint report of the shot. ‘What the hell can we expect from them if they do that to their own?’

TWELVE

‘The Reds can jam us for all they’re worth, use any electronic countermeasures that take their fancy. It won’t make the slightest difference. We’ll still hack them down as fast as they appear.’

Revell tried not to appear so, but he was sceptical of the claims made by the lieutenant in charge of the Rapier battery.

‘Come on, I’ll show you.’ From a corner of the main barn, Lieutenant Sutton pointed out the dispositions of his men and equipment. ‘I hate to disappoint you but I should tell you we don’t have a battery here, nothing like it, just part of two detachments.

‘Actually just two launchers, but God knows how many reloads. But we also scrounged a towed Vulcan system from that marvellous Aladdin’s cave down there. That’s over by those old hayricks. One of the launchers is by the tractor shed and the other at the edge of that little copse higher up the hill.’

‘Wouldn’t you be better throwing in your lot with us? ’Very kind of you, Major, but no thanks.’ Sutton waved to one of his men who was leaving his sandbagged post. ‘I say, where are you...’ The man waved a shovel.

‘Oh, yes, all right. Well, have a good one.’ Again Sutton turned his attention back to Revell. ‘As you can see, we’re very well dispersed and the component parts of a towed Rapier system really do make a jolly small target when they’re spread about. Plus of course we’ve dug in the generators and roofed their little houses over with turf to reduce their IR signature to almost zero. Would have been nice of course to have had some of those lovely armoured mobile versions instead. Then we could have flitted about and confused the commies even more, but what we’ve got will do.’

‘How will you manage with our radar blinded, though?’ Revell was surprised by, could even admire the skill with which the launchers and their ancillary equipment had been blended into the countryside, but for days his men had been hit by Soviet air strikes when jamming had rendered useless the most sophisticated air-defence systems.

‘You infantry chaps are all the same - got this sort of blind faith in technology, and when you find out it’s not working for some reason you dash about like chickens with your heads off. No offence, of course.’

The slightly sheepish grin on Revell’s face was sufficient unarticulated evidence of the truth of that.

‘If they persist in jamming, then we’ll simply wait until we can actually see them. Jets right down on the deck or choppers actually touching down, it’s all the same. Boom, instant wreckage. Mind you, if they come at us mob-handed it might present the odd problem.’

‘What do you call mob-handed?’ He didn’t want to, but Revell had to ask the question.
Lieutenant Sutton considered for a moment. ‘Well,’ - he paused again - ‘when we were up near Hanover, with the same number of launchers, we did take out five of those damned noisy helicopters inside three minutes. We can certainly engage and make problems for that number. But I tell you what, I have an absolute maniac of a gun-layer on the Vulcan who’d make sure that if a chopper did touch down nothing would get out of it alive. Does that set your mind at rest in any way?’

Overwhelmed by the RAF officer’s aura of self-confidence, Revel could think of no answer. ‘Have you got land lines to the castle?’

‘No, but then they’d hardly survive your dropping a few thousand tons of brickwork on them, would they? If you get lonely you’ll just have to wave.’

The lieutenant’s sense of humour was beginning to wear somewhat thin on Revell, but he realized the young officer might be using it as cover for nerves. ‘You can take care of your own close-in defence?’

‘I’ve forty men altogether. Working the launchers with minimal crews I can put most of them into my perimeter defences, and of course I’ve got the Vulcan. My problem has been persuading my chaps that not all of them can have GP machine guns. They all came back from that dump toting M60s and draped with more ammo belts than an army of Mexican bandits.’

Across the valley the castle still stood intact. It looked as though it had been there forever and as if it would continue to be, as if the very landscape had been designed around it. But there was nothing in the Zone that could be regarded as permanent, not even the landscape itself.

‘I have to get back. Good luck.’ Revell held out his hand.

Sutton hesitated a second, then accepted it. ‘You too, but it’s the Russians I feel sorry for. You wouldn’t believe the number of rounds we’ve got for the Vulcan.’

The top of the hill had been raked by cannon and machine-gun fire that had pulverized the road and slashed the pines to ribbons. There had been no need for Sergeant Hyde to insist on fire discipline. It would have been instant death for any of them to raise their heads and attempt a puny retaliation.

The probing fire slackened, and then ceased. Cautiously Hyde looked out, the act made less dangerous by the masses of piled bark and cones. ‘Here they come.’

A dismounted squad of infantry were moving toward the bridge. They crouched low, automatics levelled. Behind them came a pair of tracked infantry carriers. Half out of the open rear-deck hatches stood more soldiers, tightly clasping rifles and grenade launchers.

‘I should think it will be ...’ Hyde gauged distances, ‘right about now.’

The second armoured personnel carrier was suddenly hidden by a shower of white sparks. Fire belched from the open hatches and its passengers were enveloped by scorching pillars of vivid flame. Hidden from sight within the pall of grey smoke, the APC shuddered off the road into the trees, and then simply dissolved in a tremendous explosion as its ammunition ignited.

Surging forward, the T84 opened up on the mill. A billowing mass of white dust marked the violence of the first impact. Slowly, a section of the building’s roof sagged and tiles slid from their place to shatter on the road and bounce from the roof of the bus. A second shell followed but passed clean through the structure without exploding.

Machine guns and light cannon lashed out at the mistaken target. Bullets raked the walls and the few windows. Glass shattered and lengths of scaffolding were wrenched away and thrown down to land in a wild tangle.

Another mine was triggered, and this time it was the squad of infantry who took the force of it, every man being mown down by the inescapable blast from a claymore.

Trying to press on, the Russians brought on their own destruction. A fragmented steel scythe swept away another
The T84 stopped and its commander waved on more APCs. The mines concealed among the trees silently ticked off the numbers, and then the verges were lit with a series of yellow stabs of flame.

Pierced by a jet of molten metal, another tracked carrier began to burn, its fuel tank’s contents boiled by the stream of plasma. Hatches flew open, but by the pressure of furnace-hot gasses, not by human hand.

With a track blown off and its turret torn away, an APC swerved into another alongside, crushing its hull and riding onto it.

Surviving crew leaped clear and made for the supposed safety of the trees. The first to reach them found no safety there. Shotgun mines cut them down and left those who had been lucky enough to escape that fate, as well, cowering in confusion in the middle of the road.

Another tank that moved forward shuddered under an impact against its turret rear, but boxes of retroactive armour neutralized the missile warhead’s power and it kept going. It moved in alongside the first T84 and both began to pound the far bank of the river.

‘Come on, you bastards, make a try for the bridge.’ Hyde had forgotten time. Finger poised over the activating switch, he waited for an attempt to force a passage past the mill. ‘They want that bridge.’ He held up his hand and made a small gap between thumb and finger. ‘I want them to be that close to thinking they’ve got it.’

Revell knew that Hyde’s section would not be back on time. There was no mistaking the growing sounds of battle from the direction of the bridge. The sweep hand of his watch was brushing away the last moments to the expiration of the hour.

They were heard by Clarence also, and his thoughts as he listened were very different from the major’s. It was two weeks since he’d had a live target in his sights. He wished he were with the section getting to grips with the enemy, actually fighting, not forever standing about waiting for something to happen. And then frequently being disappointed.

The last fractions of the hour ticked by, and still Revell did not close the firing circuit. It was Andrea who made him delay. He couldn’t bring himself to be the one to cut her off from hope of survival.

All the men, pioneers and combat company, stood in the village street, turned to look at the castle. There was something else they were looking for as well, but it didn’t appear. A man had been posted to watch, to signal with a flare if he spotted the ambush group on their way back.

Handing the detonator box to Voke, Revell knew it could not be his act that sealed Andrea’s fate.

Voke lifted the safety cover. ‘It is a pleasure to do this for more than the reason you might think, Major. The castle was marked as an auxiliary storage facility for the main dump. Once it is destroyed I shall have no difficulty explaining what happened to a great deal of clothing and equipment. I shall write it off as lost in battle.’

Five minutes past the hour, and still no flare, nor any diminution of the cannon- and automatic-weapon fire. If anything it appeared that the tempo of the exchange was increasing.

‘It must be done, Major.’ Voke looked to the American for confirmation. He waited for an answering nod before crushing his thumb down hard.

There was a delay, a short one, as the impulse ran through the great length of wire. To Revell it was an eternity. A thousand times he’d wished he could be free of his obsession with Andrea, and now with this he was, and in his heart he knew it wasn’t what he really wanted. With this he was not just cutting himself off from her, he was signing her death warrant.

A long plume of dust was driven violently from an upper window of the castle. It came out horizontally, its formation making no concession to the wind and rain until it had sprouted fifty meters from the wall. Then in rapid
sequence it was joined by a dozen more. Feathers and bursts of the same leaden cloud gouted out from between tiles on the roofs.

The crack of the firing of the first charge was lost among the ripple of others that followed. With an almost absurd slowness a massive featureless slab of wall began to bulge as turrets began to collapse. It burst outward and a monstrous pall of dust rose to engulf the whole structure. As it rose it was stirred to wild turbulence by turrets and towers plunging to destruction inside it.

It did not rise far, beginning to spread in the wind and be beaten down by the rain before it was twice the height of the now-scattered walls. Lighter particles fanned out to merge with the storm clouds; most of the airborne debris began to roll down the vertical walls of rock, following the huge slabs of shaped stone and giant splintered roof beams that were already settling at their foot. A dull rumbling was all that had accompanied the spectacular avalanche, and that died quickly, without echo.

Standing aside from the others of the audience, Boris pushed his balled fist against his mouth and bit hard on his knuckles until they bled.

He felt as though his mind were going to explode, it was in such a turmoil. Overriding everything though was fear. That was it: sheer, stark-naked terror. Always until now the communists had been in front of them in attack, or more often behind them in pursuit. With this action they had deliberately cut themselves off, locked themselves into a position that, no matter what delaying tactics were employed, would shortly be surrounded.

His hand went to his holster and unconsciously he unfastened it and felt the comforting bulk of the Browning automatic. He pulled it out and released the magazine. Ignoring the blood running down his fingers, he thumbed a round out, rolling it between his stained fingers. Deliberately he put the bullet into his breast pocket. He would save that one for himself.

THIRTEEN

From the scanty concealment of the litter on the road Sergeant Hyde watched the Soviet combat engineers working to clear the mines. Smoke from burning vehicles masked much of their activity, but twice he saw fountains of dirt that marked where two of them at least had not been using sufficient caution.

He could have slowed the process even more with a few well-directed bursts, but that would have drawn attention to him and his section. As it was, the T84s sometimes came uncomfortably close with the random suppressive shelling of their side of the river.

‘I think they’re doing that on a ‘just in case’ basis.’ Hyde spat soil that stank of raw explosive. ‘If they thought they were really facing an opposed crossing they’d have called down artillery support by now.’

Coming forward in short rushes from cover to cover, a squad of assault engineers reached the bridge and, edging along hugging the low parapet, they reached the back of the bus. The last few meters they came on more confidently, walking on the bodies of the dead. They all froze, and then laughed when one of their number slipped on a blood-covered arm and landed abruptly on his backside, without triggering any mine or booby-trap.

‘They’re getting a bit cocky.’ Burke checked that he had a round chambered in his rifle, then took out another magazine and laid it by his side.

Timing was everything. Hyde subdued the strong urge to trigger the fuel-air device immediately, and waited. It was then they heard the dull rolling rumble of the castle’s destruction. There was quite literally no going back now.

A Russian engineer climbed into the bus and worked his way forward, threading between the stacks of mangled seats and bodies. Reaching the front, he scanned the rest of the bridge, then called on the others before jumping down and making for the mill.
His squad followed, passing gingerly between the jagged projections of metal and plastic that was all that remained of the passenger vehicle’s front third.

By this time their attitude was casual, almost light-hearted with relief at another dangerous task completed, and they stopped and took out cigarettes.

They sat on the parapet, legs dangling above the broken remains of a bar mine. Split open by flying wreckage, its contents lay scattered and useless.

Grinding and rumbling its way past the battle tanks came the huge angled ‘dozer blade of an armoured engineer’s vehicle. The turretless machine lurched through a turn, and as it reached the bridge, elevated a powerful-looking hydraulic arm. As it extended, it deployed a four-pronged grab that swayed wildly from side to side. A final, less violent, course correction and its tracks bit into and climbed onto the civilian corpses, tearing them and crushing them into the road surface.

The T84s moved up behind it, waiting to cross, and with the mines in the woods at last neutralized, more APCs threaded their way between the ruins of those that still blazed and were decorated with the burned remains of their crews.

‘Looks like a lot of our stuff down there.’ Burke noted the several captured NATO transports among those backed up at the rear of the tanks.

‘So the major was right.’ In a row beside her, Andrea placed five 40mm grenades. She hesitated before returning one of them to her belt. Long before she had taught herself that overkill was wasteful, but it was a lesson that by self-discipline she had to keep drumming home. ‘If the Soviets are using captured equipment in the front line, they must be suffering shortages that would make the capture of the valley very tempting.’

Casually, not out of suspicion or interest, a Russian strolled to the wall concealing the pressurized container. He looked around, then swung over the wall and, planting himself with feet apart, began to unfasten to relieve himself.

Hyde threw the switch and then dropped the box to grab the glasses from Burke, snapping the strap. A moment to refocus ... and there it was.

A gushing cloud of sickly yellow vapour enveloped the Russian and he collapsed from sight. It expanded, doubling and redoubling in circumference. It grew to the height of the mill and to a breadth that encompassed the bridge and the leading tank.

‘It ain’t gonna work.’ Ripper watched the rapid expansion of the fuel-air mixture, saw it start to spill over the sides of the bridge.

For that instant Hyde thought he was right, the automatic ignition sequence had failed ...

A monstrous concussion lifted the sergeant and jammed the binoculars savagely hard into his eyes. The force broke open scar tissue that squirted tears of blood down his cheeks.

Mill, bridge and tanks were hidden inside an orange fireball of colossal size. From it hurtled a blast that snapped trees and stripped the ground about them down to bare earth. As it reached its maximum extent it began to rise, sucking upward with it masses of forest debris.

It revealed the old mill, slates and window frames and doors gone, slowly twisting to the right and folding in upon itself. Tons of brick broke away to reveal the skeleton of its machinery, and then the tall structure was collapsing faster into a pile that could not be contained within its narrow site.

Much of it deluged across the bridge, sweeping before it the flame-sprouting hull of the combat bulldozer. Every external fitting had been ripped from it, even its tracks. There was no longer any parapet to offer resistance, and with the wreckage of the bus it was tumbled over the edge and down into the raging water. Violent clouds of steam leaped after the ascending fireball as the furnace-heated hull of the ‘dozer and the semi-molten shell of the bus made
a temporary dam. Such a weight of water was not to be resisted for long. Beating spray high above the bridge, first the passenger vehicle and then the military were swept away.

Save perhaps as calcinated fragments, the Soviet engineers had been blasted from existence. There was no sign of life from either of the T84’s. Both had obviously had their turrets dislodged and they now sat at odd angles to the hulls. Dark smoke wreathed from every hatch and port. And in front of both lay their broken tracks, stretched out almost to their full length, illustrating how far they had been shoved back by the force.

The mountain of rubble and giant cast-iron and oak gears and wheels were settling on the bridge when that overburdened arch began to produce harsh grating sounds interspersed with sharp cracks as load-bearing blocks fractured and crumbled to powder. When it failed it happened suddenly, the whole width of the span falling almost in one piece.

All of them dazed by the violence they had experienced, they stumbled back to the Scammel and clambered aboard.

‘Where to?’ Wiping dirt and grime from his face, Burke found he’d been cut by flying splinters.

‘There’s only the one road, back toward the castle.’

‘It’s not there anymore, Sarge. You heard it go down, same as we all did.’

‘It’s still the only road we’ve got. Maybe there’ll still be a way back into the valley.’ Hyde dabbed at the cuts about his eyes with a wad of cotton torn from a field dressing. It came away saturated. ‘And if there’s not we’ll find some farm track that’ll enable us to put a bit more distance between us and the Reds. Maybe that one.’ He pointed at a narrow dirt road that was almost hidden beneath the trees. ‘Remember where it is in case we have to double back to . . .’

Burke had to brake hard. A tree lay across the road. He was reaching for his M16 even as he noticed that its base was sawn through.

A burst of automatic fire slashed across the cab front and punched star-edged holes in the windshield. There was a cry of pain from the back seat and blood spattered the cab’s interior.

Wheels locked, the Scammel screeched to a stop and its doors flew open. Another single shot rang out from the woods and a Dutchman framed in the doorway let go his hold and pitched onto the road.

Firing from the hip on full automatic, Andrea sent the contents of a magazine spraying across the trees. From the ring-mounted fifty-calibre above the cab, Ripper hosed armour-piercing incendiary rounds into the woods. His face was set in a grimace of pain and he kept his finger down hard, not ceasing until he had a stoppage. He cleared it fast, finished that belt and quickly reached for another.

Hyde saw the powerful rounds chewing and slashing the standing timber, and added the weight of his own fire. They’d been caught by surprise, completely off guard, but had fallen instantly into the anti-ambush procedure that was drilled into them. ‘It’s coming from over by that forked tree.’ He ducked into cover to reload and came out again to see the girl send a grenade toward the area he’d indicated.

The white phosphorus burst in a dazzling spray of white smoke and golden globules of chemical fire. A scream soared up the audible scale and off it.

More automatic fire came from beneath the trees, but it was ragged and passed overhead. Burke hosed the general area of the direction from which it came and as he fired his last shot, Ripper laced the spot with a whole belt fired without pause. There came a yelp of pain and the sound of a body thrashing on the ground.

From within the smoke generated by the grenade staggered a blackened travesty of what had once been a human. It clutched an AK-47 that fountained a sparkling ball of incandescence from its ignited magazine. Two steps were all it managed; then it toppled and lay still.
‘Is that it?’ About to bring down the dying man, Burke held back when he saw it wasn’t necessary. It passed through his mind how weird it was that seconds before the man had been trying to kill him, yet when he’d appeared in that appalling condition he’d been prepared to put him out of his misery.

In answer to his question a burst of sub-machine-gun fire punched bark from the pines about them.

‘Can anyone see him?’ Hyde tried shifting to a better position and had to dive back when the move attracted another and more accurate short burst. ‘Come on, someone must have seen where that came from.’ Hell, they had a Russkie column behind them that by now was mad as could be, and they were being held up by one cunt behind a tree. He looked around. Andrea was close by, looking to him and toying with a grenade.

‘Put two HE into that tangle over there, fast as you can.’

She nodded, slipped the shell in, sighted and fired in one fluid motion. A second was on its way before the first struck.

The explosions, both tree bursts, blended together, and as their sound died away it was followed by the drawn-out creaking and splintering of falling timber.

‘Don’t shoot, don’t shoot.’

A scrap of cloth was waved from behind a toppled fir.

‘Look, I’m unarmed. I’m coming out.’

A Sterling sub-machine gun was tossed out, followed by a pistol and a long glittering hunter’s knife.

Taking no chances, Hyde stayed behind cover. The figure that stepped cautiously from among the smoking fragment-scarred trees was heavily bearded and dressed in a style that betrayed its inspiration as the uniform of several nations, but the predominant effect was British.

Moving his weight nervously from one foot to another, the man held his hands high. His fingers clenched and unclenched spasmodically.

Searching him quickly and expertly, Hyde emptied his belt of spare magazines and hurled them away. He was about to do the same with a well-made clasp knife, but changed his mind and put it in his pocket instead.

‘Can I put me arms down now?’

The gesture from Andrea made him jerk them back up again.

‘Look, I’m sorry if there’s any harm done. We thought you were commies. Just doing our bit you might say.’

‘Who are you with?’ Hyde more than suspected he knew the answer before he asked it. He wasn’t surprised when the man became vague and evasive.

‘Yeah, well, we’re not sort of like with anybody, not as such, that is, if you see what I mean.’

Walking behind their prisoner, Hyde let him worry for a moment and then barked an order. The man sprang to attention, though even as he did it he tried to stifle the reflex reaction. He looked furious with himself as he tried to assume a more relaxed stance, but it was too late.

‘Give us a break, Sarge, you know what it’s like; we aren’t all fucking heroes.’

‘Put your hands behind your back.’ To emphasize the instruction, Hyde jabbed his rifle forward, making sharp contact with the base of the man’s spine.

With strips of cloth his hands were tied tight, and as an added measure were fastened to his belt. Hyde jerked hard on them to make certain the bonds were secure. ‘There’s no breaks for you, chum, but I’d like to give your neck one
at the end of a rope.’

Knowing that he was not about to be shot out of hand, the deserter gained confidence. ‘No chance of that, Sarge; only the Reds top their own.’

‘Who were the other two?’

‘Just a couple of Turks I fell in with. The ambush was their idea. Honest, Sarge, they were the bosses. I told ... I thought you were commies.’

‘Clever of you then, if they were running the show, to wrangle the safest position for yourself, wasn’t it?’ Turning away in disgust, Burke went over to where the second victim of their return fire had fallen.

The frantic initial thrashing had slowed, but he went forward cautiously and was parting some bushes when a single shot rang out. Burke ducked, hesitated, then stepped behind the undergrowth.

An ugly splashing, gurgling noise was audible. He knew what it signified and relaxed his guard. Unable to withstand the agony of the stomach wound from which his punctured intestines protruded, the Turk had finally managed to get the barrel-tip of his AK into his mouth and pull the trigger.

In the fading light Burke couldn’t see it, but he knew the pulsing blood would be coming from a massive wound in the back of the ambusher’s skull. Turning back toward the others, Burke made a cutting motion with his finger across his throat.

‘Let’s get him out of here.’ Hyde pushed their captive back toward the truck, and as he started, he heard a shuffling noise coming from the near-impenetrable pine forest to their rear.

‘Hold fire.’ His shout came just in time.

With Andrea and Burke he watched as the file of young girls hobbled into view. That was the fastest they could move with their ankles fettered, wrists tied and nooses of thick rope joining each to the one behind.

Their prisoner whined excuse and apology without being asked.

‘They’d have died if we hadn’t rounded them up. It was the Turks’ idea; we were going to take them somewhere safe. We haven’t touched them ...’

‘Just a humanitarian act, is that it?’ Not waiting for an answer, Hyde reversed his rifle and crashed it into the back of the renegade’s legs, sending him sprawling. ‘You bloody scum.’

FOURTEEN

‘No, no. It was the other two. I just went along with them.’ Curling himself into a foetal position as protection, from further blows, the deserter pleaded and begged.

‘How long would they have lasted on their own? Oh shit, we haven’t hurt them. I told you, we haven’t touched them.’ Getting no response he began to panic. ‘Well, the Turks did, not the girls. I wouldn’t let them touch the girls. There was this boy, he wasn’t right in the head, they took him off one night. They came back without him. Fuck it, you know what those animals are like.’

He paused, uncurled to look up at the three rifle barrels directed at him. ‘We thought you were commies. One of those stupid Turks had bogged our transport, right over the tracks. All we wanted was your wheels, we’d have let you go ...’

Burke could sense the man’s fear. They made eye contact and the deserter must have seen his thoughts, because he immediately switched to Andrea, but he found no comfort, no hope there.
He hadn’t realized one of his captors was a woman. He directed his appeal at her.
‘We were taking them somewhere safe, that’s all. You’ve got to believe me.’

‘I do not believe you.’ Her finger eased back against the trigger.

‘No, no, no. Ask the girls; they’ll tell you. We haven’t touched them. Go on, ask them, ask them.’

‘You hear these things, but you don’t believe them.’ It took an effort for Burke to resist the temptation to empty his weapon into their cringing prisoner. ‘There was a rumour last year that a few of the bandit gangs had started a slavery business, supplying girls for the Russians and houses in the bigger camps, but you never want to believe things like that.’ His attempts to keep his temper in check faltered and then failed. He brought his heel down hard on the man’s thigh.

‘No, come on, lads, queen’s reg’s.’ He squirmed, fighting off the blow. ‘I got to have a proper court-martial and all that...’ He gagged as another kick took him in the chest.

‘That’s enough.’ Hyde grabbed the man and hauled him to his feet. ‘You’ll get your court-martial, but I’ve half a mind to hand you over to them.’

It was not as much a threat as it should have been. Huddled together, the girls looked too frightened and bewildered to be thinking of revenge.

‘I suppose you just happened across a group who were all in their teens and early twenties, did you?’ Hyde found he was breathing heavily, not out of exhaustion but through forcing down his natural instinct to unleash another blow.

‘Look, I told you, it was the Turks who did all the dirty work.’ He searched their faces, almost indistinct in the gloom. ‘I just told them the kids didn’t fetch decent money and the old ones would never make it...’ It was too late to retract and he knew it, but tried out of sheer terror, and in that he made the mistake of appealing to Andrea.

‘You tell them what it’s like ...’ He froze, the rest of the sentence stillborn. There was a knife in her hand.

Hampered by his bonds his recoil was too slow and he took the slashing attack across the face. The razor like blade opened his cheek from below the left eye to the centre of his chin, splitting both lips. The flesh peeled aside, exposing white bone and muscle tissue before being hidden by a gush of dark blood.

‘That’s enough.’ Only Hyde’s intervention prevented a second a more deadly lunge. Clamping down on Andrea’s wrist, the struggle brought their faces close together.

The proximity of the sergeant’s horror-mask of a face had no effect on Andrea. ‘Let me finish him.’

‘We’re taking him back. If his time’s up, then he’ll buy it when the Reds catch up with us. You’re not going to play judge, jury and executioner like you have before. Get those girls to the truck and try not to frighten them any more than they are already.’

Bewildered and bedraggled, the captives let themselves be led by Burke while Andrea sawed at each of their halters in turn. Even when released from that restraint, they kept their place in line like horses long used to being tethered and not knowing how to behave with a free rein.

‘I sure am glad you’re back. I were thinking I was gonna bleed to death.’ Ripper lowered himself down onto the seat and slit the blood-stained material to expose the bullet hole in his leg. ‘For the first time ever, I wish Sampson was with us.’

Burke examined the neat entry wound and made Ripper turn on his side while he looked for an exit hole. ‘It’s still in there. You got lucky—no breaks, no arteries cut. I’m afraid you’ll live.’ As he applied a dressing he looked into the back of the cab.

The Dutchman had been hit twice in the head, through the left eye and the centre of the forehead. His blood
saturated the bench seat.

Taking the body by its feet, Hyde hauled it out of the cab and it flopped on top of the body of its compatriot. ‘Get the girls up on the back. Throw those pallets off to make room.’

Realization of the change in their situation was dawning among the young women, and when Burke came to help the last few climb up, several tried to throw their arms around him to demonstrate their relief and gratitude. He was embarrassed by the emotive display and pushed them from him, but not hard, muttering, ‘Bitte sehr, bitte sehr, don’t mention it, don’t mention it.’

A short blond girl, chocolate-box pretty even under layers of dirt streaked by tears and with her long hair matted, stroked Burke’s arm as she waited, last to board. Over and over she quietly repeated, ‘Danke schon, danke schon.’ As he went to lift her she kissed him on the cheek, lightly and quickly, and then averted her eyes as for an instant they caught his.

‘Ah reckon I’ve seen near enough everything now,’ Ripper chortled. ‘Didn’t reckon I’d ever see a good old boy like you brought out in a blush.’ He just couldn’t resist the dig at their driver as he climbed back behind the wheel.

‘One more word out of you,’—Burke crashed into first, then remembered his cargo and let the eight-wheeler crawl forward to mount the fallen timber slowly—‘…just one more, and you’ll have a matching hole in the other leg.’

In a series of almost slow-motion lurches that brought stifled screams from their frightened passengers, the Scammel wallowed over the obstruction.

‘There’s no choice now.’ Hyde shoved their prisoner along the back seat until he was seated in the still-solidifying blood, prodding him with the barrel of his Browning. ‘We can’t go dragging those kids around the battlefield like this crud was prepared to do. We’ve got to get them back to the others. At least in the castle there’s food and water. Even if in the next few hours it could have a horde of Reds hammering on the door.’

‘How the hell are we supposed to do that?’ Burke was using every facet of his driving skills to keep up the best pace he could while not subjecting the girls to more danger and discomfort than he could help. ‘There’s supposed to be the granddaddy of all minefields right around the place.’

‘I don’t know.’ Hyde cocked the pistol and held it to the deserter’s head as the man tried to turn so as to bring his bound hands onto the door catch. ‘Please do. If the fall doesn’t kill you, I will.’

Moving from the door, the man changed his tactics. ‘You’ve got to do something about my face. I’m bleeding to death.’ His words came out distorted by the wound. With each word fresh blood welled from his split lips and dripped into his lap.

‘You concentrate on staying still and quiet.’ Hyde set the safety on the pistol and lowered it, but didn’t lower his guard. ‘And don’t worry about that little cut. Facial wounds are rarely fatal.’ His scar tissue crinkled in mockery of a smile. ‘I speak from experience.’

‘Shit.’ Ripper stared in disbelief. ‘It looks like they nuked the place.’

Through the trees they glimpsed the castle, or the stump of it that remained. Only where it joined the rock was there and there a section of wall that was recognizable. Dust still hung thick in the air about it and huge slides of rubble had cut swaths through the trees on the lower slopes.

‘So come on, tell me.’ Burke braked to a stop just short of where a torrent of broken stone had obliterated the road. Piled to three times the height of the cab, from it poked jagged lances of roofing timber.

‘Come on, Sarge, I’m asking. How do we get back to the others through this lot?’

Andrea craned her neck to survey the cliff. ‘I think I may know a way.’

Only the great gateway remained recognizable. Every other section of wall was shattered, and topped with many
meters of broken stone. Abandoning their transport on the road, Revell and Voke split their men into parties to clear a way back into the cellars, and to erect firing positions atop the mountain of rubble, and in those ground floor rooms that had survived being crushed.

The dust lay knee-deep and was being turned into an adhering slurry that soon coated them from head to foot, transforming them into grey spectres.

Revell led a group through the huge hall, now partially filled with rubble where its massive roof timbers had failed to withstand the vast weight of the collapse of the main tower.

They were lucky; the smaller rooms beyond had survived and the door to the cellar steps was clear. Voke caught up with them as Revell groped for the generator switch.

Flickering fitfully at first, the machinery made hard work of starting up in the dust-laden atmosphere. It hung so thick that it made pearly halos around the lights.

Voke held a cloth over his mouth and nose to filter the worst of the choking particles. ‘This is the only way that is clear. It would take much time and heavy lifting equipment to break through to the other entrances. The demolition charges may have been larger than was truly needed.’

‘I agree.’ Revell spat to clear his tongue of cloying grit, and failed. ‘It was definitely rather overdone.’

Together they toured the warren of cellars. There had been roof-falls in two of the smaller rooms, but most, and all those with the weapons and ammunition, had survived intact.

They found Sampson already at work in the improvised dispensary, checking supplies, laying out instruments and dressings on a cloth-covered stool beside a rough pine table.

‘All I need is a couple of well-starched nurses and I’m ready to start up my own practice.’ He opened a case of morphine ampoules. ‘Looks like I shan’t have to tie anybody down this time.’

‘Let us hope that none of this will be needed.’ Voke winced as a bone-saw was added to the other implements of the surgeon’s trade.

‘I get the impression he’ll be disappointed if they’re not.’ Revell continued the tour of inspection.

Several of the working parties were now removing stores to stock the positions topside. Frequently the officers had to flatten themselves against the cold damp walls as men staggered past loaded with cases of mortar bombs, grenades and rockets.

They had just passed a door decorated with an ornate lock when something made Revell pause and hold the lieutenant back.

‘What’s in there?’

Voke shrugged. ‘It is a room we did not need. I do not recall ever opening it.’

‘It’s open now.’ Looking again at the lock, Revell noticed that the escutcheon plate was scratched and dented. As he went to push it, from the other side he heard the musical trill of birdsong.

‘Don’t shout at me, Major.’ Dooley threw his arms wide, an unopened bottle in either hand, in a gesture of supplication. ‘I must be dead and this is heaven, and no one gets shouted at in heaven.’

The vault was as big as the largest they’d seen, but its contents were markedly different. Down the full length of both sides were tall wine racks. In the centre of the floor, standing over a drain grating was a small deal table and on it a row of glasses.

‘You’re not dead, but if you don’t pull your weight with the others you soon will be wishing you were.’ Revell
turned to the lieutenant. ‘Are any of your men teetotal?’

For a moment Voke’s command of English let him down. ‘Do you mean abstainers? Oh yes, twenty at least.’

‘Well, put your best fire-and-brimstone man on this door.’

‘Old William that is who you need. If you wish, he would enjoy smashing the bottles and letting all this ... demon drink, run to that sump.’

‘No, Major. You can’t, you mustn’t.’ Dooley was panicking at the thought. ‘There’s thousands of bottles of wine here, and there’s champagne, cognac, sherry...’

‘Out!’

‘Then can I leave my birds here? If there’s going to be some mad prohibitionist freak on the door they should be safe enough. No one’s going to get past him.’

Above the ruins the pioneers were working hard and fast. Amid the jumble of stone they had already fashioned several interconnected strong points, improvising top cover for every pit and trench. In every position was emplaced a TOW anti-tank missile launcher or a clutch of Starstreak and Stinger antiaircraft launch tubes. In the small area of courtyard that remained clear had been set two mortars, and close by them an assortment of ready-use rounds, including smoke, high-explosive, illuminating and, in greatest numbers, Merlin top-attack armour-penetrating bombs.

‘Your men know their job well.’ Revell watched as a Dutch pioneer improvised a roof, from splintered doors, over the vulnerable ammunition.

‘I think they are enjoying themselves, Major.’ Voke was handed a bulky satchel by one of his men. He glanced into it, then handed it to Revell. ‘A little present for you. Something you asked for.’

Puzzled, Revell accepted it, and from its depths extracted three large drum magazines. ‘I don’t believe it. I’ve been eking out my last seven shells and you come up with these.’

He substituted one for the half-empty box mag on his assault shotgun. ‘Perfect, flechette and explosive.’

‘It is my hope that the communists do not get close enough for you to make effective use of that weapon.’ Voke patted his British Endeavour rifle. Its bull-pup configuration made it look insignificant close to the chunky mass of the wooden-stocked combat shotgun. ‘I prefer a weapon that can engage them before they get that close.’

Revell clipped the spare magazines to his belt. ‘I don’t think the choice will be down to us.’

FIFTEEN

‘Hold your fire! Hold your fire!’ Carrington yelled at the top of his voice, and heard the instruction passed on in Dutch and English.

He looked again through the image intensifies It didn’t reveal a perfect picture, but it clearly resolved into a view of a soft-skin eight-wheeler of NATO type.

‘Is it Hyde?’ Smothering himself in clinging grey mud in the process, Revell hurled himself into the machine-gun nest and grabbed the vision-enhancing night glasses.

‘Ought to be, but there’s too many of them.’ Adjusting the focus, the major saw that their hard-man was right. Six, including Andrea had gone out on the mine-laying detail. He could see at least twice that number moving about the vehicle.

‘Star shell?’
The suggestion made sense, but for Revell there was more than simply the lives of the sergeant’s squad to consider, with action so close. Yes, the truck had to be Hyde’s, perhaps returning with prisoners from their skirmish, but it might be a Russian recon team who’d taken it over and were employing it. It was a stunt the Warpac forces had used many times to approach NATO positions.

‘If it’s Reds we’ll let them get close before we hit them. I’ll want prisoners.’ Oh yes, he’d want prisoners. If they’d captured or killed Andrea he was personally going to make the death of every communist who fell into his hands very painful and extremely protracted.

Rummaging through the truck’s tool kit, Burke swore as he caught the back of his hand on the unguarded blade of a hacksaw.

‘There’s got to be one in here somewhere.’ He cursed again as a sharp object, unseen in the dark, pierced his thumb.

‘What the hell are you looking for?’ Hyde was impatient. ‘Let’s put a torch to this rig and get moving.’

‘You can’t risk those girls to climb up there still wearing those leg-irons. The fetters are made out of what looks like old tin cans. Their ankles are already red- raw. By the time they’re halfway up, the fucking metal will have cut their feet off.’ His hand lit on a familiar shape and he drew his long-handled bolt-cutters from the bottom of the locker. ‘Got them.’

‘Be quick about it.’ Unfastening the gas tank filler cap, Hyde threaded a strip of cloth in until he felt it slacken when it floated on the fuel. As he worked he could hear the repetitive ‘snick’ as their driver severed the girls’ bonds.

‘Why do you bother?’ Andrea watched the sergeant’s preparations. ‘When the Russians arrive it will be destroyed anyway.’

‘If we’re going to scramble up that lot, then we need a light. This wagon should burn for the best part of an hour.’

‘It will also make us perfect targets if they arrive before we reach safety.’ Hyde noticed there was no real concern in her voice; she was simply making an observation. ‘That’s a chance we’ll have to take.’ He applied a match to the protruding material, then hauled several pallets off the back and propped them against the big tank.

The dangling length of cotton had flared at the first touch of the flame. It almost went out when it reached the lip, then, fed by the fuel that saturated it, became gradually stronger and lit the area in an ever-widening circle.

None of them looked back as they began the ascent. The Scammel was simply a machine that had served a purpose. Only by being destroyed was its usefulness being extended.

The girls needed no goading or encouragement at first to make the best possible speed; it was Ripper who more and more frequently needed assistance as his damaged leg stiffened.

Several times they had to make changes of direction when they struck a patch where the going was too precarious over loose material. In other places they were faced by extensive slabs of unbroken wall that had somehow tobogganed over several hundred meters to come to rest intact. Their thick coating of dust, turned to a gritty lubricant by the rain, made them unscalable and forced further detours.

It was exhausting, punishing work. The wild shadows thrown by the burning truck played constant tricks with their eyes. Sometimes it smoothed deceptively a series of jagged crags, then would threaten them with a bottomless black gulf where none existed.

The way grew steeper and at times Ripper had to be dragged or lifted. Two of the girls were also in difficulty, but their companions helped them, urging them on with earnest words of encouragement.

None of them dared look up. The point they aimed for seemed as far away as ever. And if they looked back all there was to see was the burning Scammel, now alight from end to end as its diesel fuel boiled and ignited the wooden load bed and the cab.
Andrea felt herself to be climbing like an automaton, handgrip following handgrip, instinct taking over from reasoned thought. Her arms and shoulders ached but she pushed from her mind the urge to stop and rest. She suppressed the thought that not all of the thickly sown mines might have been triggered or neutralized by the great mass of falling stone and tiles.

She slipped, and felt the hard rock pummelling her body before her kicking feet and scrabbling fingers found holds to check her slide. Gulping air, she steadied herself, then began cautiously to edge to the left in search of an alternative route.

Looking back, Andrea saw the others, more strung out than they had been at the start, and working in small groups for mutual support. It was not just to avoid unwanted advances that had prompted her to be a loner; it had always been her way to avoid dependence on others or responsibility for anyone. But as now, that could work against her, force her onto her own resources, to near breaking-point.

They were halfway, almost to the top of the fallen rubble. Beyond that was bare rock for nearly a hundred meters before they might find some footing among the broken remains of the outwork.

A stone her foot dislodged tumbled away to miss their prisoner narrowly. She saw his upturned face mouthing obscenities at her, and purposely dislodged another.

Hyde could taste the paste of mortar and ground granite. It clung to him in amounts sufficient to triple the weight of his combat fatigues and drag him down. He felt as though he had been climbing forever. Concentrating only on the next hold and not dwelling on how many more there were to go, he was surprised when he caught up to Andrea. She had stopped in a patch of deep shadow between two huge blocks.

‘This is no time to be taking a breather. Keep moving.’

‘How?’ The light from the burning truck was diminishing but it served to display what lay ahead. Andrea slumped against the debris. ‘I had thought the falling material, besides covering the mines, would have shattered the cliff face. It has not. Instead it has swept it bare of any ledge or hold.’

It was the first time Hyde had ever heard her defeatist, and by that he knew she was too exhausted to go on. Her iron will and rigid self-discipline, her determination never to be bettered was finally evaporating, beaten from her by the gruelling climb.

‘Right. We’ll rest here a while. Wait for the others to catch up.’ Scanning the rock wall, Hyde could see only confirmation of her words. ‘There’s got to be an alternative route. We’ll find it. We bloody well got to, we haven’t a choice.’

Ripper hauled himself into the small space, and put his hand to the dressing on his leg. It felt freshly damp. He was bleeding again.

‘Sarge, what we’ve ‘done so far was tough, but not even a mountain goat is going higher. I got to tell you, I’m not feeling at my best, but I sure as hell don’t want to be left here. Come daybreak it’ll be a sitting target for the first commie that wanders down that road.’

‘Listen.’

Shepherding the girls to join the group, and dragging the deserter with him, Burke shushed them to silence. It was hardly necessary.

From the direction of the mill, growing louder every moment, came the rumble of tank tracks. They were travelling fast, as attested by the thrashing and squealing of linked cast-metal over sprockets and return rollers.

‘You know,’—tampering with the field dressing made Ripper wince with pain as the soft absorbent wadding moved across the ragged edge of the wound— ‘I think we are well and truly in the shit.’

They watched the lead tank of the Warpac column slew to a violent halt on the apex of the bend before the roadblock. Its long cannon barrel swept back and forth as its turret oscillated to cover each side of the road in turn.
'Please, just don’t look up here, boys.’ Ripper felt mesmerized, like a deer in the beam of a hunter’s flashlight. ‘I bet he’s getting his ears chewed off for stopping.’

‘Maybe.’ Hyde examined the T72 through his glasses. Every hatch was dogged down tight. While they remained like that there wasn’t much chance of their spotting a small group high above them and trying hard to make themselves inconspicuous. ‘But maybe that jamming is a two-edged weapon. It’s being pumped out at such a power it could be screwing up their radio links as well.’ He turned to Andrea. ‘Did you say that Spetsnaz creep you hit had a microwave dish?’

‘Yes, and from the look of it I would say it had seen considerable use.’

‘So.’ Hyde looked at the long whip-aerial above the turret. ‘If their communications are buggered we should have confirmation any second.’

The tank recoiled on its suspension as its cannon spat a 125mm high-explosive shell into the obstructing avalanche of stone at point-blank range.

The blast of impact and the sharp crack of firing blended in one, and when the smoke cleared the ragged stack of material appeared undisturbed.

Tentatively the gunner’s hatch opened and a figure, grotesquely distorted by the erratic light, lifted itself out and slid warily onto the rear deck. There came the tinny ‘clang’ of a track-guard-mounted locker being opened. Unrecognizable pieces of equipment were taken out, and then a shallow metal dish that was handled carefully.

‘Take him out, Andrea, fast.’ It was a terrible gamble, might have the fatal consequence of drawing attention to them, but for Hyde that was one consideration among many.

There was a perceptible delay, not long, but sufficient to be proof of just how tired Andrea was, and then she fired. The grenade’s accuracy, or lack of it, was further demonstration.

As the grenade impacted on the road under the rear of the T72, the hull protected the gunner from the fragmentation effect but it was close enough to send the Russian scuttling head-first back inside the turret.

Reloading quickly, Andrea took aim for a second attempt before the hatch was pulled shut.

‘Forget him. Smash that gear on the rear deck.’

Hyde’s instruction came in time and the second 40mm round arced down to the road to detonate on the tank’s engine deck close to the open locker. The litter of unassembled equipment was instantly mangled and swept away, along with bedding rolls on the back of the turret.

Even as that second grenade did its work of destruction, the T72 and other unseen armoured vehicles on the road behind it opened up with their main and secondary armaments and fired a protective screen of smoke bombs.

Long bursts from co-axial machine guns were dwarfed by the massive concussion of heavy cannon and the rapid crackle of lighter weapons aboard APCs.

Unaimed, unleashed as a wild, blind, suppressive fire, the gun flashes hit the scene in a stroboscopic nightmare effect through which only the flashing blurs of orange and green tracer could be discerned.

Ricochets soared from the lower slopes and flew past the huddling party, and then a single 30mm armour-piercing round found them, tumbling deformed after its first contact with a boulder.

A piercing scream, and blood showered over them all. The body of a girl fell forward and flopped from projection to projection until it was lost amid the jumble of stone. Two more of the girls whimpered in pain, struck by shards of bone from the shell’s unwitting victim. They slowly collapsed and their heads lolled as they went into shock.

The rest of them crouched lower, those on the outside questing with their fingertips for anything that might be
dragged across in front of them to form a barricade.

‘I told you all.’ Ripper got no satisfaction from the mass of young warm female flesh pressing against him. ‘We are deep in the shit.’

SIXTEEN

Step by laboured step Revell had watched the painfully slow ascent of what he had become certain was Hyde’s group. There were men, volunteers, who could be spared from other tasks to go out and assist them. It was the lack of suitable equipment that had delayed the attempt.

One of the few cellars to be completely caved in beneath the crushing weight of the falling walls had been that containing the pioneers’ specialized stores. Among the items buried were all the coils of rope and wire cable, the hand winches and the blocks and pulleys.

It had taken an hour’s hard work and a measure of luck to salvage sufficient rope for them to entertain the hope of reaching the stranded party.

Voke entered the MG pit and looked down into the darkness. ‘We have spliced the lengths together. I think with what we have we could reach them from the outwork.’

‘That means opening the postern door.’ The information posed Revell a dilemma.

‘What with the generator and all the activity down there, the moment we open up it’ll stand out like a beacon on every Warpac IR-scope in range.’ ‘We could erect a sandbag wall immediately inside.

With all power off while we bring them up, the risk would be much reduced.’

It was the straw Revell had been searching for and he grabbed it. ‘Get to work. Put as many on the job as there’s room for down there.’

From the road far below came the faint but distinctive grind and rattle of tank tracks. A moment after came the short sharp crack of a rifle grenade, quickly followed by a second.

At only a few paces Voke could hardly see the major’s face. He hesitated, waiting to see if the order would be countermanded.

‘Carry on.’ As Revell made his way to the courtyard he heard the storm of wild retaliatory fire, and hurried to join Thorne and the waiting mortar crews.

They stood ready, the absurdly long Merlin rounds held poised above the gaping tubes. The barrels were almost vertical, in anticipation of engaging close-range targets.

‘I want two rounds dropped right under the wall, then four more walked back along the road, fifty-meter intervals. Fast as you …’

His last words were drowned and his ears punished by the blast as the first armour-seeking round was sent on its way. The second blast came only a fraction of a second later.

Revell was tempted to grab the pocket-sized fire-control computer and calculate the time of flight, but knew that in his unpractised hands it would take too long. He tried to read the pale green glow of the display ticking away the time on target in Thorne’s hand.

‘…three …two …one.’ For an instant, doubt flashed through Thorne’s mind, then he heard the vicious screech of the warhead’s detonation on a hard target. It was followed by a more powerful explosion. ‘Set the bastards’ ammo off. Must have impacted beside the driver’s position to do that. Second was either a dud or couldn’t find a tank of its
At short intervals more rounds were slipped down the dull-painted tubes and each time the blast seemed little attenuated by the bell-shaped muzzle-tops.

The transit times of those rounds was fractionally longer, but there were three more audible indicators of successful hits.

‘Right, move, you lot. Time to get our heads down.’ Unfastening a barrel from its bipod, Thorne led his men and Revell in a dash for the cover of a doorway. A makeshift dogleg barricade had been erected in front of it.

‘They’re slow off the mark.’ Thorne checked his watch. ‘The commies have counter battery fire down to a fine art. I’m amazed we got that many away without getting one back in our lap, let alone had time to bolt.’

‘Maybe they weren’t looking our way.’ Revell propped the hefty circular casting of a base plate against an ammunition box. ‘I expect they will be the next time.

There’s some telephone gear down below. Rig up a line from here to a good observation post on top. Once the fight starts in earnest there’ll be no point in trying to hide. Until then restrict yourself to anti-armour shots at identified targets.’

Far above the ruins, its bursting lost among the rain clouds, a giant star shell crackled into spitting magnesium light. The immediate effect was an unearthly glow that increased in intensity as the parachute-suspended ball of iridescence dropped lower.

‘That’s 155mm.’ Thorne looked at the slim 81mm mortar barrel he held. ‘Hardly fighting fair, is it? They must have some heavy self-propelled artillery supporting the column.’

As the illuminating round continued its slow, gyrating descent, Revell headed for the cellar entrance. He took the stairs three at a time and quickly reached the spot where Voke was directing and assisting in the erection of the sandbag wall.

‘No time for that now. Kill the generator. Get the door open.’ A bolt stuck and Revell grabbed a hammer from a pioneer and smashed at the rusted metal, breaking it with his third blow.

The door was pulled open not to the jet emptiness of an overcast night, but a flood of silver light that made them throw up their arms to shield the eyes. Some- where behind them the generator died. Had it not been for the cessation of its almost subliminal humming they would not have noticed. The few lights paled to total insignificance against the glare.

Burning vehicles on the road, their flames fed by hundreds of litres of fuel, the bodies of their crews and all their ammunition could not compete.

Making the most of it, a young Dutchman started down the steep ramp of the outwork. The path was narrower than previously, and lacked its protecting wall, all smashed and swept away. Twice he had to stop to clear through mounds of broken brick. He reached the second tower, paused to examine the way ahead, then turned to wave for others to follow.

Three more followed, carrying the untidy coil between them. They wedged a pickaxe into a crevice and secured the rope by several turns around it, then began to feed the loose end over the side. As they did the light from the star shell was suddenly lost.

Hyde felt the frayed end of rope brush against his shoulder. His first grab missed and almost sent him over the edge. Regaining his balance, he waited for it to swing back and this time caught it just before it would have hit him in the face.

He accepted the blond girl Burke thrust forward to be the first, and began to fasten it under her arms.
‘I will stay behind with this one.’ Andrea indicated their prisoner. ‘And will come up last.’

‘The fuck you will.’

The little blond girl began to shake as he fastened the rope, and Hyde began to expect trouble from her, but some quiet words from Burke in his appalling German and she was still and made no fuss as she was hauled up. Small pieces of rock rained down. Absently he noticed the sparkle of quartz inclusions as they reflected the light from the fires below.

‘You are not staying here on your own with this crud, because we’d never see him again.’ Hyde knew Andrea’s reputation and had seen in action what it was based on. ‘Eventually this bastard might get shot, or maybe hung, but sure as hell he’s not going to be diced.’

‘You tell her, Sarge, prisoners’ rights. You tell her.’

Hyde’s left hook to the deserter’s face would have sent him to his death if the same fist had not grabbed a wad of his clothing and pulled him back from the brink. ‘Any more out of you and I might let her change my mind.’

His facial wound reopened by the blow, and still dazed by it, the man squeezed himself back into a niche. Slowly he slid to a sitting position and tried to stanch the renewed bleeding by pressing his face against his drawn-up knees.

Twice more the sergeant had to employ the same punch, the last time because he’d instinctively ‘pulled’ the first go at quieting a girl who’d not responded to gentler methods to quell her hysterics when her turn came.

It was Ripper’s turn. He was cracking weak jokes as he started up, but then had to turn all his attention to preventing his wounded limb from making hard and frequent contact with the rock.

A steady cascade of chippings marked the progress of those already on the path, as they cautiously shuffled their way to the sanctuary of the castle cellars.

‘You’re next.’ Pushing the rope toward Andrea, Hyde waited for the inevitable argument, but there was none. His offer of assistance securing the lifeline was brusquely rejected.

‘Me next?’ Even craning his neck right back until it clicked, and squinting in the poor light, Burke couldn’t see if all the girls were now safely within the shelter of the massive walls, but he knew the first of them would be.

‘What is this placer

Ignoring the deserter, Hyde watched their driver safely on his way, before turning and roughly hauling the man to his feet.

‘Is it some kind of blockhouse, a command post? What is it? I’ve got a right to know what I’m getting into. I’m a prisoner, right? Well, prisoners have to be removed from the battle zone, don’t they?’

Not responding, the NCO waited for the rope to reappear, then threaded it through the man’s pinioned arms.

‘Here, no. Come on, play fair, Sarge. You got at least to untie me. I’ll get broken to pieces being dragged up there ...

‘Much the same will happen to you down here if you keep on whining. Be grateful I haven’t tied it round your ankles instead.’

‘Hang on. I’m only a bloody deserter. Hundreds of blokes do it every month.’

‘But not all of them team with the scum of the Zone and start up in the slavery line.’

His anger would have led him to say more but the men on the path, sensing the weight on the line, began to haul. Hyde had to content himself with giving the man a hard twist that was certain to make his ascent all the more
uncomfortable.

The wait for his turn seemed to extend into forever. In the distance the Russian artillery fire was perceptibly slackening, with the last of it appearing to be going down about where the river would be. So they must have achieved most of their objectives. NATO forces had lost sixty miles of territory in a few days.

A brief concentration of shells went slamming into a far-distant hilltop. The Russian artillery always had plenty of ammunition. That had been one constant during more than two years of bloody fighting.

Once the company had overrun an East German battery of super heavies. The gunners had been in rags, many of them barefoot and all of them hungry, but the stockpiles of shells for the guns and for its air-defence detachment had been vast.

When destroyed, the enormous mushroom of smoke and flame had given rise to the usual local rumours about nukes. The East German artillerymen had surrendered without a fight, after hacking to death their sleek and well-fed Russian commanding officer.

It was hard for him to be sure, but Hyde thought he saw movement on the road. The flames that belched from the hatches and engine-covers of the T72 made bizarre shadows dance between the trunks, and his eyes were tired and sore.

The rope came down and he hurried to secure it, but even as he did he continued to keep watch, and this time he could be certain that it was no trick of the light or his eyes deceiving him. Files of men were moving along the edge of the trees.

As the first harsh jerking tug lifted him off his feet and the rope cut in painfully hard across his back, he heard the sounds of more tracked vehicles. Trees were splintering, motors revving hard to overcome the resistance of mature spruce and fir.

He saw the occasional shaft of light from imperfectly shrouded headlamps and then had to turn all his attention to saving himself from being repeatedly dashed against the cliff.

The men above, on whom his life depended were growing weary and his progress became agonizingly slow. That, despite his efforts to find every hold he could to assist.

‘You are the final?’

Coming from just above his head in an accent so thick as to be almost unintelligible, Hyde was startled by the voice so close at hand. He got a grip on the crumbling edge of the path and experienced a surge of relief through his whole body. It would have brought tears if his face had been capable of producing them.

‘Yes…’ God, he was struggling, don’t let him slip now. ‘Yes, I’m the final. I’m the last.’

Strong hands gripped him and dragged him to safety. Panting from the exertion, aching in every joint, he weakly resisted attempts to make him stand. AH he wanted was just to rest a while, for a few moments.

They were urging him to get moving. He knew he had to, and began to force himself to his hands and knees. Again the hands grabbed him, some lifting, some pulling him forward. Others plucked at the rope still tight about his chest.

As they neared the door Hyde tripped and went sprawling, cracking his head hard.

Overhead, white light seared the night away as another huge star shell burst above the ruins.

In a far, vague distance, Hyde heard a heavy machine gun rapping out a long methodical burst. Something bumped clumsily against him and made a screaming cartwheel of hands and face and boots down, down toward the waiting mounds of sharp stone.

He saw it impact beside a lifeless rag doll, saw the puff of steam as it ruptured. Then the path, just inches from his
SEVENTEEN

‘One more word out of you, man, and I’m not just going to sew your lips up, I’m going to sew them together.’ Sampson flicked a tangle from the surgical thread as he pulled the curved needle through for the last time. He snipped it off carelessly, leaving a long strand dangling.

‘You’re not going to win any beauty prizes, but in a day or two you’ll be able to sneeze without your head falling in half!’

‘Can’t you give me something? It hurts.’

‘That’s Andrea’s fault, not mine.’ Sampson dropped an instrument into a sterilizing solution. ‘You want me to go and ask her for you? After all, it’s her handiwork I’m repairing.’

The deserter waved a hand to signal a negative and went to lean with his head against the wall, cupping his face in his hands and moaning softly.

Sampson flexed his fingers. ‘Always thought sewing was a sissy game; never knew it could be so much fun. He’s all yours.’

From the deep shadow at the far end of the long room, Burke came forward. A blond-framed pale rounded face watched him from the corner.

‘Where you going to put him?’ Pouring surgical spirit over his hands, the medic took a swig from the bottle before recapping it. ‘Oh, man, that is one hell of a mouthwash. Seems pretty crowded down here. Where can you stash him where he can’t do any harm?’ For a moment he was about to step forward, thinking their driver was about to unleash violence on his patient, but was relieved to see him halt his menacing approach and make an effort to calm himself.

‘The major’s put a guard on the wine cellar. This specimen is going in there, but he won’t be enjoying himself.’ Very slowly and precisely Burke reached for, and between thumb and forefinger took a tight hold on the length of dangling surgical thread.

‘You’re coming with me, like a good little boy, aren’t you?’ Burke accompanied the last two words with jerks on the thread. ‘There, I knew you would.’

When they’d gone out, Sampson shook his head. ‘I don’t think the commies have got to bother with employing psychological warfare. Our boys are doing that sort of harm to themselves.’

‘It’s happening to their men as well.’ Hyde got to his feet. His head ached and felt as if it had been worked over with a large steel-shod boot. But he felt a lot better than he had ten minutes before, when he’d regained consciousness. He’d been reluctant to take it at the time, but now he was grateful for the medic’s advice to rest for a while. ‘So now will you tell me what’s been happening in the last hour?’

‘It’s two, actually, Sarge; check your watch. Now don’t get mad at me. Major’s orders were to let you come ‘round in your own good time, and I wasn’t to tell you nothing about the great big outside world until you’d rested.’

Hyde began to gather his equipment together. A new M16 and several pouches of magazines had been left for him. ‘So am I rested?’

‘You’re as fit as you’re going to be, without being pulled out of the line for a spell. I can tell you, though, it was as much your general physical state as the knock on the head that put you out cold. That was your body showing more common sense than your brain. You’ll know when you’re about to crash out the next time. When it’s due, the major and Andrea will collapse a few minutes before you.’
Without fuss or drama, Hyde gently pushed home the pin of a white phosphorus grenade that had become partially dislodged.

‘Sarge, that knock on the head must have made you stupid.’ Sampson breathed deep, looked hard and rose to his full height, his marine beret almost brushing the ceiling. ‘You ever do something so fucking half-witted as that again, anywhere near my patients, and sergeant or no fucking sergeant, I’ll ram that grenade up your ass and shove you out the door. And I’ll keep the pin as a souvenir.’

Hyde choked down his instinctive reaction to the tirade and threat. He knew the medic was right; it had been a stupid thing to do. A look around the cellar showed him the row of bruised and injured girls, some of them heavily sedated. The results of his action could have been horrific. ‘I wasn’t thinking. You get so used to ... sorry.’

Closing the door behind him, Hyde leaned his back against the wall and waited for the cold and damp to penetrate and ease the sudden prickling sweat that itched so much.

An ammunition detail passed, bowlegged under the loads of mortar bombs and belts of machine-gun ammunition. He followed them toward the surface. It would be good to breathe clean air. Down here it was foul, laden with dust, thick with imperfectly vented exhaust fumes and heavy with the smells of gun oil, raw explosives and stale bodies.

Reaching the steps he had to be patient for a while longer as a ghostly file of sludge-coated pioneers trooped down. The door at the top was open but when he stepped through it the atmosphere was no better. Not until he had climbed the well-worn path through the rubble to the top of the ruins was he able to gulp a reviving breath quite free from taint.

‘Welcome back to the land of the living, Sarge.’ Garrett had jumped at the NCO’s sudden appearance, and pushed his half-eaten chocolate bar into a crack between two blocks. Inwardly he cringed as he heard it slide smoothly far beyond hope of retrieval. It was his last.

‘What’s been happening?’ Hyde experienced an unidentifiable type of shock. His first words had been barked; now he added, almost in a whisper, ‘What the fuck is happening?’

The quiet was unnerving, so totally unexpected. As he’d climbed up he’d been speculating with himself on what he’d find, but this he hadn’t even considered. It had never entered his thoughts.

Without the distant glow of artillery fire to offer reference points, the stump of the castle seemed to be an ugly pale grey island in a matt-black sea that stretched to eternity. Save for the gentle patter of rain, and that further muted by the universal coating of soft mud, there was no sound at all.

‘How long has it been like this?’ As though in a church or library, Hyde felt he had to keep his voice lowered.

‘Since about ten minutes after you were brought in.’ Fishing for the lost candy, Garrett gave up when his watch followed it. ‘Could be the war’s over, couldn’t it?’

‘Wishful thinking.’

As though reluctant to prove the sergeant’s pessimism correct, there came a hesitant low rumble of sporadic rocket artillery in action. The missile flame-tails made brief shooting stars of white light as they zipped skyward. It petered out apologetically, the last round to be launched departed like an afterthought, barely visible, hardly audible.

Making a round of the defences, Hyde came across Revell in a strongly roofed TOW position overlooking the road. The burning armour was almost extinguished, only occasionally giving off brief showers of silver sparks or a white smoke-ring from an open hatch. ‘Are they up to anything?’ He slid into the small irregular-shaped pit between the officer and Dooley.

‘Take a look for yourself. There’s movement, but not enough to present a target worth our giving away our positions for.’

Hyde could make out individual and small groups of Russians flitting between the trees. They represented too
fleeting an opportunity for the missile weapon they possessed. If they’d been able to call down artillery fire ... ‘I suppose they’re still jamming?’

‘Yes, but they’re being rather more selective now.’ Revell stared out into the night. ‘I would imagine that our lot have managed to smear one or more of their big transmitters by this time. Those remaining are having to be a bit picky about what channels they choose to fuck up.’

Dooley unclipped a handset from a radio and passed it to the sergeant. ‘Here, have a listen.’

The frequency-hopping agility of the set was still being defeated by the colossal output of the enemy’s electronic countermeasures, but just as Hyde was about to hand it back he heard the radio find a clear channel. Before he could mention it, the jamming resumed across the wavelength. In that brief moment he’d heard a score of voices break in, and then be swept away.

‘If the interference stopped this minute,’—Revell clipped the handset back in place—‘the backlog of radio traffic must be enormous. We aren’t the only ones cut off. Everyone is going to be screaming for priority. It’ll be like the Tower of Babel brought up to date by high technology.’

‘What happened to the barrage?’ After days of being drenched with the sight, sound and smell of shellfire, Hyde was having difficulty adapting to a world without it.

‘I don’t know.’ It was a question that had been burrowing in Revell’s brain, but he had as yet come up with no answer. ‘Perhaps the Reds’ jamming really is working against them as well. You know what they’re like for setting a timetable for an advance. If the barrage was prearranged and they got too far behind, they’d lose much of its advantage. And if they were steamrolling forward too fast, then it’d be landing on their own heads. In either case, without reliable communication they’d have problems. might have been simpler to stop it for a while until they got themselves sorted.’

‘Or maybe they’ve cleared our guys out all the way to the river and are digging in on this bank and don’t need it anymore.’ Spitting loudly, Dooley panned the launcher across the countryside below. ‘Not that I find that any sort of comfort, because if that’s the case then we’re a few kilometres and a wide, river away from home. Not to mention the mass of Warpac troops we’d trip over on the way.’

He jerked the mount back to examine an area more closely, but failed to identify a target. ‘It’s just an idea, Major, but if I let them have one of these down their throats,’—Dooley patted the fat barrel of the tube containing the missile —‘it’s just going to make them dig in. Chances are anyway that I’ll more likely get one of them by having him run into the trailing wires afterward than by tearing him apart with a direct hit.’

‘Make your point.’

‘Well, I was thinking, one Red in exchange for a few thousand dollars’ worth of equipment seems pretty poor value. I guess that Clarence could achieve the same at a fraction of the cost.’

Revell could have kicked himself. Would have done if there’d been sufficient room. It made it worse that it was Dooley, of all people, who had brought the obvious to his notice. ‘Get him over here.’

‘... six so far.’ Ripper kept working on the machine-gun belts, adding tracer to some, substituting armour -piercing incendiary rounds in others. ‘One he hit right through a couple of bandoleers he was wearing. Turned him into a miniature Fourth of July.’

Frustrated at not being allowed up top to join the action, Ripper could at least enjoy the involvement of passing on stories he heard from the non-stop procession of ammunition haulers.

‘Shit, what must that take his score to?’ He began to strip tracer from a long belt of fifty-calibre bullets, replacing them with ball. ‘It’s a good thing he don’t carve notches in his stock; he’d be on his tenth by this time.’

‘More like his twenty-fifth.’ Burke had been only half listening. Sent out of the dispensary by the medic, he hung around in the corridor. ‘I lost count when his score passed three hundred, just after he turned down that medal.’
‘Is that for real?’ The reverberations of Ripper’s shrill whistle brought trickles of fine powder from between crumbling brickwork. ‘Pity we can’t infiltrate him into the Kremlin. War would be over in a day or two.’ He blew dust from a round and slid it home. ‘What the hell keeps him going?’

‘Hatred, pure and simple.’ Hearing footsteps, Burke hoped Sampson was about to leave the nearby room, but was disappointed.

‘That is a lot of hatred. Is that anything to do with the way he can’t bear anybody touching him? I’ve seen him scraping himself with a dry cloth fit to draw blood after someone brushed against him.’

‘Possibly.’ Burke had his hopes dashed again by the sound of more movement that came to nothing. ‘He puts up with Andrea though, but she’s the only one I know of. He’s been a one-man army since a commie bomber came down on his married quarters in Cologne, right back at the start of things. It killed his wife and kids. After that he was a machine, good one though.’

‘Three hundred plus!’ About to whistle again, Ripper remembered the consequences last time and thought better of it. ‘Hang on, though; I thought they were trying to weed out all the guys who’d got to like the killing, rotating them out of the line.’

‘He doesn’t enjoy it.’ Giving up waiting, Burke determined to return later when perhaps Sampson wouldn’t be so vigilant. ‘I’ve seen him retch after putting a commie down with a clean headshot.’

‘Then how does he keep going?’ Finishing the last belt, Ripper flexed his blood-stained fingers and lounged back against the wall.

‘That’s a piece of information he’s never volunteered, but I can make a guess.’ Not wanting to go, Burke knew he’d soon be missed and Hyde would be hunting for him. ‘I think he’s set a price, in Russian lives, on his revenge. God only knows what it is, or if he’ll ever achieve it.’

‘Then what - he goes on killing? Like it’s become a habit?’

Reluctantly Burke began to move toward the stairs. ‘Could be, or perhaps when he decides he’s finally done hell stand up and make a target of himself, or put the barrel of that beautiful rifle in his mouth.’

The sniper waited, patient, unmoving; the rifle sights were aligned on a space between two trees where he knew the Russian would reappear. It was three minutes now, but still he maintained his unwavering pose. He ignored the dirt in which he lay, the cold, the rain trickling down the back of his neck.

At six hundred meters the gusting wind made the shot, with its short engagement time, a difficult one. If he missed, it could mean a long wait before another target presented itself.

Long experience of observing battlefield behavioural patterns had developed in Private Clarence almost a sixth sense, and for no obvious reason his trigger finger gently took up a fraction more of the precisely set one-kilo pull-weight.

He anticipated the recoil and the flash-hider saved his night vision. Panning downward he saw an indistinct hummock of camouflage material lying between the trees. It moved, sluggishly, and Clarence unconsciously made a mental calculation to make a further slight allowance for the wind.

Setting up again, this time the wait was much shorter. A figure appeared over the fallen man and the sniper saw a white face turned toward him as he lightly squeezed the trigger.

The bullet must have met minimal resistance, perhaps entering an eye, or the open mouth. In any event it was a killing headshot. But the target, his victim, didn’t fall.

Standing, and still appearing to stare up at the distant sniper, the soldier’s body waivered slightly from side to side as if held upright by a supernatural force.
Knowing that so strange a scene was certain to attract other targets, the sniper’s experience told him to wait, but he had three rounds remaining in the magazine and he emptied all of them into the standing corpse.

He didn’t watch the result, sliding back into concealment to reload. His hand was shaking as he slipped the carefully selected rounds into the magazine.

Nineteen targets to go, only that many more and he’d be free. It was a minute after midnight. This could be his last day. Even as the thought formed, his hands stopped shaking and a feeling of relief and calm flooded through him. It was nearly over.

EIGHTEEN

The first of the explosions came a little after two in the morning. They continued at erratic intervals until an hour before dawn. Sometimes they came singly, at other times in ripples. A few were from close at hand, most from various distances away in the circle of high ground about the valley. Often there were other sounds as well, the wail of pressure-driven flame, the stutter of automatic fire, and most frequently of all came the screams.

As Revell toured their positions atop the broken walls, he thought that he knew how the ancient Crusaders would have felt, waiting for first light and the onslaught of the Saracens. The weapons were more modern, could strike farther and harder, but you were just as dead from a hit by a crossbow bolt as from the lashing shrapnel of a Russian 155mm airburst.

The wind had abated and finally died away completely, and the rain had eased until it was no more than a feeling of saturating dampness in the air. Together the changes signalled the chance of a better day, but they threatened a danger as well.

By imperceptible degrees, fingers of mist began to creep between the hills and ridges. Thickening rapidly, they merged to form a fog that filled every dip and hollow and began to climb the confining slopes.

‘I don’t feel nature is on our side.’ For the tenth time in as many minutes, Dooley wiped condensation from the lens of the TOW sighting unit.

Scully passed him a mug of coffee and sat down to drink his own. ‘Be bloody fair. If you were Mother Nature and you’d been mucked about like she has in the Zone, would you be on anybody’s side?’

‘That’s not the point.’ Using his finger to draw the skin from the top of his drink, Dooley tried to flick it away, failed, and wiped it down his front. ‘We’re the fucking goodies. We didn’t go marching into commie territory; they came crashing in here yelling provocation. I’d love to know how that poor old granny they hung in Munzenberg had ever provoked them. They only had to kick her Zimmer away to do it.’

A sharp explosion, slightly muted by distance and the shroud of fog, was followed by a secondary detonation, and then another.

‘How many tries is that they’ve had at getting through the minefields?’ Scully listened intently. Faint shouts could be heard, shrill and panicky.

‘Lost count.’ Dooley wrung out his cloth and wiped the launch barrel once more. ‘What I can’t understand is why they haven’t had a crack at us yet.’

‘They don’t realize we’re here yet, not in numbers.’ Hyde crawled in beside them and tilted the can to examine the dregs of coffee. ‘Far as the commies are concerned there’s one sniper operating from here and that’s it.’ He waited to be offered the residue and when he wasn’t, took it anyway. That it was cold he didn’t care; it sluiced the taste of ground stone from his throat.

‘That’s better. I can swallow now without sandpapering my tonsils. One bit of good news. The major’s torn up
standing orders and put Boris back on the radio. Garrett’s a bloody clown, worse than useless.’

‘No luck yet though, I take it.’ Scully dropped the mugs into the can, and cringed at the noise they made. ‘Sorry, Sarge.’ He hastened to change the subject. ‘So we’ve not got through then, yet.’

‘Picked up a few snippets from a Russian field commander in the area. Reception is terrible, but according to Boris the commies are having a rough time in those minefields. They were expecting to virtually walk in unopposed through the main entrance; seems we rather screwed that up for them.’

‘Shame.’

‘That’s not quite the word they’re using.’ Hyde watched Dooley wring drops from a cloth he’d have considered bone-dry. ‘They’ve lost two companies of assault engineers and four mine ploughs so far. Had to call for the divisional reserve. Boris says there’s a few threats flying about.’

‘So what they going to do next, bugger off and leave us in peace or start chucking nukes, like they usually do when they’re narked about something?’ He said it lightly, but Scully knew that when the Russians became upset and frustrated by unexpected reverses those were real options. The first was one rarely employed.

Dooley blew his nose, then swore when he realized he’d done it on his wiping cloth. ‘I know what they’ll fucking do, same as always. The man on the spot has tried the sledge-hammer tactic; now his boss will apply typical Russian logic and finesse and try an even bigger hammer.’

There was nothing further to be said, and they just sat there, each alone with his thoughts and his fears. Occasionally they would hear a voice from one of the other positions. It grew lighter, but the rising fog made the castle as isolated in the day as it had been during the night. There was nothing more they could do; their preparations were complete. Everything was as ready as it could be to withstand an attack from any quarter.

A powerful explosion lit the fog and sent it into twisting eddies. Six minor detonations followed so closely as to blend with the first.

‘Fuel-air. Nothing else has that punch.’ Hyde looked over the rough rampart, but there was nothing to be seen, except a patch above the hill about a half a kilometre away where the natural obscurity was thickened by black smoke. ‘Too far off to have been meant for us; they’re trying new tactics to crack the minefields ... Shit.’

Howling noise accompanied a Russian gunship that loomed from the fog, its whirling blades chewing the air hard as it sought lift.

Torrents of small-arms fire lashed toward it. Every detail of its construction was clearly visible as it slashed past the top of the ruins so close they could have reached out and touched the tips of its rotors.

Storms of debris and mud were whipped into their faces stinging hard, and it was that hail that saved the helicopter. It banked steeply and offered only its armoured underside to the streams of bullets as it clawed its way to safety. Belatedly the sights of a Stinger were wiped and the missile launched, but by then the air was full of decoying strips of aluminium chaff, bright flares and every type of decoy device. There was no loud report from a successful interception.

‘They know we’re here now.’ Scraping his eyes clear, Dooley hurled a rock after the gunship. The futile act didn’t make him feel any better, but he felt he had to do something.

Another of the vapour bombs was heard, but it didn’t share the slight success of the first. Built to resist the shock of the massive over-pressures, most of the buried mines remained sentient, waiting for their intended victim.

The trees, though, could not withstand the onslaught and fell outward in great swaths from the centre of the ignition. For some seconds after the beat of the second, unseen, gunship had receded, the creaking, tearing and splintering of their collapse continued.

A Rapier missile skimmed past an angle of the wall and clipped a projection. It tumbled out of control and broke up under the tremendous G-forces exerted on its thin casing.
'Slow off the mark.' Scully ducked as pieces of fin and motor components zipped over his head. 'But I’m glad to see the guys at the farm are at least awake. But who the hell are they aiming at?'

The stump of a leg beneath his hand trembled as his patient went into a spasm; and Sampson lost his grip on the protruding rubbery length of artery. A pulse of dark blood was hosed at the wall, and then the man on the table went limp and the rapid flow became a sluggish ooze.

Stepping back, the medic swore. He’d known in his heart he had no chance of saving the man, but not to have the time to even try... The terribly punished body had given up its fight for life seemingly willingly, with hardly a struggle.

A rocket’s warhead had stripped clothing, flesh and limbs from him indiscriminately and burned most of what it had left otherwise untouched.

That was the first he’d lost who’d lived to reach him. Sampson closed the staring eyes and covered the blackened face. He put his hands palm-down into a bowl of tepid water heavy with the smell of disinfectant. It was soothing, until he looked down and saw that the solution had turned as red as the many drops and splashes on the walls and floor.

‘Karen, will you find someone to take him out?’

The little blonde put down the mop with which she’d been attempting to swill away the worst of the blood and went out.

Sampson noticed that the mophead, contents of the pail and floor were all a muddy pink. He took hold of the long handle to finish the work and found that it too was sticky with blood.

Shells were hammering the ruins, and even deep below ground the concussion of the impacts could be felt. Sometimes a monstrous 182mm round would impact, and then the shock would travel down through the walls and be transmitted by the rock itself to the floor beneath his feet. The lights would dim and then flare once more to full strength, to highlight the dribbles of dust and floating cobwebs shaken from the ceiling.

He’d lost track of time; all he knew was that this was the first moment since the shelling had started that he’d not had a victim of it waiting for attention. Sampson did a round of those already treated. They were all quiet, making no complaint or fuss. It was something to be grateful for that the Russians had not as yet used chemical weapons. Working in respirator and full NBC suit with his patients at constant risk would have been a nightmare.

Most of the girls were still among the injured, but Karen and to a lesser extent a couple of the others had been a great help. Their presence, even that of those who were laid out in the far corner, had played a large part in controlling the situation when the trickle of wounded had suddenly become a flood.

Men with gaping cuts, broken limbs and extensive burns had been calmed by the sight of the girls going quietly about their work. Those who had been forced to wait for attention found new reserves of endurance while the girls moved among them, and their presence had not had merely a cosmetic effect.

As each man was brought forward in his turn, Sampson found them already prepared for him, clothing cut away, the wound cleansed.

But all their efforts could not rid the room of the smells that permeated it. There was no ventilation and the air was becoming foul.

Carrington entered, followed by a Dutchman who appeared reluctant to breathe the fetid atmosphere.

‘Got a stiff you want carted?’

As they struggled out with their awkward burden, Sampson followed, holding doors open for them. Along the branch passageway, into the main corridor to the steps and up into a ground floor room that was unrecognizable since the last time he’d seen it so shortly before.
Sections of the ceiling had fallen in, bringing masses of plaster that had been crushed to a fine white powder beneath heavy army boots. Against a wall was a close-packed line of jacket- and blanket-shrouded bodies.

Lowering the latest addition to the growing tally, Carrington didn’t flinch as a shell struck the outside wall and sent a fresh scattering of pulverized plaster over the corpses.

‘Why doesn’t the major bring you all down into the cellars?’ Sampson hunched his head down between his shoulders as a big shell pounded another crater in the mercifully thick fabric of the castle.

‘Can’t.’

Sampson found himself bobbing up and down while Carrington remained unmoved by the barrage. ‘All we’re doing is taking stick and casualties, for nothing.’

‘The commies are pushing a road through the minefield; we’re trying to put them off. We let them have it every time the dust clears for a second.’

A giant blow against the wall of the room marked the impact of a 182mm ‘concrete buster’ shell. Cracks radiated from a point a meter above the row of dead. Shards of carved stonework skittered across the floor and a drop of molten lead splashed on the dusty tiles and solidified into a ragged star.

Clutching a face opened from brow to chin, a figure stumbled toward the medic. Dashing forward, Sampson caught him as he sagged, and started down the stair with him.

Reaching the bottom step he saw Karen running forward to help. ‘It’s okay. I’ve got him, I’ll manage. You and the other girls start to get another room ready.’ He felt the man’s blood soaking into the shoulder of his jacket, warm and sticky. ‘We’re going to need it soon.’

An airburst seeded the weapon pits with razor-sharp slivers of steel. One carved a long groove in the Kevlar material of Dooley’s helmet; two more punched effortlessly through the launch tube of the TOW and crudely stapled it to the body of the missile itself, reducing them effectively to scrap.

Dragging a replacement forward, he noticed the lieutenant was pushing a wad of dressing inside the shoulder of his jacket.

‘You hit?’

‘I felt it pass right through.’ Withdrawing the pad, Voke showed that it had only a tiny spot of blood on it. ‘There was a burning sensation. Perhaps it has cauterized itself. That will save our overworked medic more work.’

‘Better get it checked.’

‘I shall, later, when there is time.’

Dooley made no response to that. If an officer wanted to be a hero, then he was quite prepared to let him. But if he got a scratch himself, he’d be down those cellar steps before you could say ‘napalm.’ As yet he’d not been that lucky; all he wanted was a little nick, just a cut that looked worse than it was, anything that would get him down there among those girls.

There were several columns of smoke rising from various locations in the circle of hills. Working through the night to find or push a path through the minefields, the Russians must have taken fearful casualties. When the sun had broken through the midmorning it had revealed the main enemy effort. A freshly bulldozed track led from the road to the area flattened by the gunship’s fuel-air bombs. The scar of turned earth had swarmed with Warpac assault engineers and their tracked and wheeled equipment, presenting a dream target.

Every weapon for which a space could be found on that side of the castle had fired until its barrel became too hot to touch.

Trapped by the mines ahead and to either side, the enemy’s stampede back to the road had turned into a slaughter. The safe track became a killing ground as mortar bombs, anti-tank rockets and streams of fire from Brownings and
mini-guns and grenade launchers saturated the area.

When Revell had finally called a halt there were no more targets to be seen. The armour and earth-moving machinery was wrecking and blazing and bodies were sprawled in literally a carpet of camouflage material across the bare soil.

Retaliation had come quickly, but by then most had made it to the comparative safety of the lower rooms and cellars before the first deluge, of artillery rockets, had plummeted down.

For half a minute they’d received the undivided attention of a battery of multiple launchers. Half a minute in which a pounding blasting, searing five tons of high-explosive drenched and pulverized the exterior walls and the layer of rubble overhead.

A single nineteen-kilo 122mm warhead had detonated against a lower floor window. The full force of the blast caught a group of pioneers on their way to the cellars. Those directly in line with the opening had stood no chance. Seven had died instantly, four more been so desperately injured that they lived only minutes, and another three were terribly wounded.

Mercifully for the first rescuers on the scene, the worst of the carnage had been hidden behind a swirling maelstrom of dust and smoke.

NINETEEN

Anticipating the Russian commander’s next move, the instant Revell sensed the barrage was finished, he rushed a heavy machine gun to their best-protected position and had it range with tracer on the partially completed route.

He was only just in time. Smoke shells began to fall and rapidly masked its location. The near-silent eruptions of burning phosphorus fell so close to the truck that they must have caused casualties among the first of the combat engineers sent to restart the work, and the asphyxiating pall, forcing the men to wear respirators, must have made their dangerous work that much more difficult.

As the concealing cloud began to spread and thicken, the Browning began to fire short bursts on fixed lines.

Now death came upon the toiling Russians when they thought they were safe. Those hit by the blind-fire died without hearing or even realizing they were under attack.

They couldn’t stop the work completely. Revell knew that, regardless of the cost in lives, but the MG fire, combined with such heavier concentrations as they could put down during lulls in the shelling, would reduce the pace of the work to a costly crawl.

As an added touch, he had the tracer rounds removed from the fast-consumed belts of fifty-calibre slugs, to enhance the demoralizing effect on the Russian troops. Now the powerful armour-piercing rounds would arrive and slice through men, trees and light armour without warning.

In answer to the harassing fire, the communists replied with their own, turning some of their biggest guns on the castle. Only the sheer scale of the target they were punishing enabled it to soak up the bombardment. The big artillery shells impacting on the enormous table of rubble could do little more than grind it into smaller and smaller pieces.

A near miss blasted the abandoned transport parked short of the gate and started fires that made an acrid cloud full of floating particles of lampblack from tires and synthetic cab fittings and upholstery. Gas tanks ruptured and sent showers of blazing fuel over the walls, but their great thickness made them impervious to the ferocious heat generated.

The hot black smoke hung about the site in the still air, and the first the garrison knew of the Russian attack was the distinctive sound of several Rapiers being fired and the crackling report of a Vulcan firing long bursts.
At the same moment the incoming artillery fire ceased, and to shouts from Hyde and the officers, men poured up to
man every position along the walls. Hugging the contours of the hills, about thirty blurred dots against the sky began
to resolve themselves into the outlines of Hind gunships and larger troop-carrying helicopters.

The lead machine fell apart under a direct hit from a Rapier and another following closely fell out of control, its
rotors reduced to splintered stumps by wreckage from the first.

A third Hind bucked and began a lurching turn out of formation as a Rapier passed through its cabin without
detonating. The forty-kilo missile, travelling at Mach 2, wiped away both door gunners and sent the sliding doors
and other sections of fuselage panel fluttering into the valley.

‘Strikers engage as they come in range. The rest of you hold your fire.’ Revell saw the puffs of white smoke from
the chin turrets of the gunships as their rotary cannons opened up, and then the flashes of flame beneath their stub
wings as their missile racks emptied.

The range was too great and the few hits struck the base of the walls at their thickest point. Another Rapier scored a
hit and a troop transport disintegrated and spilled its infantry cargo from a height of three hundred feet.

‘They’re bloody windy.’ Recognizing the ill-timed firing for the caution it was, Burke crouched over his mini-gun
and began to wonder if they’d come close enough for him to have the chance to use it.

Spreading out as pilots jockeyed to put more distance and other machines between themselves and the Rapiers, the
formation began to lose cohesion. Viewed from the castle, the machines appeared to overlap, masking each other’s
fire, and presented a perfect target for the deadly Stingers.

‘Look at them run.’ Finger still on the trigger, Burke raised his head from the sights to watch the helicopters break in
all directions as a salvo of ten missiles lashed into them. ‘They’ve never seen fire like that.’ If the approaching
squadron was employing any sort of electronic countermeasures they proved no more successful than the showers of
physical decoys they were scattering.

Six helicopters were hit, one of them twice, and they fell among the litter of flares and chaff they’d spawned. They
filled the sky above the valley with tumbling burning wreckage.

A big-bodied troop carrier side slipped through a series of jarring manoeuvres and pancaked into the centre of a
field, bouncing viciously hard in an impact that drove its landing gear up through the fuselage and wrenched off the
complete tail assembly.

Masses of flashing tracer from the distant Vulcan multi-barrelled cannon curled from the farm and enveloped the
wreck in an inescapable wall of steel. It erupted in flame.

For the surviving machines that was too much, and they turned in every direction to take the shortest route away
from the valley. For one it was a fatal mistake.

Keeping his finger down hard, Burke sent a full three hundred rounds across the side of the gunship’s cockpit and
cabin. Pieces of canopy flew off in a sparkling shower and the craft appeared to stop dead. His second burst passed
low, glancing off the Hind’s belly armour, but it wasn’t needed anyway.

Rearing up, the helicopter virtually stood on its tail before stalling and tumbling into a seesawing motion that sent it
smacking into the side of a hill.

The sound of cheering made Revell look around, and he saw all his and Voke’s men yelling and dancing with glee
and abandon. They’d got what they’d been waiting for, the chance to hit back hard, and they were celebrating.

‘Sergeant Hyde.’ Revell knew the rejoicing would have to be short-lived. ‘I want five Stinger teams left up here
under the best cover we’ve got. Everyone else down below.’ With a last quick satisfied glance at the pyres
decorating the valley and surrounding slopes.

Revell made his way to the strongly sandbagged position on the ground floor shielding the MG ranged on the track.
He squeezed in between the walls of gritty jute and then almost fell as his foot slipped in a broad pool of congealing blood. By a terrible freak of chance, while the men above, virtually unprotected, had escaped the slightest injury this time, a single cannon shell had entered the small aperture left for the protruding machine-gun barrel and decapitated its gunner.

Unlocking the bloody fingers still clenched about the Browning, the major rolled the headless trunk aside. Ignoring the mess in which he knelt he gave the barrel a succession of taps to bring it to bear on the right coordinates and fired. He kept firing until there were only three rounds left in the belt, and stopped then only because a round jammed.

Calmly, methodically, he cleared the blockage, fired the last two AP rounds, then threaded in another belt and blasted that also into the rolling smoke. Hands tingling from the vibration, he attached a third belt, but didn’t fire.

Beside him the headless corpse broke wind and added that stench to the wreathing wisps of cordite. From a corner, in an untidy pile of empty ammunition boxes, a face looked at him, its glassy-eyed stare appearing locked in an expression of conflicting determination and surprise.

Overhead impacted the first of the restarted Soviet artillery fire. It seemed somehow remote, unreal. Revell ducked from the strongpoint, and after arranging a replacement for the dead man, headed for the cellars.

It was cool, almost cold, underground, but the tainted smoke from the burning transports had penetrated even to here, making his eyes water.

Wiping the tears away left clean stripes among the dirt coating the back of his hand. What looked like an old hobo leaned against a cellar door, and it was a moment before he recognized Old William.

The elderly Dutch pioneer looked as if he had dressed in the dark, making his selection of clothing from rummaging about at the bottom of a ragbag. His face and hands were deeply wrinkled, made more obviously so by the dirt that engrained them.

Revell wondered if even the lieutenant’s upper estimate as to his age was near correct, but the man’s grip on his over-oiled Colt Commando was firm enough and he passed him without comment, amused to receive a nod of recognition.

In a small alcove off the partially collapsed main hall, Scully had established an improvised cookhouse, on a small scale. Behind a thick blackout curtain made of tapestry he had set up two petrol stoves. A strong smell of coffee blended with the less recognizable aroma from a large pan of bubbling, glutinous soup.

Peering into the slowly churning brown sludge, Carrington took a deep breath and tried to guess its contents. He failed, but thought he detected a whiff of beef. ‘I give up. What’s in it?’

Gesturing to a pile of empty ration boxes, Scully went on stirring the mixture, using both hands to keep the bayonet he used moving. ‘Everything except the Mars Bars. Don’t worry, it’s hot and there’ll be plenty of it and it won’t send you all tearing off for a shit at the same time.’

An oatmeal block floated to the surface and he made several stabs at it, before it was churned back into the depths.

Not entirely convinced, Carrington took a taste from the ladle. It was unusual, but not unpalatable. ‘I’ve had worse.’

‘One more word and you won’t be getting any. Now sod off and let me get on with my work.’ Scully leaned across to look at the pan of coffee, considered for a moment, then added another half handful of powder. For good measure he added a bag of sugar.

A powerful explosion dropped a sprinkle of dust on the top of the soup. He went to skim it off with the ladle, then changed his mind and stirred it in.

Having improvised a crutch, Ripper was organizing the teams keeping the weapons supplied with ammunition, of the correct type at the right time.
Surprised at the Southerner’s unexpected show of organizational ability, Revell saw no reason to interfere in what seemed to be a smoothly running operation.

‘Just like when I was a boy.’ Ripper hopped about, talking loud and slow to his men, or waving his arms when that method of communication failed. ‘I used to work of an evening at our local supermarket, filling the shelves.’ He hobbled aside, bumping into the major as he dodged out of the way of a party carrying mortar bombs. ‘Got so good at it I could anticipate what was needed before it ran out. This is much the same, only I’m using my ears to figure what’ll be wanted next, instead of keeping my eyes on a passel of old girls bumbling about the cookie section.’

Sampson had matters under control at the aid post as well, but was fretting over the condition of one of the girls, and a man with a gaping chest wound.

‘I can’t do any more, Major, except to keep them comfortable as best I can.’ Rinsing his hands, he wafted them dry. ‘She needs surgery that’s way out of my league, even if I had the setup and instruments to try.’

‘And him?’ Revell indicated the chest-wound case.

‘Beyond any help, I reckon. Whatever it was that opened him up, it didn’t penetrate, just cracked a couple of ribs pretty cleanly. Certainly don’t seem to be any fragments floating about. Must have been the blast, damaged his lungs.’ Gasping hard for breath, the man was beyond registering anything that was going on about him. The little blonde knelt beside him, constantly wiping away the blood that trickled from the corner of his mouth. Restlessly he tossed his head from side to side, frequently knocked her hand and daubed blood on his cheek. Each time she patiently cleaned him and began again.

‘Is that the girl Burke’s gone all broody over?’ ‘That’s her; name’s Karen Hirsh. My German’s not so good, and she doesn’t have a lot of English, but I gather she was some sort of a nurse, or was training to be.’

‘I’m surprised at Burke’s good taste.’ As they watched, a change came over the man she tended. For a brief moment, through his pain, comprehension returned, and it showed in his face.

With fingers crusted with dried blood he reached for his attendant’s face. For an instant he looked puzzled, then he smiled. Perhaps he saw instead a wife or daughter or mother, but even as the smile formed he gave a long sighing exhalation and his arm fell back.

Very gently Karen brushed his hair back from his eyes and closed them. She pulled the blanket up over his face and slowly got to her feet. Pausing to make a mental adjustment to the situation, without a backward glance she went to sit beside the girl in the deep coma.

‘That is one special little lady.’ With the officer, Sampson had watched in silence. He took in the swell of her hips and her narrow waist and back, but his next words held no sexual connotation. ‘I’d have her to Andrea any day.’

Although he couldn’t agree, Revell knew what the marine meant. There was no humanity in Andrea. Only a few years older than this girl, she seemed to have gone through so much that all feeling had been leech from her by her experiences. But maybe, at the start, she’d been like Karen ...

‘Major!’
There was urgency in the shout and Revell was already dashing toward the stairs when a giant concussion shook the very fabric of the rock and jarred his ankles so hard that his next few steps were awkward, until the numbing effect began to wear off.

Visibility when he reached the ground floor was almost zero, and the air was roasting hot. His arms were grabbed by Voke, and together, hobbling like cripples, they groped their way toward the open air. They were stopped by Clarence.

‘There’s nothing left up there. All the Striker teams have been wiped out.’
'What did they hit us with?' The air was clearing with the draft from the broken windows, but Revell still found each breath scorching to his throat.

'A couple of MIGs popped over a hill and dumped napalm and retarded bombs right across the top. The Strikers took out one, but that was too late.'

'The Rapiers!' The new Russian tactic had worked on them; if the same blind-side approach was used against the farm it might succeed. Revell knew they daren’t let that happen. If it did, then almost half of the valley would fall outside the protective umbrella of the shorter-range weapons they deployed from the ruins. A proper defence of the complex would no longer be possible.

'Get every automatic weapon up on top.' He turned to Voke. ‘I want everyone who knows how to point a rifle. No exceptions, walking wounded as well. Tell them to grab anything that will accept a mag or belt.

There were not even piles of cinders to mark where the Striker teams had perished. Blast and fire had obliterated them completely.

Small pools of jellied petrol still burned and the very stones were hot to the touch. All their careful work had been utterly destroyed. Every sandbagged position had been flattened, leaving only the smouldering shreds of jute among their scattered contents.

‘You fire at anything that hasn’t got its feet on the ground.’ Revell’s shout carried. ‘You open fire when you see it, you stop when you can’t.’ He swapped his combat shotgun for a well-worn M60, draping a spare belt over his shoulders and laying two more at his feet. He looked at the neat coils, and wondered if they would be enough. That’s if he got the chance to fire off any of them.

TWENTY

The air was heavy with petrol fumes and shimmered with the heat rapidly being surrendered by the fabric of the castle. They found what cover they could, braced themselves and strained to hear the approach of the next attack.

A roaring blast of noise assaulted their ears as three MIG 27s screamed over a ridge and hurtled toward them. Streams of multicoloured tracer hosed skyward and the massed clatter of the weapons drowned the rattle of the cascade of shell cases pouring onto and between the stones.

Firing its six-barrel gatling cannon, the lead aircraft flashed over the ruins, straight into and through the arcing lines of steel and phosphorus.

Five of the aircraft’s external pylons were hung with ordnance, and as he poured a whole belt into the MIGs belly, Voke wondered almost absently what the chances were of their massed barrage detonating all or part of that lethal cargo.

Pieces fell from the plane but it didn’t deviate from its course, and swooped down into the valley heading directly at the farm, trailing a thin filament of fuel vapour.

It ran head-first into a Rapier missile and dissolved in an incandescent ball of flame.

The following fighter bombers sheered away from the wall of flak, and only a couple of broken lines of tracer came close as they veered back on course and bore straight for the farm.

Twin stabs of flame marked the takeoff of more missiles, but even as they hurled themselves toward the MIGs, the jets were using maximum thrust, afterburners glowing white hot, in a wild jinking series of sharp turns to lift out of the valley.

As they ran, their under-wing stores of high-explosive and napalm tumbled toward the farm, some of the iron bombs falling in a different trajectory as their miniature parachutes slowed their headlong plunge.
Flame, smoke and tall showers of debris hid the distant cluster of buildings and smothered the fields about them. But the Rapier crews had a belated revenge.

Above a distant hill reappeared one of the MIGs. A tongue of red and yellow flame licked from the root of a partially swept wing and it towed a growing trail of black smoke.

‘He’s trying to make height for a bailout.’ Watching, Carrington hoped the jet would complete its turn over them.

The damaged aircraft never made it that far. Immediately after its pilot had ejected, it was riven by a fuel tank explosion that tore away the burning wing and sent the fuselage into a flat spin toward the valley floor.

Snatched away from it by his deployed parachute, the pilot and his armoured seat separated. Instead of popping open into a life-saving canopy, though, the chute remained a crumpled tangle of nylon.

There was a ragged cheer from the onlookers as the crewman impacted murderously hard not far from the remains of his fighter.

‘We’re on our own now.’ Thorne set down the thirty-calibre MG, and the unexpended portion of the belt swung to drape across his feet.

They reloaded, and waited, but there was no third raid. Revell stood most of them down and set those remaining to construct new air-defence positions.

Carrington found a hand, blackened, with the flesh hanging from it like the tatters of a thin glove. Casually he tossed it over the side. ‘Someone is going to get a telegram saying ‘Regret to advise you, your beloved has been almost completely lost in action.’’ He didn’t bother to wipe off the adhering scraps of bloody tissue.

‘You’re bloody insane.’ Dooley had watched the act with an expression of extreme disgust.

‘Did you expect me to keep it as a souvenir? Come off it. I’ve seen you chucking bits and pieces about without being too bothered.’

‘I don’t care about that.’ Dooley resumed shovelling clear the floor of a weapon pit. Much of the debris had been fused together by a sticky black residue. ‘What’s pissed me off is that it was wearing a ring, a gold signet ring.’

Close by, Voke heard the exchange and flashed his metallic smile. ‘It is a comfort to me to know that when I am killed I shall not die alone. I am sure you will be close by, with pliers in your hand.’

‘Everybody’s a fucking comedian.’ Changing the subject, Dooley called to the major. ‘How come they were content with just two passes? They didn’t hang about to watch results; for all they know the Rapiers are still in one piece.’

Revell had been thinking along the same lines himself. Using various vision aids one after another, he swept the valley and surveyed it thoroughly. From a window below, the Browning was again lacing the Russian smokescreen with short punching bursts, now employing a high proportion of tracer. From the large number that ricocheted from unseen targets within the screen it now looked certain that the enemy were employing mostly armoured clearing devices for the task.

It was tempting to send over a clutch of terminally guided Merlin mortar bombs, but to do so would be to invite an immediate and heavy retaliation. He would save that risk until he was sure the Russians had reached the narrowest part of the route they had chosen. If one of their huge tracked armoured engineer vehicles was disabled in the defile between the hills it would block or at least seriously hamper their progress until it was towed out of the way.

His mind came back to the question of why there hadn’t been a third air strike. And how had the other two been so precise; indeed, how had the Russian shelling been so accurate, with hardly a round wasted on the slopes below the castle mound?

Perhaps there was a second Spetsnaz operative, in the valley. But though he had no evidence one way or the other, Revell thought it highly unlikely. He had more than enough experience of the communists’ special operations units
to know that it was not usual for them to duplicate their efforts. That practice mostly came from their sheer arrogance. It was a failing frequently and successfully played upon by NATO interrogators.

He handed his field glasses to Andrea, who had appeared beside him. ‘Take your time. You’re looking for an RPV.’

It was a hell of a long-shot, Revell knew that, but if any of them was capable of locating one of the small remotely piloted aircraft, it was she.

With bad grace she shouldered her M16 and began a systematic sweep of the sky above the valley.

Leaving her to it, the major checked the progress of work on the new Stinger positions. They were fewer this time, and positioned close to bolt holes that would give the operators a chance to make it to the lower levels in the face of an unexpected or overwhelming attack.

From inside the smokescreen came the blast of a large mine exploding, and then a fiercely driven column of grey smoke rose above the chemically created pall.

They wouldn’t yet need to use the Merlins. No need to employ sophisticated top-attack homing warheads while the diversity of the conventional minefield was doing all right on its own. Revell returned to Andrea, in response to her call. Shit, even though it was ‘business,’ it was good to hear her wanting him. If only it was more than that...

Accepting the glasses from her, he let her guide his search until he found the object she had located. Her hands were cool and their grip light but firm.

‘Got it.’ He’d been right, it was an RPV, apparently locked into a wide banking turn some fifteen hundred feet above the valley. It was closer than that to them in their elevated position. ‘The trouble with those little bastards is that they’re damned near impossible to bring down.’

It was galling. The small unpiloted aircraft, with a wingspan of not more than ten feet, represented a tiny target, and if it was the very latest type it offered virtually no emissions to home on, so that ruled out missiles. Carrying its own microwave link, it could receive its directions and beam out its gathered information in short bursts on tight channels that were virtually undetectable.

Back at some Russian HQ they could see real-time transmissions of what was happening in the valley in perfect safety, and pass the information by unjammable land lines to their fighter bases and artillery positions.

‘If we can take it out,’ - Revell knew he was supposing what was virtually impossible - ‘then it would take them a long time to get another on station.’

Andrea selected a grenade from her belt. ‘I have seen tens of thousands of rounds expended to that purpose. All without success.’

‘But it has been done.’ Not for a moment did Revell give consideration to employing the M60 for the task. Only a direct hit on the motor or a vital control wire - or even more freakishly, in the compact data link box - would disable the RPV.

‘Yes, it has happened.’ Andrea loaded the 40mm round. ‘Usually by chance.’

‘Give it a try; we’ve nothing to lose.’ Without his field glasses there would have been little for Revell to see. Even with them he often missed the small puff of white smoke from the air-bursts.

With her seventh shot Andrea exploded a shell just in front of the aircraft, but frustratingly it flew unharmed through the rapidly dissipating cloud.

He was about to call a halt when her thirteenth attempt created a burst above and behind the target. It looked like yet another miss; then the RPV side-slipped and nosed down into a shallow dive. For a while he lost it, then when he found it again, saw that its outline was slightly changed. A piece of the tail was missing. Finally he lost it once more, for good, against the confusing clutter of the far hills. The descent appeared to have been due more to the RPV
retaining a degree of aerodynamic stability than to any skillful control.

When he turned to congratulate Andrea she was already gone. It was easy to see why Sampson had made his remark about her, comparing her with Karen. There were times when, strong as his feelings were for her, Andrea could be unbearably independent and arrogant.

The smokescreen about the location of the Russian attempt to broach the minefield was thinning. It was no longer being reinforced by regular flurries of shells. As it dispersed, Revell saw it reveal a total of eight burning or burned-out mine-plough and roller-fitted tanks. An armoured bulldozer wallowed in a large crater at an impossible angle, on the point of tipping over. Both its tracks were broken and an body hung from its open driver’s hatch.

Though the RP V was eliminated, the enemy gunners already had the range of the castle to an inch, and Revell made every use of cover as he moved about. He’d have expected them to recommence firing as soon it became obvious the first air-strike had failed to neutralize the strongpoint.

It was easy to imagine the report of the surviving pilot from the second wave, on his return to base. Sixty automatic weapons had been aimed at his flight leader and must have given the impression of a powerful defence. And that would have been reinforced by the beating off of the abortive helicopter assault on the valley, plus the continuing punishment of the ground troops trying to establish a land route to the prize offered by the huge dump of materials.

Their need was underlined by the fact that of the eight destroyed vehicles on the track, four were captured NATO tanks, Leopards and Challengers, modified for Soviet-style mine clearing.

‘Here they come again.’ Carrington swung ‘round a machine gun and sighted on the clutch of gunships hovering barely visible between the hills across-the valley.

They were gone as suddenly as they’d appeared, and a pair of Stingers sent against them self-destructed when they reached the limit of their range, well short of their intended targets.

‘What are they playing at?’ Carrington waited patiently.

A single machine rose into distant view, unleashed a wire-guided rocket and hovered among the tops of firs only long enough to guide it to a direct hit on the gatehouse.

‘Fuck knows.’ Keeping a missile tube shouldered, Burke waited for a realistic target to present itself before he fired.

Another Warpac gunship soared from behind a ridge and unleashed a ripple of unguided rockets toward the ruins, diving back into hiding before the projectiles had traversed half the distance. Of the twenty that were fired, none came close. Most fell a long way short, pulverizing a lower bend in the approach road.

‘Maybe they’re the same ships we scared away before.’ Hyde too was puzzled by the evasive tactics. ‘Could be they’re still scared.’

Again missiles were sent against the ruins, one to strike where the brickwork was keyed to the natural rock. The powerful impact left no mark but a black smudge and a slight pitting.

Cannon fire was added, from Hinds whose pilots were reluctant to make themselves visible for more than seconds at a time. From such a hopelessly long range only a handful of spent rounds flattened themselves against the unyielding ancient fabric.

‘It’s not like them to piss about this much.’ Reading off the range in his sight, Burke was aware there was no point in having a go at such elusive targets. ‘Could be that they’re just decoys… Fucking shit…’ He whirled about and fired wildly at a gunship only a hundred feet overhead.

The range was too short for the missile to arm itself in the time, but its sheer speed took it plunging in through the floor of the helicopter.

Disintegrating and scattering burning propellant as it penetrated, it turned the cabin into a roaring furnace. Out of
control, the helicopter toppled from the sky to crash near the remains of the Scammel.

Torrents of mud and debris swept across the top of the ruins and three more camouflage-painted gunships closed in. From their open side doors came bright lines of tracer, and coils of rope were thrown out to whip about in the downwash.

Rolling onto his back, Clarence took aim and a door-gunner sagged limply, only restrained from falling by his safety harness.

The fight became wild, the choppers hovering and backing to give their gunners the best opportunities. Men who appeared at the cabin doors and made to slide down the ropes first hosed the ruins with their personal weapons.

Putting aside his sniper rifle, Clarence, hurling himself into an adjoining gun pit, pushed a body aside and wrenched a mini-gun hard back on its mount to gain the maximum elevation. Flicking the selector to the highest rate of fire he blasted several hundred rounds into the cabin top and rotor hub of a gunship banking in a tight turn to come in to drop its infantry.

There was a small flare of flame as a fuel line to one of the Isotov turbo shaft power-plants was severed, and then as the blur of the mini-gun’s rotating barrels slowed, the gunship stalled and fell onto a corner of the ruins.

Even as the cabin distorted and buckled with the impact, the still-rotating blades smashed themselves to lethal slivers against a weapon pit. Blood fountained among the fragments of carbon fibre.

At point-blank range rifles and machine guns hosed armour-piercing incendiary rounds into the craft’s shattered cockpit and gaping cabin.

He was so close, Revell could see the struggles of the pilot and gunner to free themselves, and the sprawl of infantry fighting to drag themselves clear.

Burning fuel dribbling onto the men spurred them to frantic effort, faces distorted by the effort of forcing broken limbs to respond. There came an ominous creak of metal grinding on stone and the machine appeared to sag and then shudder as it moved bodily sideways toward the edge. It teetered, a mound of rubble collapsed beneath it, and then it was gone, followed by a cascade of granite and sandstone chips.

As suddenly as they had appeared, the gunships departed, racing for the cover of the hills and woods. They trailed smoke and dropped a shower of external fittings and torn panels as they went. Unable in that condition to execute wild evasive manoeuvres, they had to soak up more damage from the tracer that chased after them.

It had been a crazy tactic. Revell couldn’t begin to understand what the Russians had hoped to achieve. They’d been trying to land troops in what had to be a suicide mission. Unless ... unless Burke was correct and the whole episode was a diversion from some other piece of nastiness they were hatching.

A monstrous explosion rocked the whole fabric of the castle. Smoke and dust belched from every entrance to the lower levels in a raging blast that threw him over.

**TWENTY ONE**

Pushing himself to his feet, he heard screams coming from below—girls’ screams. Grabbing his shotgun and waving Hyde and Voke to stay, Revell raced for the cellars.

Burke was already ahead of him, Colt automatic in one hand, the other clenched tight about a grenade from which the split ring attached to the pin dangled brightly.

On the ground floor several men had been mowed down by the blast, mostly those who had been in direct line with the cellar entrance. Some lay still, heads shattered, but most still moved, hugging themselves against the agony of broken bones. Others stood dazed, stupefied by the powerful concussion. Andrea was among them, nursing her left
Pushing in front, Revell led down the steps. By a miracle the lights still functioned, but they served little purpose. He strapped on his respirator as some protection against the thick choking dust as he groped his way down.

At the bottom they stopped and listened. From roughly in the direction of the dispensary came the muted sobs of a terrified girl. Sensing rather than seeing what was happening, Revell held out his arm to check Burke’s impulse to go straight toward the sound.

Revell was frightened at the prospect of the terrifying game of blindfold hide- and-seek that lay ahead. It would be as dangerous and deadly a fight as any he’d ever taken part in, as could ever be imagined.

Hugging the wall they stumbled forward, with Revell trying desperately to recall every turn, every doorway, every side passage.

He could see perhaps a matter of inches, six perhaps, not more. The air was hot and carried a strong scent of partially consumed explosive. His foot made contact with an object that rolled away. Still keeping the shotgun trained ahead, he stooped to feel about. His searching fingers found several of the items, grenades.

A few steps farther and another forced investigation brought about the discovery of the remains of the man who had been carrying them. Underfoot the floor was slippery with blood. From a helmet he touched, Revell determined that the bodies they were encountering were members of the Dutch ammunition detail. Groans came from a body he stepped on. Attempting to move it aside, he found it had no arms; both were off at the shoulder.

The clattering fire of a Kalashnikov punished their ears in the confined space, but Revell took no account of that when he replied with a three-round burst. There was no response to the hail of flechettes that filled every inch of the passageway with a quota of needle-sharp steel.

Wafting past, a current of cool air brought an improvement in visibility. Silhouetted against a circle of light haze dead ahead was a dark blur. It was slowly crumpling, and as he went down a second slumped from the shadows across it.

‘Two down; how many more to go?’ Burke felt the grenade warming in his hand, and knelt to roll it in the dust, to make sure it wouldn’t stick to his damp palm.

Resolving itself gradually into the outline of the shattered postern door, the patch of light enabled Revell to orient himself. ‘They must have climbed up and put a charge on it, while we were occupied upstairs.’

Before he could fire, Burke had snapped off a shot and a figure sidling through the opening was thrown back and screamed for a long time as he fell down the cliff face.

From the chunks of flesh and small splinters of wood to which the door and its surround had been reduced, Revell was sure that at the moment the demolition charge exploded the passageway must have resembled hell.

Men caught in the blast had been torn apart, and the loads they carried scattered. It was a miracle that none of the ordnance had gone off at the same time. With every other room packed with ammunition from floor to ceiling, a chain reaction of secondary detonation would have blasted the stump of the castle across the countryside and left nothing but the bare rock.

A small round dark object was tossed in through the doorway. They threw themselves down, but the Russian grenade burst between the bodies and, beyond bringing down more dust into the already heavily laden atmosphere, did no harm.

There was a tugging at Revell’s foot, and he looked down. The Dutchman Old William was sprawled on the floor, his hair matted with blood and his face lined with cuts. Unable to talk, he gestured toward a door.

Burke cautiously pushed it open. It was the wine vault. The air was almost clear. There was a cage of songbirds on the table, but they were the only occupants.
‘The fucker’s skipped.’ Burke took a tighter grip of his pistol.

‘He might not have got far.’ The smell of death and the slimy mess beneath his feet offered the hope to Revell that the deserter, whether he had mistimed an escape or taken advantage of the confusion of the attack, was dead.

‘That bloke is a survivor. I’ll put money on his still being alive.’

A heavy figure blundered into them from behind, and after the start it gave him, the major was glad to see Dooley. Even with his respirator on, his great bulk made him unmistakable.

Revell motioned toward the opening. ‘Dooley, stay here. Anything comes in through there you know what to do. Same goes if we flush someone out and he makes a bolt for it.’

‘What if he come this way instead? You want prisoners?’ Straightening the belt of the M60, Dooley undraped another three from around his neck. He settled himself in the doorway of the wine cellar, after a quick glance inside to reassure himself that his feathered friends were all right.

‘They were trying to kill your birds, weren’t they?’

Nothing more was needed to settle Dooley’s determination. He reached out and began to gather sandbags about himself. Noticing Old William, and after a cursory examination concluding from his shallow but steady breathing that he was still alive, he dragged him in behind the barricade as well.

The temptation to slip into the vault and extract a bottle was strong, almost overwhelming, but there was in his mind a more powerful reason, besides self-preservation, for not stirring from his position.

From within the cellar came a sad whistle of half-hearted song. He thought of the hard work it had been to gather the colourful birds in their aviary, with it almost encircled by burning sheds and garages. They’d been panicking, and he knew he must for certain have missed some that were hiding in nesting boxes.

‘Miserable shits.’ Dooley talked aloud, but to himself. ‘Not bad enough they don’t believe in God, they’ve got to go around trying to kill all his little creatures as well.’

He was in that frame of mind when a grenade popped in through the opening. It bounced once, almost playfully, then detonated harmlessly among the tattered corpses. Holding his fire he let three of them enter, ducking low to avoid the long bursts they directed down the passageway. Only when they paused to reload did he open up.

Coming from what must have been to them an impenetrable dark, the Russians were caught by surprise. It must have been an agonizing shock when the heavy-calibre bullets smashed into their legs and brought them down hard.

Taking time to count how many belts he had, Dooley decided he could spare one. His victims were writhing and moaning, plucking at their ruined limbs, from which sharp white shards of bone projected.

Casually, standing so he could fire from the hip, he emptied the rest of the belt into the tangle of flesh and weapons.

Dooley listened. All sound and movement had ceased. ‘See, you commie shits. I’m a humanitarian as well as a nature-lover. Maybe I should join Green Peace.’

Patting his pockets, he counted the number of spare magazines he had for his pistol, and checked that he still had his little hoard of jewellery and dental fragments. The simple action brought back memories of how he’d come by each item, the death he’d witnessed, and shared in. ‘Yeah, well, maybe not Green Peace.’

Little of the draft clearing the main passageway was clearing the side corridor that led to the aid post.

Within a few steps Revell found visibility again down to nil. They were forced to inch forward, not daring to lose contact with the wall. There were two other rooms to pass before they reached their objective at the end of the passageway.
Revell tried hard to recall the distances involved, and compare them with their present slow progress. In steps he could roughly calculate it, but how many shuffles were equivalent to one normal pace?

He tried using his thermal imager, but the invading Russians must have employed grenades whose smoke masked the wavebands on which it functioned, and he got virtually no picture at all.

His fingertips found the first doorway, and splintered wood where it had been forced open. It was tempting simply to hurl in a grenade, but some of the girls might have escaped or been herded into there. He had to be more discriminating in his tactics than he would have liked.

Making sure of the type of cartridge he had chambered, he hurled himself across the opening, blasting a shell at the cellar ceiling. There was no answering fire and he ducked inside, closely followed by Burke. They were hardly in before a hail of bullets ripped past the door.

The room was comparatively free of smoke. Lined with steel ammunition boxes, many of them displayed evidence of having been sprayed with automatic fire.

‘You think they did the same all the way along?’ Burke could picture the scene as a Russian had braced himself in the doorway and swept every corner with blasts of high-velocity rounds.

‘Not if they saw what they’d hit in here. They must have shit themselves’ Mentally Revell ticked off the shots he had fired. He didn’t need to reload, yet. ‘What’s in the next room?’

‘Karen…that is, they were clearing it to take the overflow of wounded.’ Burke remembered something. ‘The stuff they’d hauled out they dumped in the passageway.’

‘Were they stacking it both sides, or just one, and which?’

Closing his eyes, Burke tried to recall a detail that had been too trivial to note at the time. ‘This side… yes, this side. Against the wall between the next door and the sick bay.’

‘Right. We’ll make a dive for the next cellar. Same tactics as before. You still got that grenade?’

‘If I lose it you’ll know soon enough. The pin’s out.’

As he dashed for their next objective, Revell snapped off three fast shots that were rewarded with a muffled yelp of pain and the sound of a body falling.

Again there was no reply to the single flechette shot the major put into the ceiling, and when more bullets hosed along the passage they were already tumbling inside to a soft landing on rows of sleeping bags.

‘How far now?’ Pulling off his respirator, Revell gulped the tainted air. Before he had an answer to confirm his own estimate, they had to throw themselves to either side of the door as a grenade bounced past.

Fragments from it slashed through the opening, ripping apart the bedding and creating showers of down and lint.

‘By my reckoning, three steps to the stack of boxes, then five, no, six to pass it and then an immediate sharp left will put you facing the door of the dispensary.’

Revell drew a mental picture of what he expected to see when he got there. The trapped Russians would have herded their hostages to the far end of the room, to keep them out of the way and permit unobstructed action. Unless, that is, the troops were Spetsnaz.

There came the sound of a girl crying, and ugly grunted threats in Russian. The words might not have been understood, but their obvious menace was, and the crying ceased in a series of choking sobs.

‘They’re still alive.’ Burke said it to reassure himself, and then the hairs on the back of his neck prickled as there came a long wailing scream of sheer agony. The lunge he made for the door was blocked by the major.
‘Not yet.’ Revell heard Sampson’s distinctive voice raised in protest, more shouting in Russian, the thud of a heavy blow and then a silence that could be almost felt.

‘What the fuck are they doing?’ Again Burke attempted to push past. ‘All I want to do is get in there and sort them out...’

‘Stay calm. Lose your temper and you’ll make mistakes.’ It was taking an effort for Revell to keep himself under control, and was harder still when another scream, of shorter duration this time, came from someone in the last extreme of agony.

From that he knew they had to be facing the elite Russian Spetsnaz troops. Coming in with no knowledge of the underground layout, and quickly disoriented by the blinding smoke and dust, they must have blundered into this dead end, to be trapped by his and Burke’s fast arrival on the scene.

Like the hate-indoctrinated automatons they were, even at the moment when they should have been scheming to survive, the Spetsnaz had turned on helpless victims, perhaps seeking confidence by falling back on the skills in which they were most practiced.

Another random burst from an AK flashed past the door. Revell knew the Russians were carrying on a reconnaissance by fire, probing to see what the opposition would be like when they broke out. The moment they decided to do that, they would slaughter their hostages, except perhaps for one or two they might utilize as human shields, a standard Spetsnaz tactic.

At present, while they were sorting themselves out, they had most likely only one man on guard. He would probably be crouched low by the door, taking full advantage of any cover. Likely he’d built himself a rough barricade of boxes that were within his reach. He’d present a small enough target in perfect visibility; the chances of putting him down with a first-round disabling shot in these conditions was nil.

Carefully lobbed, a grenade might catch him, but fragments tearing through the open door would be indiscriminate killers. The enemy held all the cards. They daren’t delay any longer.

Another screeching howl of suffering made up Revell’s mind for him. For the sheath at his belt he withdrew his heavy-bladed fighting knife. In all the war so far it had done nothing more bloody than hack horsemeat steaks. Setting aside his shotgun, he replaced it with his Browning pistol. Weighing both, he settled for the knife in his right hand.

‘Put that grenade, near as you can, just short of the next doorway. When it goes off we go in, fast.’

Burke moved to the door. Sweat poured from him, but the dust-covered grenade stayed dry in his tight grasp. Just what the fuck was he doing here? He’d never pushed himself forward like this before. Shit, he was a combat driver; this wasn’t his sort of work. But there hadn’t been anyone special in his life before, not until a few hours ago.

There was the faint sound of a girl crying, and a harsh command in Russian was followed by the report of a stinging slap.

Without another thought he swung ‘round the doorpost, tossed the grenade and ducked back into cover.

A shout of alarm was smothered, and his ears punished, by the explosion in the confines of the tunnel. Grabbing his bayonet from his side he charged blindly into the unknown.

TWENTY TWO

The Russian in the doorway was sagging against the tumbled cases of his barricade. As Burke kicked out at his face he saw the bottom jaw was gone, but still didn’t pull the blow.

A clatter of fire from the entrance gave him the direction he wanted and he fired three fast soft-nosed bullets toward the muzzle flash.
Searing pain in his side told him he’d been hit, but he ran on and thrust the bayonet to the hilt in a figure that was lunging at him.

The blade stuck, caught between the bottom ribs, and he fired with the pistol barrel touching his victim’s stomach. His wrist jarred at the recoil, but the impact did the trick, throwing the impaled man back. The blade came free with a sucking sound.

Shouts, screams and the ear-splitting reports of gunfire blared through the dimly lit cellar. Revell snapped a single shot into the face of a Russian who swung a rifle butt at him, side-stepped the falling body and bumped into a blood-covered form lashed to a chair. Its head lolled, and then the whole body bucked as bullets intended for Revell struck it instead.

He fired twice at a slab-faced Slav wrestling to clear a blockage in his wire-stocked AK, and missed. There was a snarl of triumph from the Russian as he succeeded and brought the weapon up, and then a look of blank incomprehension as a scalpel was skewered into the side of his neck.

On tiptoe to inflict the wound, Karen was thrown aside as the man lashed out, caught off balance. His rifle swivelled in her direction and then a blood-smeared bayonet sliced across his throat.

Reeling, bewildered, he turned to counter the new danger. The bayonet struck a second time, thrust at a sharp upward angle just below his ear.

Following the body down, Burke straddled it, took the hilt of the weapon in both hands and plunged it repeatedly into the Russian chest, each time lifting his hands as high as he could. He stopped only when he was exhausted, long after the man was dead.

Karen helped Burke to his feet and fussed over the blood that seeped through a tear in his jacket, making it cling to him as the material became soaked. He gently held her hands away and went to the figure in the chair.

Using a wad of dressing, he applied pressure to the hideous wound across the side of Boris’s face. Accepting a roll of broad bandage from Karen, he wrapped it around their radioman’s head, feeling the bulk of the dressing subside as it filled the empty eye socket.

Hauling himself to his feet, Sampson tentatively felt the large contusion at the base of the back of his neck. He knuckled his eyes to clear them of double vision. Gathering himself to take over from Burke, opening Boris’s jacket and cutting away his undershirt to examine the tight cluster of exit wounds below his left shoulder. ‘They grabbed him on the way in. The stupid little guy was so scared he called out in his own language. Those animals started on him without warning. I tried to stop them and they must have swiped me a hard one from behind. They weren’t even questioning him. It was like it was normal practice, just started cutting him.’

There was a rattle of M60 fire from the corridor. Revell looked around the room. The smoke and dust were clearing. It looked like a charnel house. One of the attackers was still moving, and he crushed his boot down hard on a hand that was too near a discarded automatic for comfort. Looking up at him, the Russian tried to spit, but succeeded only in dribbling. It was an effort that proved fatal. Somewhere inside him a blood vessel ruptured and filled his throat to drown him.

The scene in the room was overwhelming. Several of the wounded had been trampled or hit by fragments or ricochets.

‘I’ll send you some help.’ Revell got no reply. ‘Old William and some other wounded are in the passageway.’

‘Okay.’ Sampson set upright a drip that had been knocked over, and hauled the corpse of a Spetsnaz off the girl with the head wound. ‘I’ll be there in a moment. Hell and shit! I thought I’d seen everything in the Zone, but this is just plain horrible. Why the hell do we go on doing this?’

‘To stay alive.’ Revell had seen enough; he started to leave.

‘You call this living?’ Sampson picked up the body of a girl. The side of her head had been blown away and white
brain matter dripped from her shattered skull. ‘This is fucking butchery.’

Revell had no reply. On his way out he checked Dooley. Old William sat beside him, cradling an M16 and grinning a toothless grin. He made his customary nod at the major.

‘Added a few more to the collection.’ Dooley patted the M60. ‘Three more and I can send them off and get a set of storage jars.’

There were at least eight bodies lying half inside the postern doorway. Wisps of smoke rose from tracer lodged in them.

Mounting the cellar steps, Revell crossed the ground floor, past the row of dead whose numbers would shortly be swollen. Already those killed by the blast were being hauled aside to join them. Andrea was helping, using one hand.

He would have sent her down to be attended to, but she studiously ignored him, and he passed on without comment.

There was sporadic incoming artillery fire, but it was arriving at predictable one-minute intervals, indicating that it was an East German battery employed. Though the air was full of the dust and smoke they pounded from the ruins, after the cellars it tasted clean and wholesome.

It was tempting to take advantage of the set intervals to take a shortcut across the rubble, but instinct made Revell choose the safety of the more difficult route under cover. That saved his life, when a twin-barrelled 30mm flak tank blasted the top of the ruins with a thirty-round burst.

On the far side of the valley another smokescreen was forming. Out of range, another attempt was being made to breach the minefield. There were comforting reports of explosions to indicate that the work was going slowly or badly.

Voke was fussing with the sterile pad inside the shoulder of his jacket, but stopped when Revell came into the dugout. ‘You have noticed the timing of the shells?’ He nodded knowingly to himself. ‘East Germans, always so precise. Their employment against us would explain why there have been no chemical rounds. The Russians do not trust them with them, since that time when a whole regiment tried to defect to the West, after hitting the Russian divisions to either side of them with Sarin and VX.’

‘Not many of them made it though, did they?’

‘True, the Reds bombed them to pieces as they crossed the Zone. But at least when we fight them it is one less factor to worry about.’ Voke grinned, glanced at his watch and held his helmet down hard as a 155mm shell crashed into the wall below their position. ‘Right on time.’

‘I think we’re going to have to blow the dump. They’ll be through into the valley by tomorrow morning.’ It was bitter for Revell to have to admit that defeat, but he had to be realistic. At least he would have the satisfaction of blowing apart the Russian’s prize even as they reached for it.

‘There is a problem, Major.’ Voke was apologetic. ‘I have tested the circuit, and there appears to be a slight fault.’

‘How slight is slight?’

Sweeping his arms wide and shrugging in a resigned gesture, Voke was no longer smiling. ‘The link was deeply buried, and was still working after the castle fell, but it is not now. I think it would be unlikely we could trace the fault; it could be anywhere between here and the complex.’

‘Shit.’ Gauging the distances involved, Revell estimated the nearest of the dumps would just be within range of their TOW missiles.

He was suddenly aware of Andrea by his side. Her wrist was bandaged and splinted. Reading his mind once again, she handed him a laser rangefinder.
The reading was three thousand six hundred meters. ‘There’ll be a bit of wire to spare.’

Voke shook his head. ‘The installation is hardened. With what we have I do not believe we could penetrate several meters of earth and then a meter of steel-reinforced concrete. And in any event, the munitions and fuel are on the far side. A direct hit anywhere else would do no more than very localized damage.’

Revell sat back and thought about it. His eyes met Andrea’s. There was no expression in hers. For the first time he could recall, he felt no wave of sympathy for her, as he invariably had when she’d been injured in the past.

‘Can it be done manually, from down there?’

‘I was afraid you would ask that, Major.’ Despite his words, Voke’s smile had returned. ‘The answer is yes. There is such an emergency system. When it was installed a joker hung on it a notice saying ‘suicide switch.’ There would be little chance of getting clear.’

‘We don’t have a choice.’ For Revell now there was a lot of planning to be done. ‘It’ll take the Reds the best part of the night to break through into the valley. By then we should be long gone, most of us. A small stay-behind group will have to blow the dumps at the last moment. Once they go up all hell will break loose. They’ll know we’ve done a runner.’

An airburst detonated overhead and chunks of shell-casing drummed against the roof of the strongpoint.

Brushing dust from his shoulder, Voke winced as the movement aggravated his wound. ‘If you are taking the wounded with you then you will need as long a head start as possible.’

Andrea looked up at the words. ‘It would be madness to burden the escape group with wounded.’ She glanced at her wrist. ‘With the more serious cases, that is ...’

‘We are not leaving anyone behind; you know what they can expect at the hands of the Russians. This unit has never left wounded to fall into their murdering hands.’

‘I’m telling you, Major-Revell, sir, that it don’t matter what you say—it can’t be done.’

Forcing down his instinctive response to the medic’s insubordination, Revell waited for the explanation, drumming his forefinger against the stock of his shotgun.

‘There’s two down there with head wounds who’ll die if we try to move them, three with open chest wounds who’ll die when we move them, three real bad gut wounds who won’t make it any distance at all, a double amputee who’s hanging on by a thread and eight cases of multiple fractures of the hip and leg who are going to be hell to move. And that’s not counting all the walking wounded who will either need help, like Ripper, or who are in no state to give a hand with the others, like the lieutenant here, or Andrea.’

It was growing dark, and for Revell the gathering gloom was an accurate reflection of his mood. ‘How many have we got who are fit to fight or carry?’

‘A lot of those still on their feet will need frequent kicks to keep them moving.’ Hyde had made the count himself. With the men dispersed about the various defence positions it had taken that to bring home how depleted their numbers were. ‘But if you want me to include everyone still with the strength to pull a trigger, seventeen.’ He looked at the lieutenant.

‘Thirty-nine of my pioneers are still on their feet. Using the sergeant’s methods I could persuade another eight to make the effort. We lost sixteen men when the door was blown.’

‘No luck with the radio yet?’ Revell made no comment on the figures; they spoke for themselves. The radio was a forlorn hope, but he’d insisted Garrett keep trying.

‘Nothing yet.’ Hyde had made the same report every ten minutes for the last couple of hours.
Dooley pushed his way into the group. He thrust a bulky pack at the major. ‘You should see this.’

Taking the bag, Revell noted it was Russian and sticky with blood. Inside was a signal gun and a selection of variously colour-coded cartridges for it. There was also a large wooden case, strongly fastened with leather straps. Resting it on his knee, he undid it to reveal a compact microwave dish complete with all its related equipment, right down to spare batteries.

‘I found it under the body of a Spetsnaz who didn’t make it past the door.’ Dooley wriggled fingers through holes in the pack’s carrying strap.

‘Get Garrett over here on the double.’ Revell turned to Sampson. ‘And I want Boris up here. Before you say it I know he’s in a bad way, but from now on your main task is to keep him alive for as long as you can - that’s if you want to go on living yourself.’

The sun set early, behind a bank of bluish-grey clouds that were growing on the western horizon. As the tops of the hills caught the last of the pale light a sharp breeze sprang up and added a distinct chill to the air.

From across the valley came the occasional report of a mine being triggered. No flash was ever visible inside the dense smokescreen but it gave notice that the Russians were making no faster progress over there, even without harassment.

At what would have been sunset, if the changing weather had not brought it forward, they heard a pair of gunships circling. For half an hour they maintained an erratic search pattern, but if the castle was their target, they never found it.

Gradually the beat of the rotors faded in the distance, and some kilometres off, an inoffensive, unoccupied hilltop received a deluge of fuel-air bombs, and as it burned was repeatedly strafed with cannons and rockets.

The Russians didn’t dare take their loads back and admit failure. Revell could only hope their report of a brilliant pinpoint attack would allow them to be left in peace for a while.

It was shortly after that, as he wrestled with the problem of what to do with the wounded, that they established a radio link through a satellite relay.

Boris lay back, ignoring the discomfort of the broken surface. It was nothing compared to the throbbing in his head and the agony of drawing each breath. There was a curious bubbling sensation in his chest, and a growing numbness down his right side.

They had explained why he could not have more pain-killers and he had accepted their reasoning. Laid beside Garrett, he had directed the necessary modifications to the equipment to enable it to operate on NATO wavebands.

The clumsiness displayed by the young PFC, his impetuous rush into every task at the risk of doing irreparable damage, had driven Boris to the verge of distraction. Fortunately no serious damage had resulted from his frequent dropping, knocking and gouging of components.

He’d made every allowance for the work being done under difficult conditions, in the dark and cold and with only the fitful illumination from a small flashlight held by their shivering’ medic, but still the PFC’s reckless ineptitude had made him despair at times.

‘You lay down like that, you fool, and you’re going to drown in your own blood.’ Sampson wadded a jacket and placed it under the Russian’s head and shoulders.

‘You want that jab now?’ Even as he asked, he produced a hypodermic.

‘Pozhalusta, da.’ Boris wrestled with his swirling memory, but the English words would not come. But he’d been understood, and as he felt the tip of the needle enter his arm he experienced an overwhelming sensation of relief, so strong that the comfort it brought merged imperceptibly with the effect of the drug.

He knew he was very likely one of hundreds who would breathe their last this night in the Zone. But he did not see it
as a personal tragedy; he had been marked for death for too long, had come to accept the idea, and now the fact.

Lying at the bottom of the gun pit, he could see the crescent of the microwave dish resting on a plinth of broken stone. Vaguely he was aware of people gathered about the nearby radio. The only sound he could hear was his own blood rushing through his ears, in a hurry to find the holes in his body, to escape and take his life with it.

There was a face above him, and he was being gently shaken. They should leave him alone, he had done all he could…

‘Can you hear me?’ Garrett turned to Sampson. ‘How much have you pumped into him?’

‘Enough to take away the pain. In his case that’s quite a lot. The poor little creep is in shock. I’ll lay money he can understand you, but he may not be able to answer.’

‘Boris, Boris, can you hear me?’ Garrett felt like he was touching a corpse, the man was so pale and cold. ‘Boris, the signal is fading. The set is all right, but the signal is fading.’ He repeated it again, talking loudly and slowly. ‘What do I have to do?’

From a depth only a shade away from deep unconsciousness, Boris struggled to articulate. He could manage only a single word and it took forever to form and virtually the last of his breath to utter.

‘Batereyka.’ He was still being shaken and the question persisted, going on and on. By an effort of will he dragged his mind back from the plunge into blackness it had commenced and tried again. ‘Ak-kumulyator… batareyka… battery, the battery…’

The last word blended into a deep sigh. In the narrow segment of night sky that he could see, Boris watched the stars being snuffed one by one as the leading edge of a large cloud drifted in front of them.

He did not think it strange that he had no fear of death. How can a man who has known fear all his adult life be afraid of being released from that?

There would be no more KGB, no more GPU, no more foul prisons, no more brutish interrogators, no more thugs of the Commandants Service. And no more Andrea with her scarcely veiled threats and ever-present menace.

Pain was returning, but still as only a pulsing burning sensation so far. He was glad his last act had not been one to bring death to his fellow countrymen. Making the set function had been an act to save life, not destroy it. It no longer mattered that help would come too late for him.

‘At last.’ Andrea bent over the blanket-wrapped form. ‘He is dead. Good.’ Revell paused as he was about to replace the headset. ‘Andrea.’ Her features were indistinct in the darkness, but he knew she had heard him. ‘Fuck off.’

**TWENTY THREE**

Scully had to steel himself for each journey down to the cellars to help with bringing up the wounded. Even the difficulties and sheer exertion of the task couldn’t override entirely his abhorrence of the cramped passageways and low ceilings.

Manhandling the litters through the narrow doorways, around sharp corners and up steep staircases, and all the time trying to ensure that a drip needle wasn’t dislodged, or that a fractured limb wasn’t knocked against the wall. The work was exacting and exhausting for the patients, as well as the bearers, as they were tilted and jolted.

Several times Scully had seen Andrea stalk by, a look of savage determination on her face as she hunted for the missing deserter. A gruesome check of the remains scattered below ground had positively confirmed he was not among those killed. She had appointed herself to conduct the search among the warren of storerooms.

‘Don’t fancy his chances if she finds him.’ Dooley hefted his end of a litter higher and took the weight as two others
supported its front end and started up the cellar steps.

‘What the hell did the major say to her?’ Scully staggered, but managed to maintain his grip.

‘No idea.’ Arms aching, Dooley would have preferred to move faster but the pace had to be set by the men in the lead. He had to tap with his toecap to determine the exact height of each step before moving onto it. ‘Whatever it was it’s broken the spell. I reckon she won’t be twisting him ‘round her little finger anymore.’

They finally shuffled into the ground floor and under Sampson’s supervision lifted the Dutchman off the litter and laid him on the bare stone floor.

The whole of the good-sized room was filled with wounded. Some were sitting but most were laid still, making no sound except for an occasional low moan as pain broke through the heavy doses of painkillers.

‘That the last?’ Sampson made an adjustment to a drip, working with his nose almost touching it, by the light of a carefully shielded match.

‘That’s it.’ Dooley flexed his muscles to rid them of the cramp induced by the prolonged strain of the hard work. ‘Only thing still down there is Andrea and that deserter.’

‘They deserve each other. Maybe they’ll run off together and we’ll all be happier and safer.’ Looking about him, there was little Sampson could see, and less he could do.

Karen had the flashlight and was moving among the wounded quietly. The small circle of illumination flicked from drawn faces to dressing, to drips and then on to the next.

‘Are we really ordered to stay put, and keep the dump in one piece?’ Dooley couldn’t make sense of the rumour that was flying about. ‘We can’t hold this place now. We’ll just be handing all those goodies to the commies on a plate.’

‘All I know is that I was told to get the wounded up to the first floor, ready for evacuation at first light or soon after. Won’t take so long to get them into a chopper from here. Guess, as usual, the casevac boys don’t want to be on the ground longer than they can help.’

Checking the pulse of the last man brought up, Sampson felt it falter, pick up again, and the cease.

‘Oh shit. I lost him, and I really thought he was in with a chance. You never can tell.’

‘That all you know?’

‘Look, Dooley, you’re so keen to find out, go ask the major. I’m busy, trying to stop people from dying.’

Sampson disconnected the drip. He knelt beside the body and pulled the blanket up to cover the face. ‘Yeah, I’m trying, dear God I’m trying, but I’m not always succeeding.’

There was no doubt he’d heard the orders clearly, but in the short transmission time he’d been allowed, Revell had been given no more than the barest facts. They were brutally brief and precise. Stay put, don’t destroy the dump, casualty pick-up at first light. That was it.

It wasn’t orders, it was a death sentence. They were a tiny NATO island in the middle of a surging communist sea. At best from now on they could be of no more than nuisance value to the Russian troops intent on capturing the valley and its contents.

By this time the communists would be confident that the handful of troops holed up in the ruins did not possess the means to destroy the dumps. Their mine-clearing effort had only to remain beyond the reach of the comparatively short-range weapons emplaced among the ruins and shortly all would be theirs.

It was only the fate of the wounded that deterred Revell from disobeying orders. Once they were away he would take matters into his own hands. It was more than likely that HQ did not understand the implications of the situation.
Just because he’d had an acknowledgment of his signal did not mean that the staff officer dealing with it had fully understood precisely what was at stake. Shit, how could he? He wouldn’t have seen the lives lost, the bodies broken and torn apart...

‘The Reds have lost another bulldozer, by the look of it.’

On the far side of the valley a bubble of flame rose through the piled smokescreen. Hyde watched it tuck in its tail as it climbed until it was a disembodied ball of dull fire, and then it was gone.

‘Yes.’ Revell noted it absently. ‘But they haven’t far to go.’ ‘They’ll have thrown away a lot of lives.’ Hyde beat his arms across his body to combat the cold. ‘Did the powers-that-be say if we’d be reinforced after the wounded are away?’

Flecks of sleet blew in the wind and Revell pulled his collar higher. ‘They didn’t say anything. I don’t know whether they don’t know what they’re doing or won’t say what they’re doing. We stay, that’s all I got.’

‘You going to speak to the men? There’s a lot of rumours flying about.’ ‘They can’t be any worse than the truth. Pass on what we know. I’ll talk to them after the casualties are lifted out.’

‘There won’t be a lot you can say, will there, except to tell them to check they’ve filled in their will forms.’

Revell knew his sergeant was right, echoing his own thinking. Perhaps they were being left behind purely for their nuisance value. They could tie up quite a few Russian troops for some time. It was a tactic the Russians themselves had frequently used. Stay-behind parties could inflict damage out of all proportion to their numbers.

Hell, and he’d thought by defending this place they were making a real contribution to the NATO effort, giving the Russians a hard kick in the teeth. The truth was they were no more than pricking them with a pin, and would be brushed aside and destroyed as an afterthought of the main Warpac advance. Perhaps the NATO staff wanted the tempting stores in the valley to remain intact for the time being so as to act as a honey-pot, drawing more and more troops onto them.

Another airburst cracked overhead. The flak tank that had been quiet for an hour joined in, hoping to catch anyone going to the assistance of wounded. Orange tracer flashed above the ruins to arc away in the distance and finally self-destruct at the limit of their range in tiny points of light.

‘Sunrise in thirty minutes,’ Revell had to brush a snowflake from his watch to read it. ‘We’ve got about six-tenths cloud. Let’s hope it stays that way.’

‘I’ll get Scully to pass round hot drinks.’ Hyde wiped his face with the back of his glove. The leather was sodden.

‘Good idea. might be the last chance for a while. Then I want all weapons manned. When we hear that chopper coming in I want to hit every commie flak position with all we’ve got.’

‘What the fuck’s going on?’ Dooley scrambled up on top and hurled himself into the nearest weapon pit. He had to bellow at his loudest to make himself heard by Clarence.

‘How should I know? I’m only fighting this war, not running it; that’s if anybody is...’

‘Shit.’ Dooley threw himself flat as a flight of Harriers screamed past so low that they felt the blast of their slipstream and tasted the exhaust from their jet pipes. ‘The whole world has gone fucking mad...’

The rest of his words were lost as a pair of MIGs followed the Harriers. Tracer was coming up from among the trees, among them the 30mm from the flak tank.

‘Hit it.’ Revell jumped up and yelled to the mortar crews. ‘Take it out now.’

‘Fire!’ Thorne and his men dropped bombs down the waiting tubes in a never-ending procession, pausing only to realign on fresh targets as they were called. Every location in turn was drenched by the deluge of explosives, and the
anti-aircraft fire rapidly diminished.

Masses of tracer and whole swarms of anti-tank missiles ploughed through the trees, and soon there were several fierce fires sprouting from unseen sources, and the crackle of exploding munitions.

More NATO ground-attack aircraft were visible in the distance, peeling out of formations to make diving attacks with rockets, bombs and cannons. Almost every time they were rewarded with dense pillars of black smoke denoting burning vehicles. The columns rose straight up in the still, pale dawn.

‘This is fantastic. I thought we didn’t have any aircraft left.’ Dooley sent yet another TOW missile on its way and gave it his full concentration until it blasted the camouflage from a self-propelled gun. He grabbed a reload.

‘Some clever shit has been saving a few by the looks of things.’ Carrington had hefted his mini-gun onto the top of a broken wall and was expending ammunition at an incredible rate against a distant ridge. After a thousand rounds, showers of random tracer marked the destruction of his target.

From close at hand came the distinctive heavy double beat of a Chinook. The downdraft from his blades accelerated the sleet to stinging speed that hurt exposed hands and faces. As it reduced forward momentum and began to drop toward the ruins, its gunners were putting down a massive weight of fire from four mini-guns and as many grenade launchers. The machine was plastered with red-cross emblems.

The rear loading ramp was already half-lowered when it made an uneven touchdown. By the time it made contact with the broken stone the first of the wounded were lining up to board.

A loadmaster, linked to the flight deck by the umbilical of his intercom lead, did a double-take as he saw the girls. ‘Can’t have been all that bad, Major. I wouldn’t have minded...’ His words tailed off as the line of wounded kept coming in a never-ending line from an opening among the piles of rubble.

‘It’s not been a party.’ Revell ducked as a cannot shell passed through the arc of the forward rotors and a shower of metal and carbon fibre fragments slashed past. ‘Have you got a combat air patrol? Can you get hold of them?’

‘No problem. What do you want and where?’

‘Everything they’ve got. Right under the castle walls and back along the road.’

Less than a minute elapsed and then the air was filled again with the roar of jet engines as a line of A-10s dipped from the clouds and swept low over the trees.

Firing rockets and letting rip with their cannons, the ground-attack aircraft tore the landscape apart, cutting great swaths through the trees. The last to make its pass released four tear-drop-shaped dull silver pods.

They tumbled end over end to burst in long broad avenues of violent flame. Pines became pillars of fire and burst explosively as water trapped behind their bark instantly expanded into super-heated steam.

Hyde clapped the loadmaster on his shoulder to get his attention. ‘That’s it. They’re all aboard.’ - ‘You better pull in the rest of your men, Major. We don’t like to hang around.’

At first Revell thought he’d misheard the load-master. ‘No, we’re staying.’

‘Not according to the orders my captain was given. We’re to lift out all troops in this location. Came direct from your CO. A Colonel Lippincott?’

‘Did you hear his words?’

‘You bet. Nearly burned my ears off. Something to the effect that we were to haul out- any fucking cunts wandering about on this heap of shit.’

‘That’s Ol’ Foulmouth all right.’ Revell had to shout to make himself heard. ‘But we can’t pull out. There’s a
billion-dollar supply dump down there. The Reds are after it.’

‘You haven’t heard what’s happening, have you?’

**TWENTY FOUR**

Bending his head closer to the loadmaster, Revell strove to catch his words.

‘We’ve put down a couple of divisions of paratroops behind the Russian lines. So far they’ve taken a dozen of their command centres, complete with staff and generals. SAS and First Air cavalry have gone in and screwed up all their communications centres. They’re running about like chickens with their heads off. Seems we suckered them into overextending themselves when we fell back across the river. We already slung ten bridges across and our armour is flooding this way.’

‘We’re attacking?’ After the last year of holding actions and retreats the concept was almost an alien one to Revell.

‘You bet your life we are. No preliminary bombardment, just went straight for their throats. Our bombers are having a field day tearing apart roads blocked with their backed-up transport. It’s Falaise all over again.’

‘This area is still stiff with commie troops.’ To illustrate Revell’s point, a mortar bomb impacted against the wall of the gateway and its smoke was cut to ribbons by the helicopter blades.

‘Not for long. We’ve seen them streaming back out of this sector. This lot can’t have got the message yet; they soon will. Not that they’ve anywhere to go. We’ve got all the roads blocked. So come on, get them in here.’

More mortar shells began to fall, most landing short, but now and again one would find a few extra meters of range and detonate on the walls to send hot shrapnel across the ruins.

A red-hot lump of tailfin smacked with its flat side against the back of Revell’s hand and a large blister formed instantly.

Boarding in small groups, in short rushes from cover to cover, they made the comparative safety of the Chinook with only two more light casualties. Fragments wrapped on the fuselage armour.

They threw themselves down on the bare metal floor. There was no noise, no cheering, no celebration as they sat huddled together. This was always the worst time, when the helicopter was most vulnerable. A window cracked under a hard impact and several of them started at the loud report.

‘Is that everyone? My captain’s shouting at me fit to rival your colonel.’ The loadmaster paused to listen to his headphones. ‘He’s calling in another strike to try and hit that mortar, but he wants to lift now, like right now.’

‘Andrea’s missing.’

It was Clarence who’d noticed, missing her among the crowd in which her face alone would have stood out.

‘We can’t wait...’

Revell leaped out, not giving the air crewman time to finish. ‘One minute, just one minute.’

‘We could all be dead...’

Running without thought of danger from the incoming bombs, Revell raced for the cellars. He was shouting as he went, every swear word, every obscenity he could lay tongue on, anything that would vent his fury. She was coming out of the wine vault, an open bottle in her hand. ‘I couldn’t find him.’

Her speech was slurred, and she retaliated to Revell’s forcing her hand against the wall and smashing the bottle by jabbing at his face with the broken neck. ‘You fuck off, Herr Major. I’ve had enough of all of you. Don’t you like me anymore.’ Her dark eyes held his. ‘I killed your girlfriend in Hamburg; did you know that?’
‘Come on, you stupid cow; you’re putting everyone’s life on the line.’ By a handful of the collar of her flak jacket he hauled her up the steps, past the line of bodies and out to the Chinook. He pushed her hard to send her sprawling over a mini-gun, to the amazement of its baby-faced operator.

Still the chopper didn’t lift, though the rotors were working up to full speed and the wheels were performing a series of bunny hops as it threatened to rise.

‘Air-strike coming in.’ The loadmaster anticipated the officer’s question. ‘The skipper doesn’t want to get in their way.’

Through the gun port, over Andrea’s still prostrate form, Revell saw two Phantoms boring in at high speed. It wasn’t until they banked to begin their bombing run, so close that he could see the white-outlined black crosses of the Luftwaffe, that he realized the West German pilots were going for the wrong target.

There was no time to shout, to tell them to abort. He could only watch helplessly as they sped the length of the valley and unloaded their pylons immediately above the village.

The detonation of the thousand-pound bombs carpeted the floor of the valley in smoke and flame and overlapping white blast rings. A Bradley hull spun through the air; a house roof lifted, complete and intact, to twice the height of the instantly demolished building beneath it.

For a moment Revell could hope that no other damage had been done, that the underground storage areas had not been penetrated; then there came a long, low, powerful rumble and the whole valley and the surrounding hills appeared to shake.

The Chinook was pushed bodily sideways, puncturing a tire and buckling a landing leg. Thrown off balance, Revell regained the window to see that the site of the village was concealed inside a huge fireball that was beginning to rise. Only its seemingly deliberate slowness gave any measure of its awesome dimensions.

Countless secondary explosions raced through the ground at its base, the collapsing earth graphically marking the precise layout of the complex.

‘Heck.’ The baby-faced gunner was wide-eyed with amazement at the spectacle. ‘Was that a nuke they dropped, was it? You can feel the heat from here.’

Riding the turbulence of the strong up currents, the Chinook lifted and turned to head west. Revell beckoned Clarence to undrape the girl from the gun. He couldn’t bring himself to have anything to do with her.

They were a hundred feet above the ruins, making the transition to forward flight, when she suddenly revived and shoved the sniper’s hands away. Before he could get hold of her again she had thrown herself behind the machine gun and, ignoring the pain of her strapped wrist, was training it downward and opening fire.

The stream of bullets struck a long way short of the lone figure that had climbed into the open. She tried to correct her aim, but fumbled as her target hurled himself aside, and missed again.

Clarence was less gentle the second time, and wrenched her away. The range was longer now, and he sent the tracer in a swirling cone of steel toward the deserter.

Almost into safe cover, he was struck across the back of the legs, below the knee. He collapsed with both calves reduced to a pulp of jelly-like tissue and small fragments of bone.

‘You didn’t kill him.’ Andrea hammered with her fists on Clarence’s back, until she was pulled off.

Dooley had pushed his caged birds into a safe corner, and now gripped her in a bear hug from behind. ‘Keep still, you mad bitch.’

‘He didn’t kill him, he didn’t kill him.’
Waiting until she was quiet, deprived of breath by the pressure of the hold, Clarence sat down, and taking a piece of biscuit from his pack, broke it up and began to poke it through the bars of the cage.

‘No, I didn’t kill him, but he’ll be no more trouble to anyone. And in any event, he would not have counted.’ He pushed in the last crumbs, then picked up his rifle. ‘I still have five to go. Deserters don’t count.’

For as long as he could, Revell watched the series of explosions as the valley receded in the distance. There had been no open expression of the frustration most of them must have experienced. Except perhaps their medic. Sampson had muttered quietly and angrily to himself as he moved among the wounded.

They had all had a reprieve of sorts. A handful of them had come through with hardly a scratch, but all had picked up another layer of scar tissue inside.

With the NATO armies now on the offensive, the war in the Zone was going to be harder and nastier than ever before. He didn’t doubt that the Special Combat Company was going to be right in the thick of it.
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