

THE
JOHN RUSH
ADVENTURES

Alex Hori

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Though it would be cool if they were.

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This book has been written using American English and without the use of AI.

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Introduction

When I was a kid I loved to read. There's something magical about sitting down with a book. The words are a journey that you populate with images and characters out of your mind. An author might describe an adventure, but is the reader who brings it to life.

While I read a wide range of authors, I was happiest in the fast paced worlds of adventure stories. Doc Savage, the prototype for Superman, solved mysteries with his god-like intellect and strength. H. Rider Haggard took me on journeys into Africa. Conan-Doyle, Sherlock Holmes' creator, took me to lost worlds of dinosaurs with Professor Challenger as my guide. And let's not forget W.E. Johns whose Biggles fueled my early interest in anything to do with airplanes.

To a contemporary eye these stories are not without their problems. The language is sometimes racist or sexist. The settings and villains can be full of unfair cliches. Yet there is something compelling about these stories set in different worlds where heroes are simply heroic and villains are bad without needing to be understood.

John Rush is my attempt to step back into that simpler world and leave some of the baggage behind. They're written as novellas, short enough to enjoy in a handful of settings without feeling like it's a slog to the end. Set in the aftermath of the Second World War this isn't a world where you can Google an answer or call a friend for help. There's action and adventure and twists and turns that our hero has to overcome with their wits and fists.

Enjoy this trio of adventures featuring the British Adventurer, John Rush.

The Wagner Affair

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Chapter 1

Alaric Wagner barely fit in his cell. The bunk was pushed against the longest wall but even then his feet stuck out through the bars. Not that he was particularly tall. The cell was just small.

He lay in the gloom with one hand behind his head and the other drawing in the air. Outside in the dirt courtyard a symphony of insects entertained him, while at the end of the corridor there was the faint hum of a fan and a glow from a reading lamp. His cell was the last of four, though he'd never seen another prisoner.

Six months ago (from the tally he kept scratched on the wall) he was the toast of the Central American state. His efforts in building a post-colonial country were rewarded with lavish praise and a seat at the highest table. He had a small domestic staff, a hacienda with an orchard and they'd even found him an old Mercedes. And now? A tiny room made of mud with bars on the window and a wall made of steel. Meals were basic and not quite sufficient to nourish him. If he was lucky he got to spend the day outside in the courtyard re-reading the same three books. When it rained he spent the day inside.

The orchestra had stopped playing.

This was it, he told himself. The day the post-revolution regime decided they no longer needed the old Nazi. Perhaps he should have surrendered to the allies. Surely the Soviets wouldn't have been this bad?

A loud thud echoed up the corridor. Shadows moved on the walls and Wagner took a long, deep breath to calm his nerves. He wasn't afraid.

Keys jangled and boots thumped on the dirt floor outside. A giant of a man loomed through the darkness. His face, round and bearing the unmistakeable features of Spanish descent, appeared at the bars.

"Alaric Wagner?" he asked.

Wagner nodded.

"Come here," the big man said in broken English.

Without objection he rose from his bunk and stretched his back. As he approached the bars the giant's arms reached through and took hold, pulling him close. An enormous hand cradled his head.

"This is required," the giant said.

An explosion broke the outside wall and threw bits of mud and stone inwards. Wagner ducked, or tried to as the giant's grip on him was far too strong. A few pieces of debris bounced off his tattered prison uniform. No doubt the giant's hand blocked a piece or two aimed at his skull.

From outside came shouting and the unmistakable chaos of his small guard roused from sleep. He knew each of the six men by sight if not name. No doubt none survived the crackle of rifle fire that soon silenced them.

The giant released his grip.

"I am Garcia," he said. "General Basa has sent for you."

Wagner had no idea who that was or if he should be grateful. When a figure appeared at the hole with a rifle pointed at him he knew he had no choice but to accept the General's invitation.

It was a small compound surrounded by an eight-foot-high wall of dried mud bricks topped with barbed wire. A single gate led to the dirt track that wound off to the jungle past an open space, facing the two huts that were the prison's only buildings. One was for the guards and amenities, while the other had cells for ten people. Only one had been occupied and that had a hole in it.

A lone figure crouched in the compound's centre, inspecting the hard dirt floor. Countless tracks crossed this way and that, and it was almost impossible to work out who went where or did what. Unless you looked hard enough. Looked for the things that didn't belong.

"US Army patent boots," John Rush concluded. "Four of them, plus the prisoner. He was barefoot."

"You blaming this on the good-ol' CIA?"

The voice had a Wisconsin accent and belonged to the woman sitting on the hood of a battered green Jeep. She was a little over five feet four inches tall, slender build, cropped blonde hair and dressed in khaki slacks and shirt. Under her left armpit was a holstered Browning pistol, spare clips under the right. She watched the figure crawling in the dirt with sharp blue eyes hidden behind dark glasses.

"Hardly old, Winnie. It's only been around six months."

Norma "Winnie" Wincroft winced at his use of her unwanted nickname.

"Yeah, and I still don't know how the British know about it."

Put him in a European city and Rush wouldn't stand out. An inch or so taller than average, a toned build, features unremarkable apart from his eye's striking hazel color. A mop of brown hair sat atop his head, cut short enough to be smart, not so short a hint of its natural curl didn't slip through.

He took five careful steps towards the cell block and picked up a crumbled piece of wall. He sniffed it, then put it back.

"Locally produced dynamite," he announced. "Can tell from the lingering aroma of the clay they used."

"At least we're off the hook for that, eh, Rush?"

"Not for the weapons," he replied, pointing to a spent cartridge case. "That looks like ammunition from an M1 carbine."

"One of the guards opened fire," said a deep voice with a local accent. This was Cadmael, chief of the country's police force. He was short and lanky and seemed perfectly suited to the mountains and jungle. His features were of

one of the indigenous Mayan peoples with a round face, long nose and a wide mouth almost hidden under a thick mustache. Covering his greying hair was a wide-brimmed straw hat that was out of place with his light blue dress shirt and smartly pressed dark trousers. On his left breast was the crest of the Guanama Police, and the insignia of a Colonel adorned his shoulders.

"You use M1s?"

"No, señor Rush. My men use Lee-Enfields. That is probably from the gun that shot the guard dead where he stood."

"I've had enough of this, Rush."

Winnie slid off the Jeep's hood and strode over to the hole in the wall. She smiled at Rush as she walked past as if tormenting him with her clumsiness.

"Anyway, how did you get to Central America so fast? Thought you were in Korea waiting for it all to kick off."

"Well, I'm here, Winnie. How about you?"

"I'm here for the peace conference," she told him, peering into the gloom. "Disinterested observer as Guanama didn't want our help."

"We prefer our peace to be agreed amongst our own peoples," the Colonel said as he sauntered over with his hands behind his back and the natural air of authority a high rank offered.

Rush watched as Winnie inspected the interior of the cell from outside. Then curiosity got the better of her and she stepped through the hole.

Instinct made him run as hard as he could. A standing start to a full sprint and back to a halt in less time than a blink of an eye. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back, throwing her to the floor as he rolled on top of her. He used his body as a shield for hers.

The landmine clicked and threw itself into the air. It detonated and spewed hot metal and fire, shredding anything in its path.

Winnie would have lost her head.

Winnie pressed the dressing on the deep gash in Cadmael's arm. He winced, the only sign of distress since the jagged slice of metal tore into his flesh. As soon as he saw Rush pull her clear, he'd thrown himself to the floor. Getting hit was bad luck.

"That's an old rebel trick," Cadmael told them. "Put the mine under the mattress and wait for someone to pick it up. I have heard many tales of squads being maimed by such traps. Makes it hard to be tired when your bed might kill you."

Rush agreed.

"Which begs the question, who did our rebel friends want so badly?"

"There are prisons like this hidden across the jungle," Cadmael explained. "The Junta used them for 'undesirables.' They hid them out in the jungle and forgot about them. I couldn't tell you who was in here."

"No, but Miss Wincroft can," Rush said, looking straight at her.

The formality hurt more than her nickname, and she shuffled guiltily from foot to foot. Caught in subterfuge like a kid with her hand in the cookie jar and chocolate around her mouth.

"Can't confirm nor deny anything, Rush. You know that."

"Was the prisoner a former Reich scientist called Alaric Wagner?"

She looked shocked.

"How the hell do you know that?"

"Nazi Party slogans scratched in the wall of his cell alongside some chemical formulas and what looks like an engineering sketch. The science rules out SS or Gestapo, and it isn't one of von Braun's cronies. You got the ones with Paperclip that the Soviets didn't nab. Wagner's the most likely candidate, all things considered."

"I don't know why they sent me here to babysit you," she complained. "You already got the answers."

"The scratches are old, which suggests at some point he got some paper and pencils. Do we know what he did with his notes?"

Cadmael shook his head.

"I can ask."

"Don't," Rush insisted. "If they were here, they would've been scattered around the cell. Someone wanted those pretty bad."

"Whoever broke him out, right?"

"They didn't do it for their health," Rush said.

An unmade road full of ruts and cracks should have made for slow progress. Winnie was having none of it. She piloted the Jeep like a sports car, dodging the worst potholes and letting its robust construction soak up the rest.

Not that Cadmael shared her confidence. He sat behind them, clinging on for dear life and muttering silent prayers to the mountain spirits. It made listening to their conversation more difficult.

"Why would he do that?"

A deep rut knocked the wind out of his lungs, and he missed the first part of Rush's theory.

"...abandoned in a prison and he's likely to develop an intense desire for revenge. He more or less built parts of this country, then they buried him when it was no longer convenient."

The Jeep swerved left and right, missing a fallen branch stretched across the road. It slid to a halt. They were at a junction, or what passed for one in the mountains. Either way ran the main highway to Guanama City, the small country's capital.

"Think he'll build it? He'll need money and resources."

Cadmael took a deep breath and let his heart rest. The highway was a thread of tarmac through the jungle. Broken in places, lots of places, but a lot less distressing than the dirt trail up to the prison.

"They'll be in place," Rush promised. "There's enough people in the world who think Herr Hitler had the right idea if only he'd been given time."

As Winnie accelerated, Cadmael replaced the discomfort of bouncing down a trail with the terror of a Jeep traveling close to its limit.

Chapter 2

There were no walls, only a tarpaulin stretched between two trees and pegged to the ground. Yet the fresh air blowing through and the comfortable bed Wagner lay on more than compensated. Hunger and thirst were sated, he was clean and his clothes were new.

The ape-like frame of Garcia lingered on the edge of his vision. He sat on a camp chair that struggled to support his colossal weight. Whether he was there to protect Wagner or stop him wandering off was a question of perspective. Both could be true.

There was a price for this freedom, and it didn't take long for his creditor to come knocking.

A figure of average height and slim build, a few years too young to be the General his field uniform implied. He was Hispanic, though it was doubtful he'd ever visited Spain, and played to his heritage with a mustache clipped in the style favored by Franco.

"Herr Wagner, my name is General Basa. I can only apologize for the appalling treatment you suffered at the hands of my predecessors."

"Danke, Herr General," Wagner replied and nodded in appreciation.

"Will you walk with me?"

Garcia helped him stand. He was still weak from his ordeal.

The undergrowth was stripped away, making space for a small village of tents and shelters. Two dozen men of varying character busied themselves, all wearing the same drab uniform as their leader. When the trio approached, each came to attention and saluted. The General returned their gesture,

pausing to exchange a few words of comfort. It was impossible to ignore the loyalty amongst this motley band.

"A small force, but fierce," Basa explained. "There are more spread throughout the mountains, and I will count on many more pure Spaniards once the new revolution begins."

"What happened?" Wagner asked, ignoring the grand proclamation. He had heard his share of those in the past.

They paused outside a large tent.

"Factions and in-fighting," the General said sadly. "The Junta split in two. One side favored establishing a Francoist State. The other sought reconciliation with the Maya people. Caal waited for the fighting to stop and stepped into the vacuum. I am afraid it was he who sent you to rot."

Wagner recalled meeting Filipe Caal twice. An unremarkable man who seemed content to linger in the shadows. His patience won him a country.

"Come," said Basa as he held the tent open.

The moment Wagner saw what was inside his heart stopped and tears appeared in the corners of his cold grey eyes.

"This is everything I could find from your old hacienda and the ones taken from you in the prison," Basa told him. "I have arranged it here in chronological order. Or as best as I can determine."

Slowly Wagner walked the table filling the centre of the tent. His eyes scanned the papers laid out so not one overlapped another. It was all here, or all that mattered. Every sketch that became a technical drawing. Every formula he'd refined to perfection. All his notes on delivery methods, management and the potential to maim and kill.

He let his hand run across the paper, his touch as soft and loving as a parent on a child. The lines he'd drawn and corrections made flowed through his nerves and amplified the beauty he saw in his destructive creation.

"The device has been manufactured to the specifications in the drawings," Basa said, presenting small photographs for Wagner to inspect. "We are unsure of its assembly and chemical processes."

"Yes," Wagner said, "that is understandable. I didn't write everything down for obvious reasons."

"Of course, Herr Wagner."

"Your plan is to regain control of the country and assert the superiority of the Castilian over the Mayan?"

"Yes."

"And the weapon will be used in a limited capacity for this purpose?"

"Of course. The operation has been planned to contain losses to a minimum."

Wagner inspected the photograph once more.

"You do not want to advertise a weapon of this nature until you have complete control," Wagner advised. "But it will need to be tested."

"A suitable, isolated target has been located."

Wagner approved. He warmed to the youthful self-appointed General. There was a hint of familiarity, but he couldn't place where they'd met before. He'd made a point of avoiding too much contact with the Junta. A lesson learned from serving The Reich.

"I was a captain," Basa said as if reading his mind. "We never met, though you may have seen me at the Presidential Palace."

Mystery solved, Wagner let his eyes drift across the plans.

"Do you have all I need?"

"Yes," Basa promised. "There is a facility in the mountain to complete your work. Garcia will take you there if you are willing."

Wagner nodded appreciatively. He looked down and caught sight of his hands. Once smooth and slender, now they were shriveled and rough. There was also a subtle tremble that refused to stop.

"We have help for you," Basa told him gently. "There are students from our university who are committed to helping with this task. They can be your hands. And your legacy."

The grand gesture lifted Wagner's spirits. Doubt and frailty passed, and his pride in his abilities as a member of The Master Race rose once more. Der Führer would be proud.

"If you have what I need this will not take long."

Basa smiled.

"Perfect."

Chapter 3

The rough surface of the highway was swallowed by a smoother tarmac as they neared the capital. The jungle gave way to cultivated plains. Lone houses became villages, then the continuous flow of a city street. They were made of sun-hardened mud, most left in their light brown natural state. A few were painted in bright reds, yellows and blues, often with a market stall out front stacked with produce sheltering from the sun under a cloth awning. Here and there were breaks for Catholic churches, parks and other trappings of a city trying to rebuild.

All the streets converged on a central square, surrounded by taller buildings than the usual one and two-story houses. Not the highs of North America's blocks and skyscrapers, but a couple made it to five stories.

The Jeep slid to a stop outside a four-story hotel on the corner of the square. It was freshly whitewashed, though a few bullet holes and a hint of graffiti supporting one of the factions tried their best to remind the visitors of the civil war. Around the outside ran a veranda on a raised deck with chairs pushed against the clapperboard wall.

"You know we're not involved in this peace conference, right?" Winnie told him. "It's strictly local."

"So why would the CIA show up," he prodded.

Rush lifted his rucksack from the Jeep, slung it over his shoulder and helped the wounded Cadmael down. Never had he seen a man more happy to put his feet on the dirt.

"How do you feel?"

"My shoulder aches, but I will be fine. I will get this seen by a doctor as the lady suggests."

He leaned a little closer to Rush and whispered, "I hope her field medicine is better than her driving."

"I'm sure she's an expert in both," Rush reassured him.

Rush settled in a seat on the veranda. There was little to look at but the street outside, which seemed unusually quiet for a weekday afternoon. A few people walked this way and that, and it was easy to spot who belonged to which ethnic group. The descendants of the Spanish wore stylish European suits and dresses, and carried themselves with the superiority cultivated by generations of colonization. The indigenous Mayans preferred simpler, loose garb with bright colors and wide-brimmed hats to stave off the worst of the burning sun. Neither seemed particularly keen to interact with the other.

A young Mayan woman brought him coffee in a small white mug. It was quiet, she told him, because Guanama had inherited the siesta from the Spanish. Once the sun started to set, the streets would come alive.

He thanked her and settled in for some people-watching. He barely managed a sip of the strong, bitter drink before he was disturbed by Winnie.

"Got you an audience. Five this afternoon. Better wear something nice."

"Strange place for the powers to play their games," he mused. "A country so small it gets lost on maps, yet riddled with history and conflict it doesn't deserve."

"Does any country deserve a war?" Winnie posited. She ignored the young woman who brought her coffee, but Rush made a point to thank her. "What's here aside from trees, trees and more trees?"

"A rich cultural history, diversity in plant and animal life? If the country can recover from the Junta perhaps it can pull together an economy more prosperous than exporting fruits?"

"Makes you wonder why a Nazi diehard like Wagner would come here."

Rush looked around.

"Somewhere to hide. Or be hidden."

Chapter 4

Men made fortunes quickly in the shadow of the war. Nobodies rose from the ashes of a tortured Europe to amass wealth and power noble families could only dream of. Boris Nevin stood above them all.

Latvian Jew, so the rumors said. He fled the Soviet Union and landed in Germany at just the right time to make a small fortune as a fixer. Wealth attached itself to him too easily not to draw attention. Yet he managed to avoid the gaze of serious journalists and gossip columnists alike.

For all the wealth and rumors, he was a remarkably dull man. A couple of inches shorter than Rush and a few pounds heavier, with a barrel for a head that rose from broad shoulders. A low, sloping brow merged seamlessly with his black, slicked-back hair, barely a wrinkle or mark on the impressive dome. Thick, bushy brows ran as near straight lines above small, brown eyes that peered out with an intense stare as if focused on a tiny point on the taller man's forehead. A long, thin nose with slit-like nostrils reached down to thinner red lips pursed together so he looked like he'd sucked on a lemon. He wore a khaki jungle suit, a crisp white shirt underneath, and a brown tie with a Windsor knot tight to his thick neck. The suit was a little on the large side, and there was a noticeable delay between his movements and it catching up. What movements he did make were stiff and directed with intent.

His handshake was firm but friendly.

"So nice to see you, Mister Rush," he said so joyfully Rush might almost have thought it was true. His Latvian accent slipped through a cultivated mid-Atlantic drawl.

"This is quite impressive," Rush said, gesturing at the large hall. Here and there workers in navy blue overalls put the finishing touches to the future venue of the Peace Conference.

"Thank you. It helps that I have no vested interest in this country beyond metal and timber. Unlike your friend, who was quite insistent we meet American intelligence services, I would think."

Quite well informed, Rush noted. Although it was a small country, and Norma Wincroft stood out like a sore thumb.

"Yes, I just wondered what sort of security is in place?" said Rush casually. "You may have heard of a small problem in the West with a prison escape?"

"The Nazi Wagner? Yes, I hear such things. Why should it be of concern? Or is the British Secret Intelligence Service eager to talk to him?"

"Why would you think I work for the British?" Rush joked. "No, I'm just concerned about a weapons expert with a grudge against the Junta wandering around."

Nevin laughed.

"Yes, yes. But please, we do not call them 'Junta.' They are the representatives of the Hispanic community. The country is trying to move beyond such emotive terms."

Rush corrected himself.

"Quite right. But the point stands."

"Come. Walk with me, John. May I call you John?"

The hall was the centerpiece of the building. Two stories with a glass window that looked out across the city as if to remind the representatives who they served. They would sit in two rows arranged in a semi-circle facing plain-looking desks. Above was a gallery for the public and press to watch.

"The tables will be replaced with something more appropriate once the treaty is signed," Nevin explained.

Through the back of the assembly was a large hall with a pair of curved stairways sweeping down from a majestic landing. Beyond were offices,

meeting rooms and the other trappings of government. A wide corridor led to a grand hall that faced towards the blue of the Caribbean Sea. Around the outside was a paved path that led visitors past the building as if to remind them of the importance and grandeur of democracy. Or so Nevin proudly explained.

He took great pride in pointing to details buried in the design that connected with the lofty aims of a fledgling democracy. Rush was more interested in the myriad of close-circuit television cameras, self-sealing doors and thick armored glass on the windows. While the modernist structure might suggest openness and accountability in its design, its construction was closer to a fortress.

"I noticed the security detail isn't local," Rush observed as they arrived at the roof garden that spanned the structure. They chose to look over the harbor and out across the water.

"No," Nevin confessed. "They are my private security. A few highly trained men from various armies with a singular loyalty and commitment."

"Local boys not up to it?"

"I think you are being frivolous, John," Nevin complained. "No, it was a question of trust. I am a disinterested party and both sides accepted neither should bring weapons into a place of peace. I will guarantee the security of this oasis until the treaty is signed."

"Very noble."

"Not at all, John. The harbor here is a convenient location for my shipping interests. I see this as a mutually beneficial investment."

"Fair enough."

Nevin gestured over towards a modern dock under construction. It was large enough to treble the size of the ramshackle collection of jetties serving the local fishing fleet. A fresh concrete dockside followed the shoreline to the parliament compound, the half-built steel framework of new warehouses

overshadowing what few wooden structures had yet to be torn down. Beneath them a jetty stuck out into the clear blue sea like a grey scar.

"The first of four," he said proudly.

"A little country building never hurt anyone."

"Indeed," chuckled Nevin. "Anyway, my security only operates to the edge of this new parliament. Beyond that is the 'local boys' responsibility, as you so eloquently put it. That said, I would appreciate being informed of any progress you might make on locating Herr Wagner. For obvious reasons."

The finality of his tone brought the encounter to an abrupt end. He smiled, turned and walked away, leaving Rush alone in the garden.

"Please follow me," insisted one of Nevin's security boys. A Nepalese in a dark green jumpsuit with a Browning automatic holstered at his hip and the flash of the Royal Gurkha Rifles on his left shoulder. It was one of more than a dozen regimental insignia Rush had noticed during his tour.

"How can I refuse such a polite offer?" quipped Rush, allowing himself to be guided out of the building.

"What do you think?"

Winnie waited with the Jeep across the road from the building's main gate. She leaned against the bonnet with her arms folded across her chest and round, tinted glasses protecting her eyes from the setting sun's glare. One of Nevin's men watched her suspiciously from a concrete sentry box.

"It's an impressive building."

"But? There's always a 'but' with you, Rush."

"If the private army in there and the police out here aren't sharing intelligence that would be a concern. Any tension between the local boys and Nevin's?"

"Not that I've seen."

He scanned the building one last time.

"Wagner's got a day's head start on us. We'd better make the gap up."

Chapter 5

Overnight rain washed away whatever tracks the escapee had left. Even with the help of one of Cadmael's local police officers, Wagner's escape route remained elusive. A day wasted, Winnie lamented as she guided the Jeep back to the city.

There were a handful of vehicles on the road. Most were trucks in various states of disrepair, somehow kept going by skilled and inventive mechanics.

"Are the rebels still active in the city?" Rush asked. They were a few minutes away from the hotel.

"You mean the motorbike we've picked up?"

"Looks like a WLA."

"Damned Yanks again," she laughed. "Hang on."

She floored the gas pedal and the Jeep gathered pace. They had no chance of outrunning the Harley Davidson in pursuit. It was catching them quickly. The rider, huddled down in a thick jacket, extended his right arm.

A bullet ricocheted off the bodywork.

"Damn it! He's shooting at us!"

"I noticed," said Rush calmly. "Take a left."

A second bullet whizzed overhead. She ducked, and they sped past the turning.

"Shoot back!" she demanded.

"Left," he repeated.

This time she swung the speeding Jeep hard, lifting the outside wheels off the ground. They lost some speed, which she hurried to put back on. Easier now Rush was out of the vehicle.

He rolled in the dirt, came to his feet and spun around in time to see the bike sliding the turn. He was quick enough to drag his belt off and whip it through the air. It caught the assailant in the face, knocking him off balance and the bike toppled, spilling both in the dirt.

The pistol came around, lining up to shoot, but Rush was quicker. A shot rang out as his boot sent the pistol spinning into the dirt.

That wasn't the end of it. Rush's punch hit thin air and he nearly caught steel in his ribs. As the blade brushed his shirt, he grabbed at the rider's wrist and flipped him around. Lined him up for the sharp punch full in the face.

The rider went down, limp as a sleeping baby.

As the dust settled, Winnie turned up, Browning aimed at the stunned figure. Rush searched the unconscious man's pockets.

"Anything?" she asked.

"Apart from the US Army bike, flying jacket, boots and pistol?"

"Someone really wants the world to think we're behind this," she complained.

A grunt from the ground warned the rider was coming around. Rush slapped him lightly on the cheek to hurry the process along. The attacker snapped awake, confused, then terrified as he looked straight down the barrel of a pistol.

"What do you want to do with him?" asked Winnie, sounding like she'd as soon shoot him as anything else.

"Let him go. I think we've got enough."

"You figure?"

Rush lifted the motorbike and gave it a quick look over. He held it up for the rider, who swung his leg over the frame and settled down. He still looked confused.

"Well, he wasn't a local," Rush said as the motorbike turned the corner.

A black Mercedes was parked outside the hotel. It was at least a decade old and had enough dents to show a well-lived life. Behind it was an older, soft-skinned truck, olive green and military. Two soldiers stood by the entrance, both armed with bolt action rifles. Lee-Enfields, just as Cadmael had said.

In the lounge were three more soldiers, and on a sofa away from a window was an older man in a dark suit and slicked-back black hair. He stood as Rush and Winnie walked in. The nearest soldier stopped them, and reluctantly she handed her pistol over.

"President Filipe Caal," Rush said cheerfully as he shook the man's hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"And you too, señor Rush. Señorita Wincroft and I have already met."

They sat, the guests in uncomfortable wicker chairs facing the President. One of the soldiers watched them closely with his pistol leveled at them. It was easier to wield than a rifle in a confined space.

Caal extracted a silver case from his oversized jacket and offered the thin brown sticks inside. Rush declined. Winnie accepted, put one end of the cigarillo in her mouth and lit the other with a match.

"Gotta try these, Rush. Got quite the kick on them," she laughed and breathed deeply. Her face turned red.

"I like my lungs, thank you," he sighed.

"I understand you had some difficulties," said Caal casually. He blew smoke into the air, directing it away from Rush.

"Word travels fast."

"Very. Was it connected to your search for Herr Wagner?"

The waitress arrived with three small white cups full of steaming black coffee. She placed them carefully on the table between the guests, smiled and backed away. Everyone watched her like a hawk.

"Tell me about him. How did he end up here?"

"That I don't know," Caal said. "Franco was the rumor, but it is just that. What I can say is these past three years since the end of your war have been a time

of beneficial change for this small country. His knowledge gave us fertilizer that greatly improved our crops and drugs that saved our lives. We have a small chemical plant here in this city that makes for our people what we could not afford to buy."

"And yet he ended up in a prison in the middle of nowhere."

Caal appeared troubled by this. He picked up his coffee and held the cup to his lips as if caught in some painful memory he couldn't escape.

"When the previous government splintered, there were three factions. Shall we just say that Herr Wagner's true nature shone through?"

"He talked about racial superiority?"

"Yes. And he talked of solving 'the Mayan problem.' It was chilling."

Caal put the cup down without drinking. He leaned forward, rested his elbow on his knees, and put his head in his hands.

"The things he proposed, señor Rush. I know I was raised to believe the Spaniard is the superior of the Mayan, but even to that crass way of thinking his ideas were repugnant."

"A chemical weapon?"

A nod provided the answer. Relieved by his confession, Caal leaned back and drew in on the cigarillo again. The two guests joined in his quiet contemplation of what could have been.

"I decided he was best out of the way until we had peace. Then we would decide together what to do with this Nazi."

"Perhaps use him as a bargaining chip?" suggested Winnie. "Get some technical assistance out of us?"

"Or the Soviets," offered Rush. "The chap who tried it on with us was a Russian. MGB, most likely."

"I did not know the Soviets were here," Caal said, genuinely surprised. "You can imagine with our connections to España Franquista we do not welcome Communist interference in our affairs."

"But you like help from ex-Nazis, right?" she snapped.

Caal stood, abruptly ending their conference. Rush would have liked a few more minutes but accepted the withdrawal gracefully. They shook hands, though Winnie's offered hand was ignored.

"I assume your intention is to remove Herr Wagner from the country?"

"If I have your permission, of course."

After a moment of consideration, the President nodded his head.

"Thank you."

The man with the pistol rushed to leave. He shouted orders and the dozen soldiers hidden in the shadows drew back to shield the President. Less than thirty seconds later the Mercedes and its escort roared into the night.

Rush leaned against the doorframe and watched them go. In a way he admired the man he'd just met. It took courage to admit there was a better way than that which gave him power. More to act on this knowledge.

"Russian?" said Wincroft and she sidled up next to him.

"He was riding a Soviet copy of a Harley Davidson," Rush explained, "and his watch was a 1947 edition Probeda."

She sighed.

"Great, so we got the damned Soviets here too."

"Maybe."

Chapter 6

The plain was like two hands cupped together and raised to the sky. The fingers were the steep mountains on three sides, the palms the flat land cultivated with crops, and a handful of huts clustered by the intersection between river and road. The huts were made of wood and raised on low stilts, suggesting heavy rains flooded the land regularly enough. The eastern end of the plain was open, falling away to a steep slope into the jungle with the river snaking down out of sight. Somewhere in the trees, it joined the Guanama River and flowed out to the ocean.

Three figures walked slowly along the dirt road. Their forms were hidden under thick clothes that left nothing bare, and their faces twisted into the black, bug-eyed snouts of gas masks. They stopped here and there to push open the door of a hut or peer through a window.

"Jesus," Winnie gasped. She fell back from the open door, catching her balance before she landed on Cadmael.

Rush hurried over and looked inside. Four mannequins were hunched over a crude wooden table. A man, a woman and two children yet to reach their teens. In another world they were an ideal family sharing a joyful breakfast. Here their faces were twisted in horror and pain, their muscles so tense they'd snapped. Lying in a pool of bloodied vomit was a small rodent, hoping for a feast and instead finding death.

"I've seen this before," Rush muttered.

Winnie swilled water around her mouth and spat. It splashed on the small patch of vomit she'd heaved out once she was back at the Jeep and her gas mask was off.

"Sorry," she said weakly.

"What is it?" asked Cadmael. His complexion was almost ghostly white, and his eyes stretched wide as he tried to comprehend what he'd experienced.

"It looks like sarin gas but far more potent," Rush told them.

"Like the Nazis used in the camps?" asked Winnie.

"That was Zyklon B. This is far worse. How long have your men been here, Colonel?"

"Twenty minutes," said Cadmael. "Why?"

"They might have been exposed," Rush told him. "Might be a low dose, but we don't know how long this takes to disperse or what the effects of exposure are."

"My Gods! Some of them touched the bodies when they found this place."

"Dig a pit about a meter deep and at least thirty meters from the river. Get your men to strip, stand in the pit, and hose them down with cold water. Don't let anyone wash in the river, and don't go back to the village for at least another hour. Make sure you burn their clothes. It can stick to the fabric."

Cadmael sensed the urgency in Rush's voice and rushed away to carry out the orders. He knew they would save lives.

"Wagner's work?" asked Winnie, trying to put on a brave face.

Another Jeep arrived. Its bright blue bodywork was modified to resemble a station wagon with a hard top and comfortable seats. It pulled up alongside the battered green model, determined to make it look shabbier than it deserved.

Niven clambered out, dressed in a tan suit and white shirt. A woman with long black hair and dark skin was with him. She wore a plain white shapeless dress edged in geometric patterns woven with bright threads. She fell to her knees as she stumbled out.

"What have you done?" she screamed.

"It's a gas attack," Rush told her bluntly in his crude Spanish. "I'm afraid everyone died."

"We must bury them," she insisted. "We must for the sake of their souls."

Rush put her to one side for the moment. His attention was drawn to the three uniformed men who'd slipped silently out of the Jeep with Niven. They spread out, took defensive positions and scanned the jungle for any hint of a threat. He'd seen their machine guns in Soviet hands on the Eastern Front. These looked fresh out of the box.

"You will excuse the theatrics, John," Nevin said as they shook hands. "When I heard what happened, I assumed Wagner would be involved."

"You might well be right," Rush told him.

The woman started chanting. Rush knew better than to interrupt her.

"The Nazis were working on chemical weapons, but Hitler wouldn't use them," Rush said. "There were rumors of plans to use sarin in V-weapon warheads."

"That's what Wagner was working on," Winnie said, confirming Rush's suspicion. "I guess he figured how to improve it after he got here. He'd need a serious laboratory."

"Like the chemical plant Caal told us about?"

Cadmael joined them. The sound of men undressing and cleaning themselves wafted up from the plain.

"Will my men be safe?"

"They should be," Rush offered as reassurance. "It disperses over time, and I don't think we've been here long enough for a fatal exposure."

The woman had stopped chanting and Winnie introduced her as Ixchel, the notional leader of the Mayan people.

"Mayans," she scoffed. "You talk as if we are one people."

"Perhaps more like Europeans?" Rush offered in bad Spanish. "A person can be a European, but also a Spaniard, and within that group, a Catalan or Basque?"

Ixchel stared at him like he was an idiot child. Then she smiled.

"Perhaps," she conceded. "You are the famous señor John Rush who has come to save all of Guanama and the 'Mayans'?"

"I am only interested in one man," Rush told her. "A European German called Alaric Wagner. I think he caused these deaths."

She peered at him through narrowed eyes, deciding if she would trust him.

"These people should be buried in a certain way and place," she told him. "That is their custom."

"The bodies and village should be burned," Nevin said callously. "Just to be sure."

Ixchel shivered as if a great heresy had been proposed.

"What killed them might kill others," Rush said gently. "If we bury them, it may leak into the ground, and we don't know what it will do if it gets into the water. Fire will destroy the chemicals."

"Then why not burn the soldiers?"

Cadmael spoke in his native dialect. She shrugged and countered, and they went back and forth for almost a minute until she yielded.

"We will bury the bodies in a mass grave to the east, according to tradition," he said. "They will be covered after they have been burned and the rituals performed. Then the village will be torched. My men will do this."

"Thank you," Rush told her.

"Tell me, señor Rush, is it progress that one man can destroy so much?"

He had no answer for her.

It was a test. Rush was sure of it. Like any test, the results had to be validated. For a chemical weapon, that meant observing its effects from a safe position.

A small plateau jutted out of the mountainside, forming a natural viewing platform. The dominant winds blew down from the mountains, putting it upwind of the village and likely out of harm's way. Tyre tracks confirmed two trucks with a dozen or so people watching on. They'd arrived along a dirt track at the back of the plateau, one truck staying there while the other followed a trail down to the flat land. It stopped about fifty meters upwind of the village before releasing its deadly cargo.

Where Rush stood, on the edge of the rocky platform, was the perfect view down to the village and the death that unfolded. He tried not to imagine the scene.

"What did you tell her?" he asked Cadmael.

"I said if any of my men died, I would personally set their body on fire."

Rush took a pair of binoculars from the satchel slung around his body. Ixchel was supervising a clutch of naked men gathering bodies from the huts. Occasionally, one would pause to throw up on the ground, and she would put a reassuring arm around him and encourage his efforts.

"I like her."

"She is an easy woman to respect," Cadmael smiled.

"And Caal?"

"Less easy, but he tries. I always thought he didn't quite fit in with the Junta."

The village was a distraction. This was what Wagner had come to see, not where he'd come from. That lay along the track behind.

Winnie was already there, map in hand. The two men joined her.

"What's that way?"

"Old mines. About six clicks."

"Couple of hours hike. Less if we jog."

"Take the Jeep and you'll be there in ten," suggested Nevin.

"Too noisy, plus there's the risk of booby traps. Better to go on foot."

Nevin pulled a pistol out of his jacket and handed it to Rush. He accepted the Makarov, inspecting its design and how new it was.

"Please bring it back," Nevin said. "It was a gift."

"I will," promised Rush.

Chapter 7

The jungle's humidity soaked into the trail, turning dirt into thin mud that clung to boots and slowed their progress. What should have taken ninety minutes took nearer three hours. It was doubtful Cadmael would get his trucks through any quicker.

And yet Wagner and his new ally had managed to get not one but two vehicles through the mud. The tyre marks, which Rush stopped to inspect from time to time when a fork offered choices as to where they had gone, suggested new, deeper treads better suited to the terrain than the worn sort on the Police vehicles.

Winnie whistled, closely mimicking a bird they'd heard in the canopy. She'd already vanished into the undergrowth, and Rush followed suit.

Ahead lumbered two men dressed in a mishmash of American uniforms. Apparently on patrol, they carried their M1 carbines casually, unaware of the danger that awaited them. Rush would have let them pass unmolested, but his compatriot hankered for a weapon better than a pistol.

She took the trailing man, slipping out of the shadows with knife drawn. Her smaller stature was no impediment as she dragged her quarry to the ground and finished him with a swift slit across his throat.

Rush stepped out in front of his target. The rebel, too surprised to react, was dropped with a fast pair of punches to the head.

"That's better," Winnie said, brandishing the stolen M1 like a trophy.

"You didn't have to do that," he protested, gesturing at the dead man she'd dragged into the undergrowth.

"That or risk this goon spilling on us," she countered. "Think that's gonna hold him?"

A rough rope fashioned from vines and creepers held the unconscious rebel firmly against a tree trunk. The man's own webbing belt pressed in between his teeth and pulled his head back. An improvised gag to silence him.

"They'll find him later," he told her.

Reluctantly, he picked up the discarded M1 and checked it over. Full jungle clip and a round already loaded. It hadn't picked up any mud when it spilled out of the goon's hands. Two more clips were in a pouch strapped to the stock.

"We can't be far," Rush told her. "They've got no water bottles."

The jungle thinned to a small clearing barely the size of a trio of football pitches laid side-by-side. In the centre was a windowless wooden shed with bolted barn doors as the only way in. To the right, a pair of trucks sat waiting for cargo, fuel drums placed between them and the building. On the left were a quartet of tents, one smoking as a meal was prepared. Judging from their size, they quartered twenty men at most.

The tower at the far end of the shed troubled Rush the most. The skeletal structure raised an observation platform some twenty meters into the air and gave it a commanding view of the compound and the thinned jungle it sat within. Two heavy caliber machine guns rested on tripods on either side, one looking along the track leading into the clearing, the other covering the far side. Both were manned by eager-looking, youthful soldiers.

"It has to be in the shed," Winnie said.

Rush grunted and continued his observations. Something didn't look right, but he was damned if he could see what.

"I'll snipe the tower and the fuel drums from over there," she decided. "You cause merry hell, and I'll keep you covered."

Not a word from Rush. His gaze followed a well-trodden path leading away from the vehicles into the trees. It was too wide to be an exit point for foot patrols. The furrows on either side looked wrong too.

"Of course!"

"What now, Rush?"

"This is a nonsense," he told her. "It's all show to divert our attention from the real prize."

"What?"

"Why would they put such an important asset in a shed for all to see?"

The penny dropped.

"Of course! We'll waste our time on the hut and they'll scarper."

Rush slipped away, Winnie following a short way behind. Both held their carbines to their shoulders, ready to aim and fire when discovery came. For now, they kept low and moved quietly, each step carefully placed so as not to disturb the silence.

They made their way to within a few meters of the hidden path. Rush stopped and lay down in the dirt, gesturing for her to do the same. Carefully he swept away some of the fallen undergrowth, and the top of an anti-personnel mine appeared. Thin wires led off left and right, and when he traced one he found more of the lethal weapons buried in a zig-zag pattern along the track. Trip one and a series of mines would turn the surrounding jungle into a torrent of twisted, lethal metal.

They kept the mines between them and the track as they followed it through the trees. Here and there, a lone bomb hid alone in the jungle, as if the others were there to lull the insurgents into a false sense of security. Rush counted twenty-six before the minefield ended. No doubt there was a similar number on the other side.

The track ended at a wide clearing pressed up against the edge of the steep mountainside with a tunnel cut into the rock. Wooden beams held the

roof and planks shored up the sides. Heavy wooden doors stood open, and a light glowed from inside, flickering as people busied themselves.

Two soldiers kept watch from a nest made of sandbags on a platform over the tunnel entrance. One stood proud, watching the jungle with a carbine in his hands. The other was hunkered down behind a .50 caliber machine gun.

"What do you think, Rush? Wait for help?"

"No," he whispered. "We need to get in there."

The compound was barely fifty meters away, and the secret track turned out to be far straighter than it first appeared. The fuel barrels were almost in full view, but so too was the tower and its own .50 caliber guns. If they tried anything they'd be caught in a deadly cross-fire.

"I could probably hit it from here," Winnie told him, aiming at the tower. "You take out the closer one and get inside."

He looked back at the nest. The rifleman was an easy target, but the machine gunner presented a greater challenge. Only his head was visible, and it looked as though he wore a steel helmet.

"First shot on the fuel drums," Rush suggested. "Then pick off the tower and keep your head down. The mines will probably go off."

"Needs two for a spark," she replied.

"When you've done that, covering fire at the entrance while I get over there and cover you as you come in. Should be able to get some more ammo."

"Right. Go on three?"

Silently they took position.

The first shot put a hole in the nearest fuel drum. The second ricocheted and gave her the spark she wanted. It exploded, throwing flame and smoke high in the air and catching its neighbor. As Rush predicted, the mines detonated, their wires tripped by falling debris.

He took out the standing soldier. Clean shot to the right shoulder, robbing him of any hope of firing a weapon.

It took her three rounds to find her target on the tower. The fool stood up to peer through the smoke, and that was when she got him.

The gunner in the nest fired, the thudding of the .50's recoil absorbed by the jungle trees. He wasn't aiming, just shooting to keep everyone's head down. Reinforcements would flow out of the tunnel soon enough.

Rush took him down with a single shot.

"Moving!" he shouted.

He ran out of the jungle, weapon leveled at the tunnel, ready for the inevitable charge from inside. Winnie opened fire. Single shots at anything that moved.

"Moving!" she shouted.

As she ran, he shot. Single shots into the darkness. Keeping heads down and weapons out of reach. Behind them the thud of the tower's .50 echoed around the trees.

She went past him, found a place to take cover and took up the fight.

"Moving."

In deeper, hunting for the next place to stop, discarding his spent clip for a fresh one. An indent in the tunnel wall was enough to offer some cover. Down on one knee, rifle pulled into his shoulder.

Now he had targets.

There was a small cavern, large enough for some lab equipment, canisters and a small workshop. Shadowy figures darted this way and that, panicked by the shooting and explosions. He picked one off, smashing a thigh bone with a well-aimed shot. The screaming added to the terror.

She ran past, swapping clips as he had done. A desk was her cover, pushed over on its side with unexpected strength and used as a shield as she took up the fight.

He made it to a workbench before someone shot back. A lone figure standing at the edge of a dark tunnel leading deeper into the mountain. Rapid fire that forced him to keep his head down.

Then came the lights.

Two circles roared toward his hiding place. He threw himself to one side as the truck smashed through flimsy wood. It lost momentum, enough for him to throw himself into a chase. He grabbed the backboard, M1 discarded as he pulled himself up.

And ducked as a pistol fired at him.

Wild eyes threw wilder punches at him. Rush blocked the punches as best he could while he hung on. There was a rhythm to the blows he used to give himself time to take in his surroundings.

Huddled by the cab was a thin, terrified, dirty figure in clothes too short and baggy for his lean frame. Wagner, no doubt. Too far away to do any good in the fight.

Anchored to the bed with ropes was a thick cylinder of polished steel. A hatch was open, and he could make out copper pipes and valves with a small flask at its heart.

A punch landed on Rush's jaw and he would have fallen if Basa had pressed his advantage. His feet slipped off the backboard as he swung out with just a single hand to halt his fall. He clung on for dear life.

Winnie joined the fray. She shot at the speeding truck, doing her best to keep the rebel's head down and give Rush a chance to regroup.

He threw himself back and let momentum swing him forward. His hand stretched out, gripping the edge of the canister's open hatch. The best leverage he could find as he regained his footing.

Nevin's pistol found its way into his hand, and he would have shot Basa if Wagner hadn't charged. The slight man crashed into him with a hard jolt, and Rush was off-balance enough to stumble. He threw his hand out, grabbing at whatever came within reach. But it wasn't enough. He crashed onto the dirt, tumbling until he came to a halt. Bruised and winded but otherwise unhurt.

Then came the thud from the tower's fifty. Rush was in the open, an easy target for the gunner. Trapped between the minefields on either side of the track.

Bullets slammed into the dirt around him. Getting closer as the gunner got his eye in.

Three cracks in quick succession silenced him.

"Damn it," shouted Winnie as she caught up to him.

"Get down," Rush shouted.

The soldiers in the compound had gathered their wits and weapons. Caught in the open, she had no choice but to pick them off as best she could. Not that they seemed interested in her. They were eager to get to the one truck that wasn't on fire and follow their leader into the jungle. In less than a minute, they were gone, and the pair were left alone with a fire and two minefields for company.

"Did you get him?"

Rush shook his head. He sat up and brushed the dirt off his shirt. One sleeve was ripped.

"Damn," she cursed.

"Not all bad news," he told her.

He held out his hand and showed her the small flask he'd ripped from the canister as he fell.

Chapter 8

The canister banged loudly against the side of the hatch. Everyone froze, waiting for the inevitable escape of gas and their horrifying death. Except it didn't happen. Wagner's design was more robust than they gave it credit for.

"Down!" Wagner shouted. "Bring it down!"

The crane let out more rope, and the canister slipped into darkness. Garcia, now a deckhand in the enterprise, guided a solid steel gurney into place, and the weapon came to rest on it.

As he tightened straps over the metal cylinder, Wagner fussed like a father over a daughter preparing for her first prom.

"These waters are too dangerous to leave now," the captain warned. "We wait until the tide turns."

Basa grunted his acceptance. He slipped aft, and as he approached the radio room, Wagner appeared from the stairs leading down to the hold.

"We are summoned," said the Nazi.

The radio operator carefully tuned the set to the right frequency. He swapped his headset for a speaker box the size of a small briefcase. It crackled and hissed until he pressed two buttons on its side. Then came a voice. Deep, full of reverb and adjustments to mask its owner's identity.

"Is the weapon secured, Herr Wagner?"

"Yes, sir," Wagner confirmed. "It need only be armed."

"Good. You will be in position by tomorrow morning?"

"Yes," Basa told the voice. "The captain will not depart yet."

"This is sensible and within tolerances," the voice agreed.

Basa moved closer to the speaker box and spoke in a low, conspiratorial tone.

"I have been considering our arrangement. Now I have the weapon, our terms should alter in my people's favor.

There was silence. A long, uncomfortable silence.

"I assume you have been compiling your own blueprints, and your chemical specialists have analyzed and reconstructed the elements of the weapon?" asked the voice slowly.

"Yes. We can build our own version."

"Herr Wagner, what is your assessment?"

Wagner bent down towards the speaker box.

"They do not have the primer," he said. "All they have is an inert gas with an unpleasant smell."

The captain appeared. He held a pistol, which he leveled at the rebel leader.

"You should understand, señor Basa," warned the voice, "that your involvement in this enterprise is purely a convenience."

Basa looked past the captain to his own man on the bridge. The soldier removed his pistol from its holster and took aim at the captain.

"And you should know," continued the voice, "that I have taken precautions to guarantee my plan's success."

The soldier's aim shifted. Now Basa was the target of two guns.

"Ensure the weapon is delivered as agreed," the voice told him. "I will ensure the success of your coup, and you will provide what has been promised. Or you may find yourself on the receiving end of another change of power."

Basa knew when he was outplayed and yielded the field. For now.

"Yes," he agreed. "I hope this misunderstanding will not sour our relationship."

"Until tomorrow, señor Basa. Or should I say, President Basa?"

The radio clicked back to static, and the radio operator put the case away.
"You didn't tell him about the missing piece," Basa said to Wagner.
"No need. It has already been replaced."

Chapter 9

They were only together for a few minutes before going their separate ways. Cadmael went back to the city, taking Ixchel with him. Winnie and Rush took the Jeep deeper into the jungle.

Even with her driving like a devil possessed, they couldn't make up the three-hour head start. She followed Rush's lead, guiding the speeding vehicle along the broken trail with expert precision, barely slowing for the turns he advised her to make. His eyes scanned the dirt far ahead, reading the tracks left by the fleeing vehicles. It helped that the tires were so distinctive.

As the trees thinned and jungle gave way to open lowlands, they decided to leave the loud Jeep and continue on foot. The sound of running water led them to a small river cutting through rock. It ran away to a bay surrounded by low cliffs.

From up high they surveyed the land. A small village had once nestled in amongst the cliffs, most of it ruined by war and fire. Nature was trying to reclaim it, though for the moment her advance was halted by man. Tents hid among the ruins, and uniformed men patrolled the edges of the encampment. Others practiced their infantry skills, the crackle of single-shot target practice reaching the observers' ears.

"She doesn't look right," Winnie said, gesturing at the boat moored on a roughly built jetty.

The trawler was 160 feet or thereabouts and painted a dull grey to hide her against the sea. A superstructure in her midships rose a couple of stories, and the stack had been cut off to keep it low. A crane was being disassembled

forward of the hold to keep her profile close to the horizon. It would be harder to spot and target.

"Armed, too," noted Rush. "There's a couple of gun mounts for fifties fore and aft."

Winnie's scouting moved to a shed hidden a little inland of the shoreline. The wooden structure was painted green, and foliage was draped across its low, slanted roof. It would have been concealed if two cigarettes hadn't glowed by the door. One was smoked by a tall and muscular man, and the other belonged to someone shorter and thinner. An ape with its pet skeleton.

"Wagner?"

Rush focused his binoculars on the figures.

"Yes," he confirmed.

"Looks like a gun runner," Winnie posited. "I'll wager her cargo is in those sheds. And I'll bet it's got his gas in the hold."

A third figure joined the smokers. They talked, the cigarettes were discarded, and they quickly returned to the trawler.

"Tide's turning," Rush noted.

"I want to get down there and see what's in the shed," she said.

"Didn't get the answers at the tunnels?" he quipped.

She'd fussed over the weapons left after they'd spooked Wagner out of his hiding place. Taking notes of serial numbers and inspecting ammunition boxes. Hoping he wouldn't notice.

"Got a plan, Rush?" she asked, ignoring his jibe.

"Get back and tell Cadmael about this. Get him to face his men into the city instead of out of it. I'll see if I can delay them a while."

"The two of us stand a better chance."

"Go," he told her. "Tell him the attack is coming by sea."

Rush slipped through the village. The burnt buildings and undergrowth offered ample cover as he approached the shore. The noise of the ship's preparations was enough to cover any he made as he ran.

His target was the shed, and he reached it without incident. It was secured with a brass padlock threaded through steel latches. Neither offered much resistance as he pulled them off the rotting wood.

Industrial shelving lined the walls. One side was empty, the other half full with thin shipping crates. In the gloom, he made out consignment details painted in white on the dark wood. M1 carbines, pistols, grenades, ammunition, enough for a small army. Or an assault on a peace conference.

There was movement outside. The door rattled as it opened, and a shaft of light lit the containers nearest Rush. He slunk back into the shadows, watching the two soldiers framed in the doorway. Both aimed their weapons inside.

"We know you are here," one lied. "It will be easier if you come out."

Another sound from outside. This was the roar of the trawler's engine. It was too loud and powerful to be the heartbeat of a boat bound for offshore fishing. He was running out of time.

One of the men entered. The rifle was cumbersome in the narrow confines of the shed. It took too long to turn when Rush stepped out of the shadows.

Quick punches knocked the rebel to the floor. The other was caught off-guard and Rush took aim with Niven's Makarov. He charged and fired, missing his target. Not that it mattered. The next punch put the man down.

All hell broke loose. A siren screamed, ordering men to rush to prepared positions and defend the jetty with their last breath. Rush hoped it wouldn't come to that.

He tossed a couple of grenades into the box where he got them from and ran outside. The shed exploded, throwing wood and unexploded bombs into the air. As they rained down they landed amongst boxes of ammunition and rifles and more went off. A fire caught, spreading quickly through the rotting

wood and caught the crates. As the flames lapped around the wreckage they found bullets and as they went off it sounded like an army attacking. The defenders responded, firing wildly far away from where Rush slipped through tall grasses towards the jetty.

The trawler's anchor was still down, the thick chain his route onto the ship. Hand over hand he climbed the links. Peering over the edge he saw the ship's crew were looking landward towards the battle. He slipped over and hunkered down behind the winch. Beneath him the decking vibrated as the engine built power. A few grenades in the right places should slow it down.

"I suggest you step out, señor Rush," shouted Basa from the deck outside the bridge.

With three men aiming carbines right at him, what other choice did he have?

Chapter 10

"A pistol and three grenades," said Basa disappointedly. He picked up the Makarov pistol, removed the clip and inspected it. "Not even a full magazine."

"Make do and all that," Rush quipped.

Basa put the pistol down, neither man looking at it. Their eyes were locked on one another.

"And so the British come to save the foreigner from himself. Is that how it plays out? Another puppet state to add to the fading empire?"

"Why does everyone assume I work for the British?" Rush complained.

Basa stared out across the horizon as if seeing a prophetic vision.

"It does no good. This fake peace will end in less than three hours, and Guanama will be restored to her glory. Not the British, nor the Americans, nor the Soviets, will stop that."

"Oh please," Rush mocked. "Do you really think anyone cares about your revolution? All I care about is the Nazi building chemical weapons for you!"

"You think my country cannot be a force in Central America? You think so little of us?"

"I think you've needed a lot of brand-new weapons, my friend. I wonder who gave you those? And at what price?"

Basa refused to rise to the challenge.

"I would kill you now, but I think you will be more useful later. A show to the British and Americans that their interference will not be tolerated. Garcia?"

The ape-man stepped forward and stood to attention.

"Take him below. Don't hurt his face. I want him to be recognizable."

Food store, Rush decided. Box room with no windows, empty shelves and a pair of runners suspended from the ceiling. This was where the trawler's crew kept their food. When it had been a trawler.

Only now it was where he and Garcia were getting acquainted. A thick rope looped around his shoulders, then tied off on the runner. With his hands cuffed behind his back, he hung limp from the ceiling. He was the perfect punchbag.

Garcia was strong but not quick. His punches were hard enough to set Rush swinging, taking some of the sting out. Then there was a pause while the ape sized up the next punch.

It was a slow and painful exercise. Each blow knocked the wind out of Rush's sails and left a painful throbbing in his stomach. Tensing his muscles to protect himself was getting harder. His breathing was more labored.

"We're underway," Rush gasped. He struggled to remember his Spanish. "Shouldn't you check up on deck or something?"

A firm punch was his answer.

Winnie took a few hours to get back to the city. Fortunately, she didn't have to retrace her steps back to the gassed village and found a highway that ran her along the coast. A hundred kilometers for her in the Jeep. More like forty for a trawler heading in a straight line.

Blue uniformed police officers directed her to the Colonel. He'd organized roadblocks around the parliament, just as they'd agreed at the burnt-out tunnels. Now he was on the roof of a building at the end of the boulevard leading down to the docks and the concrete fortress.

"They're coming by sea," she told him. "Rush says to watch the parliament."

He grunted, and the edge of his mouth lifted in a knowing smile.

"Tell me what you see on the roof."

She took his binoculars and scanned the parliament's roof garden. A couple of days ago, she'd done the same thing when Rush was up there with

Nevin. Now she was looking at someone from his "security force," looking straight back at her. She waved. He ignored her.

"Do you notice anything?" he asked. "Maybe down at the gate."

She looked down at the entrance gate. It was thick steel bars with a sentry box to one side. Another of Nevin's men walked back and forth inside the compound, looking out at the street beyond. And then it hit her.

"Their guns!"

Nevin's men carried Soviet submachine guns with drums for their ammunition. These had M1 carbines.

"Damn, the coup's started."

Speeches, mused Nevin. They always made speeches. Grand statements before an audience of peers and selected journalists. Meaningless words that spoke of peace and reconciliation. More to stroke egos than herald the start of a new era.

Too busy making history to notice their benefactor slip from the auditorium. Or to hear the locks that sealed them in their tomb.

Chapter 11

Rush hit his head twice on the water-tight hatches as they clambered through. Garcia was too big to fit easily and forgot or didn't care about the limp body slung over his shoulder. A third crack came when he was dropped onto the metal deck.

"Ah, John Rush. We meet properly, yes?"

A haggard figure looked down at him. The face was lean and almost skeletal, pale skin tanned dark by hot tropical sun and jaw lined with grey wire stubble. Yet his frail form was lifted by the determination of a man about to see his life's work used in anger.

"Herr Wagner, I presume?"

Wagner scoffed. He stepped back to attend to his creation. The heavy canister from the mine was fixed firmly in a cradle, itself anchored to the floor. No chance of it being accidentally toppled by a wave. Or a clumsy prisoner.

Rush dragged himself up onto his feet. The ship lurched and he fell against the hull, then slid down until he was seated.

"Sorry," he apologized. "Not got my sea legs yet."

"Don't worry. The journey is nearly ended."

The hatch opened. Basa stepped inside and Garcia came to attention. His arms couldn't rest by his side.

"Is it ready?"

"Yes," Wagner confirmed. "I will combine the gases and charge the system as soon as we strike the shore. Then it will be down to you and your men."

Basa crouched down to Rush's eye level. Again they stared at one another, each sizing the other up. Rush was in no position to do anything with his

hands still cuffed behind him. And he was still weak from Garcia's relentless beating.

"You will stay here and watch Herr Wagner at work. When he is done, then you will play your part."

"I assume you mean to parade me in front of a camera, claim I murdered them for the British and execute me?"

"You have a sick and twisted mind, señor Rush. But yes, exactly that."

"Fair enough," sighed a resigned Rush.

Basa stood and looked down at his pitiful prisoner without a hint of regret. He handed the Makarov to Garcia, whose giant fingers seemed to swallow it whole.

"I want him alive, but if he does cause problems, please use this. The irony of being shot with his own pistol is amusing."

"Yes, General."

The hatch slammed shut. Rush looked at Garcia and smiled. He had him right where he wanted him.

"It's a clever plan," Rush told Wagner. He had to shout now the trawler's engine was running at full tilt.

Wagner was busy at the canister. It needed constant monitoring now the boat was bouncing over waves. Each landing jolted the device and threatened to unseat a hose or seal that would render it useless. Or worse.

"You don't know it," Wagner retorted.

"Give me some credit, Herr Wagner," he protested. "Build an air-sealed auditorium for a peace conference, trap the attendees inside, and pump it full of toxic gas. How am I doing so far?"

Wagner shot him a vicious glance that told him everything he needed.

"Of course, a diehard Nazi like you wouldn't team up with a Latvian Jew like Nevin."

A pained look flashed across the Nazi's face. It was brief but telling.

"Ah, you didn't know about that. If it makes you feel better, it's probably a cover anyway. Gives the whole, 'I escaped the Nazis and Soviets' story a bit more credibility while he hands out the guns to anyone who pays."

"You talk too much."

As the boat crested a wave it landed heavily. Garcia was distracted momentarily as he grabbed a rail to steady himself. Not once did the pistol waiver. Not that it mattered.

Rush had freed himself.

A pair of fifties in the sentry box pinned them down. Short bursts chewed up the walls and blasted through anything softer that got in the way. Anyone who put their head up for a closer look got the wrong end of a sniper's rifle.

"We can't stay here," Winnie shouted. Her voice drew another burst that dug more holes in the mud wall. It wouldn't be long before a bullet found its way through.

"The box is armored," Cadmael shouted back. "We've nothing to go through it."

There was one thing. It sat alone at the edge of the old warehouses, tempting her to come closer. There was just the small matter of thirty meters of open boulevard to get across.

"Cover me."

Guns rattled and grenades exploded, none of it causing any harm to the sentry box. It didn't matter. It gave her long enough to dart across the open road. She slipped between two old warehouses, wood splintered around her as the fifties took random shots. As long as she kept moving, she was fine.

Hot-wiring the bulldozer took less than ten seconds. Breaking the steering lock added another twenty. She listened to the thud of the heavy machine guns and hoped more of Cadmael's men hadn't fallen to it. They were brave lads, but what they had in courage didn't make up for a lack of training. It would have been a slaughter if Cadmael had still been looking outwards.

The bulldozer wasn't fast, but it didn't need to be. It just had to keep going. She hunkered down as best she could, her foot hard on the gas and one hand on the wheel. Peering out the side door was the best view she managed, and used the curb as a marker for keeping it straight. Not easy as bullets bounced around her. The windscreen shattered, spraying her with glass. A grenade banged against the cab and exploded on the street. It just needed one on target and it was all over.

But she held on.

It hit the sentry box with more force than she expected. The armor crumpled, trapping the men inside under steel and concrete. Not waiting for them to regroup, she threw herself out, firing wild into the wrecked space. It worked.

One of the fifties had been thrown clear of the wreckage. She heaved it back on its tripod and up onto the bulldozer's broken track. With the gate still shut, she had to guess where to shoot. Thick wood erupted in a shower of splinters as heavy shells tore through. Now she could aim.

It was the snipers' turn to keep their heads down.

As soon as the ship was airborne, Rush made his move. The moment of weightlessness was enough to aid his lunge across the deck and he threw the discarded handcuffs hard at Garcia. The ape was too focused on his balance not to deflect them and not quick enough to stop a hard hit to his wrist. It sent the pistol clattering across the deck.

The ship landed so heavily it knocked the wind out of them both. Garcia was first to his feet, sweeping at the smaller opponent. Rush ducked it easily and lashed out with a hard jab under the ribs. It barely registered.

Knowing Garcia favored his right, Rush kept out of its wide range. Not that he could keep dodging for long. He'd soon run out of space in the cramped hold, and Garcia showed no signs of tiring.

As a tree trunk of a right arm flew over his head, Rush went to ground. He wrapped his legs around Garcia's right shin, knocking it out from under him. The tree fell, and Rush rolled clear, coming back to his feet in time for the ape's face plant on the metal decking. A pair of short, sharp punches to the temple kept him down. At least for now.

"Idiot!" yelled Wagner. The Makarov pistol was in his hand, pointed straight at Rush with a deadly steadiness. "Basa might want you to live, but I have no such qualms about killing you."

He pulled the trigger, and the round in the chamber exploded. Rush was already moving, charging straight at the Nazi, oblivious to being shot at.

Wagner screamed as Rush punched him. The German fell back, crashing against his canister. He swung the pistol around again, and with Rush standing over him, there was no chance he could miss. Yet he did.

Rush pulled the weapon out of frail fingers. Wagner cowered, knowing his time was up.

The clip slid out of the grip. Rush inspected it and confirmed what he already knew.

"Seems your friend 'Boris' gave me a pistol loaded with blanks. Bit careless for someone supplying weapons to a coup, don't you think?"

Garcia hit him from behind. He sensed the blow coming but didn't move fast enough. As he fell forward, he twisted and used the momentum to roll to his feet. The ape was coming fast, and Rush threw himself to the side, putting the canister between them.

There wasn't enough space for Garcia's swings to reach full strength on this side of the canister. The neutered swipes were easily ducked, and Rush used jaw and chest for target practice as he backed away. Not that they made much of a dent in the ape's relentless advance.

Now Rush was beside the open hatch in the weapon he could put his plan into action. He grabbed the hose leading into the pump and pulled it clear.

An uppercut nearly caught him, such was his focus on the valves and flask inside the canister. He turned what he hoped was the release valve.

"No!" screamed Wagner.

As the Nazi lunged to shut it off, Rush swung the pistol grip. It sent the valve spinning away, spewing deadly gas into the confined space. Spraying it straight into Wagner's skeletal face.

Holding his breath, Rush sprinted for the only exit. He stumbled but kept going forwards, throwing himself through the hatch and dragging the water-tight door shut. Garcia tried to wrench it from his grip, but the lock was already spinning.

The ape fought for his life. He pulled at the hatch, desperate to turn the wheel. Rush held firm, forced to watch the gas take its toll through the small window. The man's face twisted as it turned from shades of blue to purple. He vomited against the glass and fell.

Behind him, Wagner slumped over his precious creation.

Chapter 12

The engine's scream and the waves rushing past masked the sound of his climb to the deck. Three dozen men crouched down facing forwards, prepared for the inevitable collision with the fast-approaching dock. The question was how hard would it be?

A quartet of .50 cal machine guns were manned along the side, most hidden inside the superstructure. The positions on the far side were firing, hinting at a battle raging with whatever passed for Cadmael's navy. A cabin cruiser with a Bren gun was the most likely candidate.

Rush made his move. He slipped onto the deck, grabbed the nearest soldier, and punched him out cold. Scanning the waiting compatriots, he waited for inevitable discovery as he stripped the unconscious man of his weapons. It didn't come.

The shore was fast approaching. Even if he could get to the wheelhouse and stop the trawler, momentum would carry it on.

He went back down, hoping the gas hadn't leaked out of the hold.

The engine screamed at full tilt, powering the trawler through the rough seas far beyond its limits. Whatever control was needed came from the wheelhouse, as the engine room was empty.

Rush felt along the cylinder head until he found the throttle cables. They were stretched open, and he wanted them to stay that way. It was easy to achieve with a screwdriver and pliers from the toolbox left on a workbench.

"Thirty seconds," shouted a voice over the ship's intercom.

One of the fuel tanks was empty, the other half full. He plugged one end of a rubber hose into its release valve and pushed the other into the bilge. As he left, he lit an oily rag and tossed it inside.

Someone saw him and shouted, but it was too late. Rush threw himself over the side, hoping the water was deep enough. The trawler's wash tossed him, but he held his breath firm and swam down.

"Kill the engine," Basa screamed.

"I can't," shouted the captain.

The dock was rushing up towards them. This wouldn't be the gentle bump they'd planned.

Basa ducked down and pushed his back against the front of the wheelhouse. Now was the time to pray.

The trawler crashed headlong into the concrete jetty beneath the parliament building. It crumpled, almost snapping in half as the engine continued its relentless push. A handful of soldiers had their wits about them and jumped clear. Those who didn't were left to perish in what came next.

An explosion tore the back of the trawler clean off. A fireball rolled high in the sky, raining down burning metal and wood and gasoline on the unprepared soldiers below. Unearthly screams penetrated the thick smoke surrounding the shattered vessel.

Then came the second explosion as the fuel in the bilge ignited. It blew up through the hold, throwing blazing decking and those trapped aboard skywards. Screams filled the air.

Rush surfaced clear of the sinking trawler. He watched as it tried to sink in shallow water, then turned his attention to the concrete quayside. The survivors had gathered, organizing themselves around a figure wearing the tattered uniform of a General.

This wasn't over yet.

The fortress was doing its part in keeping Cadmael's men at bay. It forced them to move around the outside to get from the gate to the entrance hall, exposing them to heavy fire from the roof. How many troops were up there was anyone's guess, but a handful of men with their modern carbines could do the trick for long enough.

Clutching the pistol he'd liberated from a fallen rebel, Rush ran across the burning lawn toward the entrance. No one fired at him. They were either too busy with the assault on the other side of the building or assumed he was a survivor of the wreck.

Two soldiers crouched down by young shrubs planted on either side of the entrance. As Rush ran towards them, they hesitated.

"They're coming from the beach!" he shouted in Spanish.

It bought him a moment more. Enough to take aim at a knee as the soldier raised his weapon to shoot. The man screamed, clutching his bloodied leg.

Bullets whistled past as he threw himself to one side. He fired high, spoiling the soldier's aim as he ducked. The next shots went low and left the man sprawled on the floor in agony.

Rush robbed them of their rifles, tossing them far out of reach. The pistols he kept.

Basa was a fool. The double-height entrance was the perfect place to lay an ambush, but it was empty. Rush slipped inside, covering doorways and nooks with the stolen guns as he crept towards the hallway cut through the building's centre.

Quietly he advanced, hiding in the shadows, covering each move forwards with his handguns. Ahead was the reception hall for the auditorium. Its sweeping staircases and sparse chairs and couches offered little cover. All he had in his favor was the darkness as the lights had failed, and only the

skylight above the staircase provided any illumination, casting deep shadows in doorways and halls.

A shot rang out, and a bullet thudded into the wall ahead. He dived, rolling to the other side of the corridor before the sniper could get a second chance. Darkness shrouded him.

Then came the thump of metal on the wooden floor. He had no choice but to run, opening fire to keep heads down. At the last moment, he threw himself over a chair and curled up. It shielded him from the grenade's blast.

Up came one of his assailants from behind an overturned couch. He was barely two meters away, and his rifle wasn't even lowered before he fell back with a bullet in his shoulder.

Rush moved fast, using a desk as cover as the second sniper opened fire from across the hallway. As he threw himself to the ground, he caught sight of Basa. The small man was by the door, clutching one of Niven's Soviet submachine guns. The heavy drum magazine would cause so much death if he got inside the auditorium.

The door exploded, or rather the lock did. As it flew open, the light from the glass wall flooded into the battle. It was blinding, and Rush lost sight of the General in the glare.

Screaming.

Rush pushed out, rolling across the floor and drawing the sniper's fire. Bullets hit where he had been, and each movement brought him more into the open. An easier target if the sniper moved. He took a chance on a clear shot and ended the duel.

The thud of the machine gun reached him. The screaming became less chaotic and more determined. Basa was lost in the glare and the mass of bodies surrounding him.

Then it stopped. Caal stood over the crushed General, aiming the weapon with a soldier's determination at his forehead. Two others held his arms, and a third lay on his legs. Only Ixchel was between the usurper and a bullet.

"No!" she cried with such authority that no one dared move.

The hatred on Caal's face faded. He relaxed and took a pace back. The weapon lowered. It stopped being a threat and became a warning.

"I'll leave you to sort this out," Rush said. He took a carbine off one of the screaming snipers and made for the stairs.

They were at a stalemate. Cadmael's men were pinned down behind trees and walls, but the men above them weren't going anywhere. They still had the advantage, and anyone foolish enough to move out into the open felt the searing pain of a bullet. Or worse - they didn't.

"We can't starve them out," Winnie told him. "Sooner or later someone'll work out they can take hostages."

Cadmael looked around at his men. Those who'd fought in the civil war kept down out of good sense. The others stayed in place out of fear.

"Covering fire on the roof," he shouted, then looked at the two nearest veterans. "Come with me. We'll get inside."

Wild shooting started above them. There was shouting and screaming, and then a rebel fell back over the parapet and landed heavily on the lawn. After that was silence.

"Don't shoot!" shouted Rush. He appeared at the roof's edge with his hands in the air.

"I should have known," Winnie sighed.

Chapter 13

The auditorium was abuzz with excitement. The treaty was signed, hands shaken, and the tentative steps towards a new peace taken. Heartfelt speeches were made, more poignant given how Mayan and Spaniards had worked together to bring down Basa.

Rush and Winnie stayed away. Cameras and journalists weren't their thing, and neither wanted to distract from the Guanamanian people's victory. They sat on what was left of the roof garden, sipping water and watching the sun setting behind the mountains turn the landscape a warm red.

"Did you get what you wanted?" he asked.

"Sorry?"

"I assume you were looking for the source of the M1 carbines. Bad form for the US Military to lose so many new weapons."

"It was that obvious?"

"Very. I assumed you knew Nevin was shipping them. I also assumed you didn't know where he got them from."

"Yeah," she complained. "We couldn't find a leak at a factory, and they didn't look like refurbs from the war."

"They're not."

He lifted one of the discarded weapons onto his lap.

"Notice anything?"

She didn't see what he was driving at.

"Wrong wood," he said, tapping the stock. "A couple of other details, but these aren't stolen. They're manufactured. Good copies too. Maybe better than the original. Certainly lighter."

She looked hurt.

"Good news is the few hundred knocking around here are likely the only ones he could make," Rush told her. "I think he wanted to use this country as a manufacturing centre. Then he could supply who and what he wanted, and nobody could do a thing about it."

"Put Basa in charge and he could make the country his own," she said, finishing his explanation. "Anyway, doesn't matter now. He's in the wind and it'll take a while to regroup."

Rush stood and slung the rifle over his shoulder. He turned towards the sea, already a dark blue as the last rays of sun receded.

"Maybe."

Chapter 14

Rush stepped out of the stairwell onto the roof garden. His eyes scanned the handful of ex-pats gathered for after-dinner drinks, then picked out the one American. She leaned against the bar in a dinner suit styled for a man and tailored for a woman.

"Slacks suit you," he beamed.

Winnie smiled and pushed a margarita glass towards him. He took a small sip, grimaced and put it down.

"Thought it was more practical," she said. "See you've gone casual."

Tan sports jacket, white shirt and near-white slacks. Comfortable and timeless. Easy enough to get lost in the crowds in Havana's busy streets.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Room 53," he told her. "Just look for the goons."

"Ten minutes enough?"

"Plenty."

"You Brits can't keep him," she said. "Not sure what you'd do with him."

"Why do you keep assuming I work for the British?" he joked.

"Must be that cracking accent you've got."

He smiled at her as he slipped back to the parapet. It was barely knee-high, and six stories below was the sidewalk. He looked over it, then at her, and skipped into the air.

A firm grip on the ledge let him judge the next drop. His landing was near silent, but he pressed his back against the wall and waited, just in case.

A light glowed behind the closed French windows, obscured by thick curtains. All it took was a thin blade to lift the lock.

A large suite welcomed him. A double bed to one side with a dressing table and wardrobe facing it. Beside the bed was the connecting door to the next room, a lounge if memory served him right. By the wardrobe was the door to the bathroom. The light was on.

The toilet flushed and water ran in a basin. Then the door opened, and a short, rotund figure clicked off the light and rubbed a freshly shaved chin. He wore loose boxers and a tight vest. Ready for the dark suit and white shirt laid out on the mattress.

"Evening," Rush said cheerfully.

Nevin froze. The towel slid slowly from his hand to the floor.

"You!"

"Would you mind calling your friends in?"

The large man lunged. In his hand was his shaving razor, the blade extended and now used as a slashing weapon. He was quick enough to slice Rush's jacket. Not so fast to draw blood.

"Palidziba!" he screamed in his native Latvian.

Double trouble as the connecting door flew open and a burly man with an automatic pistol appeared. He took a moment to assess what was happening. A moment too long.

Rush piled into him, grabbing the goon's gun hand. It went off, the shot smashing the mirror on the back of the bathroom door. Nevin dived for cover, momentarily taken out of the fight.

The goon grabbed Rush and pulled him around, arm tight across his throat. Nevin saw his chance and lunged with the blade, determined to cause some real damage. Rush pushed back, catching the goon off-balance, and they stumbled back; just out of range of the slashing blade.

He wouldn't get another chance like that.

One shoe went down, heel smashing into the goon's foot. The grip loosened enough for Rush to breathe, but that wasn't his aim. He hit back

with his elbow, winding his assailant and finally breaking free. Again he pushed, this time to his right, the whirling blade just missing his cheek.

Down the goon went with Rush on top of him. Nimbly he pushed himself into the next room, grabbed the discarded pistol off the carpet and let momentum bring him up to one knee. The newly acquired pistol came up and he fired. One shot struck the flattened goon in the shoulder as he struggled to his feet.

Nevin ducked away, probably heading for his own gun. No time to worry about that now. The suite door was opening, and the guard from outside came in shooting. Rush dropped him with a shot that splintered his shin.

As he rolled off to one side, the heavy man opened fire. His shooting was wild, intended to catch a lucky hit rather than a surgical strike. Easily dodged as long as Rush could keep out of reach.

Then he moved up onto his feet, aiming as he stood. The perfect shot that knocked the gun out of a podgy hand. The bullet took a couple of fingers with it.

He charged forward, making full use of Nevin's pain. Flipped him around, dropped him to the floor and put a sleeper grip on him. Enough to subdue him without rendering him unconscious.

"It doesn't matter, Rush," the trapped man told him weakly. "I am a dead man."

"My American friends might have something to say about that," Rush told him. "So what was it, Boris? Can't believe you went to all that trouble just to open a factory."

"The big picture," Nevin gasped. "We can't live in the shadows forever."

The door burst open again. Winnie charged in, pistol in hand. Behind her a black suit with a man inside trying hard not to look like American Military.

"You lovebirds need the room?" she joked.

Rush dropped his ruined jacket on the couch. Maybe housekeeping could make use of it.

"We'll find somewhere safe to keep him," Winnie told him.

He passed through the suite door into the hallway beyond.

"If he tells you anything about who he's working for, you'll let me know?" he asked.

Then he was gone and Winnie shrugged. An all too familiar scene.

"Depends on if I see you again."

The Demchuk Formula

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Chapter 1

Tension was thick in the near silence of the control room. A dull red glow illuminated dials and the faces of a dozen submariners. Each focused on their task, putting aside thoughts of the metal shell that kept them safe from the crushing cold of the Black Sea.

"Where is she?" whispered Captain Harris.

A short, lean man with a thin beard and ruffled hair, Harris kept his crew steady with his calm authority borne of experience. He'd seen combat in the Far East and ducked the Soviets before. HMS Artful and the 60 souls crammed inside were in good hands.

"Two thousand yards off bearing zero-nine-five, skipper," replied the sonar operator. He sat alone in a cubbyhole behind the control room, one hand pressing his earphones against his head, the other adjusting dials. The sea spoke to him, and he listened to her whispers. "Still fading."

Harris tracked the periscope around until he spotted the dim navigation lights bobbing on the calm Black Sea. The Soviet destroyer had shadowed their slow progress, rarely breaking contact. He was happy for it to keep them company until it was time for a few wartime tricks to throw it off.

"Number one, you have the conn."

He left his First Officer to keep watch on the shadow and slipped forward to the wardroom. A lone figure sat at the folded-down table, dressed in a loose black overall and with a tight cap covering short auburn hair. His features were hidden behind the dirt of war paint, though his lips were thin and his jawline strong. Bright hazel eyes turned from the Soviet Army map he was studying to the skipper.

"We're just outside Ukrainian waters," Harris said in a hushed voice.

John Rush nodded.

"There's a Soviet destroyer a couple of miles away heading in the wrong direction, but we can't stay submerged for much longer."

"Where are we?"

Harris got his bearings on the map, then tapped a point five miles off the coast.

"Sea's calm," he said. "I can get you to within two miles, but even that's pushing it."

"That'll be enough," Rush said.

"And you only need twenty-four hours?"

"If you've not picked us up by six am, we'll make our way out."

"And there's three coming back?"

Rush nodded.

"Risking a submarine on the King's own orders is unprecedented," Harris told him. "These people had better be important."

"They are," Rush promised. "They could change the world."

A thin line of trees separated the sandy beach from the flatlands of Ukraine. It offered a little shelter from the penetrating wind blowing in off the Black Sea, its tendrils wrapping around young saplings and the shattered remains of older trunks. Reminders of the war that had been waged barely four years ago.

Rush carried the lightweight canoe a few yards inside the sliver of woodland. He set it down in a shallow hollow. Cold, gloved fingers quickly reduced it to a collection of poles and tarpaulin.

He stripped out of the thick, bulky overall. It had kept him warm and dry on the paddle from the Artful to shore, but now it had outlived its usefulness. Better suited to his task was the tunic, shirt and trousers he wore beneath. They were a mix of British, Soviet and French styles liberated from surplus

stores. On his back was a small satchel stuffed full of essentials. His only protection was a hunting knife in a sheath strapped to his belt.

With his discarded equipment covered, he picked his way through to the edge of the trees. Ukraine's vast fields were beyond, still recovering from their role in the Patriotic War. Germans and Soviets had fought a fierce battle nearby and left a legacy of unexploded ordinance and abandoned equipment.

He followed the trees for a mile to the north, then cut inland along a thin track. He moved quickly with an almost unnatural silence. Constantly watching for leftovers from the war or signs of discovery. He's barely covered a hundred yards on his new course before a flashlight's beam froze him to the spot.

A gate gave him a way off the track. He vaulted it, keeping low to avoid discovery, and sank behind the hedge. Muscles tensed as he prepared for a fight.

The light belonged to a soldier, but he was not alone. Two others were with him, walking swiftly towards the shore. If Rush was lucky, they would be young and inexperienced and not notice his fresh bootprints on the track. Otherwise, the mission might be over before it started.

"What did you see, Vasily?" he heard one say.

"It looked like a man," said the leading soldier. He was further ahead of his colleagues and more alert, his rifle in his hands while the others kept theirs slung over their shoulders.

"There is no moon, so how did you see?"

"Chasing shadows."

Vasily was adamant and pressed on. He was coming closer, and Rush felt for the handle of his knife.

"Look!"

Rush held his breath as the soldier ran past him. Through the shadows, he watched the young man pick something off the path and hold it aloft as if it were a prize.

"Look!"

"A glove? What do we care about a glove?"

"It isn't wet," Vasily said. He held it to his cheek. "And it's still warm."

Suddenly the men were on guard. Rifles came down off of shoulders and they huddled closer together.

"We must inform command," Vasily decided. "There's a telephone in the village."

The soldiers moved away, slowly at first, then breaking into a run. It was two miles to the village, plus the time for more troops to arrive. That gave Rush about forty-five minutes as a head start.

"Better get moving," he said to himself and slipped out of the shadows. He pulled on a fresh glove.

The warm red fingers of dawn reached across the fields, waking everything in their path. Birdsong lifted from hedgerows and trees, and lights appeared in the small box houses dotted across the almost flat landscape.

A railway cut a thick scar through the idyllic countryside, carrying grain from the fields to the factories. Here and there, small stations offered a halt for trains to pause while cargo and passengers were loaded.

It was the railway that gave Rush cover. Along its edges grew trees in thick woods that shielded the rails from the winds of the flat plains. He was less than half a mile from a station with a pair of grain stores attached. Settling at the edge of the trees, he scanned the horizon with his binoculars and chomped on a slab of flapjack.

For someone being hunted by the Red Army he was remarkably relaxed. As he predicted, it took an hour for the Soviets to mobilize. They were equally predictable about their search, and keeping ahead took little effort. A truck

had parked up at the farm he was watching. The dozen soldiers it unloaded were busy searching the barns and farmhouse. Eager, but not particularly methodical.

This was better.

A second truck pulled up at the railway and discharged its men. They didn't waste time with the stores and dived straight into the trees. They walked in a straight line, spread out across the narrow strip of woodland, rifles in hand. In the centre was a corporal with a submachine gun, ready to spray bullets at anyone who ran. Behind them marched an officer armed only with a pistol and a keen eye.

Rush moved back through the thin woodland. He darted from shadow to shadow, keeping the Soviets behind him. There was trouble ahead.

Two more trucks and two more detachments. One approached from the railway line, the other pressed against those he retreated from. He was trapped on three sides with the field heading to the farmhouse his only escape.

"We know you are here," shouted a voice, heavily accented and amplified by a metal bullhorn. "Give yourself up."

They were closing on him. If he kept ahead he'd be forced out into the open fields. He could make a run for it, but a sniper would likely pick him off. And the soldiers from the farm now marched across the crops towards him.

He threw his knife and rucksack onto the floor and put his hands on his head.

"I surrender," he shouted in his best Russian and waited for his captors to arrive.

Chapter 2

Everything had happened in an entirely predictable order. After some light roughing up, he was thrown in a truck, a bag pulled over his head, and taken off to their camp. There was a lot of shouting and more manhandling before he was stripped, searched and given fresh clothes. An old, tattered tunic and trousers, stripped of insignia and rough against his skin, but no boots or socks. They didn't want him running away.

He was taken to a bare cell with a shaky wooden chair. His only company was a tall, muscular corporal with a revolver and a stare that could drill holes in concrete. That's where they left him. An hour with his clothes barely enough to keep him warm and the wooden chair creaking with his every move. His request for a drink was ignored.

Then the door opened and the corporal came to a stiff attention. It was behind Rush, and all he had to go on was a vague shadow cast on the plain wall opposite.

"You are British Intelligence," said a cold, crisp voice with a slight Belarusian accent.

Heavy hands rested on Rush's shoulders. Fingers dug into flesh and he winced as they found nerves and pressure points.

"You will tell me about your mission."

"Mission? I'm here bird watching."

The grip was released, and the voice stepped slowly around in front. It belonged to a man in the field uniform of an Infantry Major with several medal stripes over his breast pocket. He had a boyish handsomeness, which put his age somewhere in the mid-thirties. Yet behind his small eyes there

was a haunted stare that revealed each of his medal stripes carried a tale of unimaginable suffering.

"There's been some sort of mistake," Rush said.

The Major slapped him hard across the cheek.

"No mistakes," the Major said. "You are British Intelligence."

"Why does everyone assume I'm British Intelligence?" Rush complained.

"The accent? The clothes? The equipment you have with you? Is this enough?"

"Army surplus," Rush said.

Another slap. Rush took it, resisting an instinct to punch back. It would give him a moment of pleasure and a lot more pain.

A gesture and the corporal sprung into action. Rush was dragged to his feet and the chair kicked away. His arms were pulled back, and his body held firm against the soldier's.

Slowly the Major unbuttoned the tunic and pulled it open. Rush shivered as cold air touched his skin. He knew what was coming.

The first punch was straight into his navel. He tensed enough to take the worst of it, but it still left him a little winded. As he sucked air in, his muscles relaxed and that was when the second punch arrived. He would have doubled over if the corporal hadn't held firm.

"Are you here to assist the UPA? Are you here to assist the illegal insurgency?"

"Bird watching," Rush repeated.

Four hard punches in rapid succession to his left side. Rush coughed and wheezed as he recovered.

"Mission?"

Rush said nothing. The Major lined up to deliver another beating.

"Wait!"

"What for?"

"The flash," Rush gasped. "Is that the Leningrad Medal?"

"What of it?"

"I was there in forty-three. For Iskra."

The atmosphere in the room changed. Operation Iskra broke the Nazi siege and allowed vital supplies to enter the city and civilians to leave.

"What did you do? Bird watching?"

"Sabotage."

Rush felt the corporal's grip loosen. Not enough to escape, but at least he could breathe a little easier.

"I was there for the entire siege," the Major said. "Not for a day trip. Mission?"

The corporal stiffened and a quartet of punches thudded into his chest. He coughed and spluttered as the wind was knocked from his lungs.

"Wait!"

The Major grunted disapprovingly.

"Mission?"

"You think the MGB will be happy if I've been beaten to death?"

A Tokarev pistol appeared in the Major's hand. He pressed the barrel hard against Rush's forehead, and their eyes came together as if in a battle of wills.

"You tried to escape and were shot."

"Yeah," laughed Rush. "Sounds entirely plausible."

"There are witnesses."

"And the MGB will believe every one of them," mocked Rush. "How's Siberia at this time of year? Cold?"

Another hard punch to the chest silenced Rush's taunts. The pistol pressed against his forehead once more.

"Mission?" demanded the Major.

A long silence. Rush watched the Major, sizing him up. The Leningrad siege had given him a cruel, uncompromising edge. In a different time he'd have pulled the trigger without hesitation and thought no more of it. One more dead insurgent to add to his tally. Without the chaos of war there were orders to follow. His didn't involve killing a prisoner.

The cell door opened and there was a loud click of heels as a soldier came to attention. The Major glared at him.

"Comrade Major Kobets, there are MGB officers here."

"So?"

The battle continued, but Rush knew he'd won. It was a matter of time before Kobets relaxed and holstered his pistol. A nod released him, and he fell to his knees, coughing and gasping. He stayed there as the Major marched off.

"About time," Rush complained.

The arrival of Moscow's state security changed how Rush was treated. He was given his socks and boots back, then moved from the cold cell to the warmth of a canteen. They even gave him black, sugarless coffee. They were almost civilized.

After being so careful to get him into the cell without knowing where he was, they were clumsy to move him without a bag on his head. He took in his surroundings as he walked from the concrete block to the wooden shed.

The compound was tucked away at the edge of a large town. Plain wooden dormitories and outbuildings built to a similar pattern clustered at one end of a rectangular enclosure surrounded by a high chain fence topped with barbed wire and watched over by two tall observation towers at either end. There were no training facilities, firing range or drill square. Four trucks and an old GAZ automobile were parked in the open. All watched over by a pair of Red Army privates armed with rifles and a third holding a submachine gun with its distinctive drum magazine.

From the hasty construction and the presence of at least sixty soldiers from a Belarusian unit, Rush deduced the Ukrainian Nationalists - or some other anti-Soviet group - was active. It explained why he was in custody with the Red Army rather than the local Police as he'd planned.

"Could I have more coffee?" he asked the corporal in bad Ukrainian. The man didn't even blink, confirming he wasn't a local.

The canteen door opened, and a short, scrawny man in an ill-fitting dark suit entered. Black hair was swept back from a high forehead, and small, piercing eyes stared at him from behind round-rimmed glasses. A pointed beard clung doggedly to a jaw covered in pox marks and scars. He walked with short, quick steps until he stood before Rush. He checked a slim watch on a steel chain that he tucked back in the small pocket of his waistcoat. Then he sat.

"So, John Rush, you are here watching birds?"

The man spoke in slow Russian, each word carefully chosen and delivered in a deep baritone that didn't fit his frail frame.

"Yes."

"And Major Kobets? He was kind to you?"

"That's pushing it a bit," Rush scoffed.

"My name is Demchuk. You know who I am?"

"Internal state security, I'd assume?"

"Second Directorate," the man elaborated.

"Ah."

"Indeed."

Demchuk looked at the nearest soldier. With the corporal there were three in total, each with a pistol aimed at the prisoner.

"They think you are with the Ukrainian rebels," Demchuk continued.

"Perhaps we will take a little drive and find out?"

"Moscow in time for tea and torture?"

"Indeed," laughed Demchuk.

Rush sipped coffee. It was turning cold.

"What happens next is quite simple," said Demchuk. "You will tell me what I want to know. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but you will tell me."

"Information obtained under torture is notoriously unreliable," Rush warned him.

"Yet so much fun to obtain."

Rush chuckled.

"I think we should get you a shirt," Demchuk decided. "It will make the long drive more comfortable?"

"Very kind," Rush said.

"That won't be necessary, Comrade Major," Demchuk protested.

"I insist, Comrade Colonel," Kobets retorted. "There may be rebels who would like him back."

"But you reported you'd suppressed the UPA?" said Demchuk, with mock confusion.

"I have," insisted the Major. "Even so, this is a sensible precaution."

Rush leaned back in the seat and sighed. The wide bench was comfortable enough, although his knees almost pressed into the back of the driver's seat. Thick metal cuffs held his wrists, the short chain padlocked to a longer, heavier one fixed to the car's floor.

A woman sat directly in front of him. She'd led him out on the end of the chain, and he was happy enough to follow. She was tall and slender, with blonde hair pulled up in a tight bun on the back of her head. Her uniform was a little on the large side and had trousers rather than the usual skirt. An air of superiority surrounded her, which came from more than the Captain's flashes on her tunic.

The passenger side doors opened in unison. Demchuk climbed in the front while the corporal slid in beside Rush. The soldier unholstered his pistol, although he gave the impression his action was not only for the prisoner's benefit.

"Paranoid, aren't we?" said Rush in English.

A truck rumbled into life and rolled up behind the GAZ. More soldiers emerged from the buildings, dressed in heavy winter coats with rucksacks and rifles. Two had submachine guns, and another carried a radio.

"We shall have a little company at our host's insistence," Demchuk announced.

"Problems?"

Demchuk turned and looked first at the corporal, then at Rush.

"An appropriate measure in case we are ambushed. Perhaps you have friends?"

With the soldiers loaded and orders given to a fresh-faced Lieutenant, the pair of vehicles made their way slowly to the compound gate. The GAZ led the way, with the truck a short distance behind.

The road was a rough track rutted and ruined by war and neglect. While the GAZ did its best to cope, Rush was thrown around in the back. The engine protested loudly, and the transmission whined. He wondered how much longer it might last.

"You speak good Russian for a bird watcher," Demchuk shouted over the noise.

"It was useful," Rush said.

"In Leningrad, no?"

Rush nodded.

"You prefer English?" asked Demchuk. His English was heavily accented but understandable.

The corporal gave Demchuk a suspicious look.

"Might be better, all things considered," said Rush and side-eyed the corporal.

Demchuk cleared his throat in an operatic fashion.

"I hear the spring leaves in Hyde Park are delightful."

"I prefer the autumn blossom," replied Rush and smiled.

Demchuk fought not to smile back.

"It seems your host does not trust me," he explained. "I imagine he is on the telephone to the local MGB office as we speak."

"So, not much time?"

A red flare exploded in the sky.

"None."

Chapter 3

"Stop the car," demanded the corporal. He raised the revolver and aimed it directly at the driver's head.

Rush sprung into action.

The padlock holding his cuffs to the floor popped open as he swung his hands towards the raised gun. It went off as the thin chain between his wrists pushed the barrel away, then clattered onto the floor of the bouncing car.

Rush kept moving, and his elbow struck the corporal's cheek hard enough to knock him to one side. His head connected with glass and the side window cracked.

It wasn't enough to put the soldier down. An elbow came up and found a tender bruise on Rush's side. There was a loud yell, then a spluttering gasp as a fist crashed into ribs and knocked the prisoner back against the door.

The soldier lunged, grabbing Rush's throat with one hand. His grip was firm, and Rush coughed and spluttered as he choked. A swinging punch should have finished him.

Rush raised his forearm and blocked the incoming blow. His other arm came up from down low, a sharp uppercut crashing into the soldier's chin with enough force to fill the cabin with a cracking sound.

The corporal lifted himself up, ready to strike again. Suddenly he went limp and fell to the floor, blood streaming from a hole in his skull.

"They're shooting at us!" the driver exclaimed needlessly.

Bullets raked the back of the car, passing through the thin metal and thudding into the bench seat. Rush ducked down behind it.

"Anything to shoot back with?"

"There's a forty-one under my seat," she shouted, ducking as bullets bounced off the crude dashboard.

Rush pulled the weapon out. It was boxy and heavy, the stock poorly designed for target shooting. What it lacked in accuracy was made up for with a thick drum magazine loaded with bullets. He dragged a second drum and a bag of box magazines beside him.

He pulled the Soviet's body around by the passenger door and lay down as best he could in the cramped compartment. He rested the barrel of the submachine gun on the dead man's back.

"Could do with a right turn," he called out.

"I will turn right in three, two..."

Rush reached up for the door pull.

"...one!"

As the car turned, he opened the catch and pushed at the door as hard as he could. The truck was in view for no more than a second, still going straight, presenting a large, tempting target.

Rush squeezed the trigger. He watched as bullets struck the ground in front of the other vehicle, quickly correcting his aim and shredding the rubber tires. The truck screamed as a wheel rim caught a rut and snapped around. There was nowhere for the rest of the vehicle to go but over onto its side.

He slammed the door shut and took up position on the back seat. Through the shattered window he watched as dazed soldiers struggled to get out of the wreckage. One had the sense to aim and fire, but they were long out of range.

Demchuk winced as Rush tied off the dressing. A bullet, likely the corporal's rogue shot, had grazed his upper arm. It was nothing deep or life-threatening, at least for a few hours until infection set in. A simple field dressing and firm pressure would do for now.

"Thank you," Demchuk said, resting against the car's rear wing.

It was parked under a tree back from the road. There were bullet holes across the back, and the rear window was missing. Nothing important had been hit.

"She's Olga?" Rush asked.

The woman was alone by the road, gun in hand, watching back the way they came. Kobets would have dispatched more soldiers within a few minutes of the crash.

"Yes," Demchuk said proudly.

"She looks like her mother."

"Has her temperament too."

"And your brains?"

The older man nodded and groaned. He shook a little and coughed into his hand. When he took it away there were spots of black blood.

"Cancer," he said.

"Does she know?"

He nodded.

"I have maybe three months. Perhaps a bit longer. Perhaps a bit less. I am, as you say, a dead man walking."

"So why are we here, old friend?" asked Rush.

"Comrade Stalin will have his bomb next year, if not the year after," Demchuk sighed. "Balance will be restored with the Imperialist United States. Then it will shift in his favor."

"The Demchuk Formula?"

Demchuk nodded.

"Immeasurable energy that could power entire countries or destroy them," Demchuk said as if despising its existence. "I suspect Comrade Stalin will choose the latter."

They sat in silence as each contemplated the outcome of such a war.

"If you're going to die anyway, why ask for help getting out?"

Demchuk laughed.

"I said it was the Demchuk Formula. I did not say whose."

He gestured at his daughter, and she joined them. She stayed on her feet and carried on her vigil.

"When I realised what I had created I stopped," she told him. "I destroyed my old papers and new ones I created had mistakes."

"So this formula is in your head?"

She nodded.

"Which is where it will stay," she promised.

Rush sighed. They'd sold him a sheep dressed up as a poodle. Not that it mattered. He would have tried to help them escape no matter what the reason. He owed Demchuk that much from Leningrad.

"And this is why you must both go on without me," the old man decided. He coughed again and wiped the blood off his hands with a rag kept in his pocket for the purpose. "The mad old scientist met his unfortunate end in Ukraine and with him died his formula. What a shame."

Silence.

Olga broke it. She crouched beside him and held his shoulders, imploring him to continue. But he held firm.

"I'm sorry, but it is better this way," he told her. "You won't see me die a miserable death and I can still be of some use."

The decision made, Rush helped him to his feet. The dying man brushed dust off his jacket as he looked around the flat fields. His eyes showed a fondness as he admired his homeland one last time.

"There's an airfield twenty-something kilometers from here," he said, gesturing to the south.

"They'll shoot us down before we get in the air," Olga protested.

"Not the point, right?" guessed Rush.

"It will buy you some time. Unless you planned on escaping by plane?"

The two men laughed at the shared joke dredged up from their history together.

"They'll torture you, Father," Olga told him.

He hugged her.

"No they won't," he promised.

Rush left them to say their farewells. He looked out at the flat lands, crossed with trees and hedges meant to stop the winds from blowing away the precious crops. Drought had ravaged the soil for the past two years, causing a famine the Soviets had tried to hide. Olga's slight frame betrayed it.

The GAZ burst into life and trundled slowly towards the road. Demchuk was behind the wheel, his face pale and lips almost blue. In the back seat sat the corporal, propped up to look like a prisoner. The hood over his head hid his death.

"Keep her safe for me, Rush," he implored.

"I will," he promised.

The last they saw of him was as the GAZ turned onto a larger road and vanished behind a line of trees. The sound of its rough engine faded quickly and a cold silence descended.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"Walk," he said.

The truck had turned on its side, spilling soldiers across the road. Most escaped with nothing more than bruises, although some bones were broken and an officer's pride injured. It was too precious to leave by the roadside and, with the help of another, was put back on its wheels.

"Where did they go?"

"Down there, Comrade Major," said the young Lieutenant. He was one of those to break a bone. He held his injured arm as a medic prepared a sling.

Kobets found the road on his map. It went towards the coast, with others crossing its path that led towards safe havens and borders.

"The airfield?" asked the sergeant standing at his shoulder. While Kobets had medals, he had scars to remind him of the war. "They might try to steal an airplane!"

"Or have one come in and pick them up."

The damaged truck's engine started. A few of the soldiers cheered.

"We will go to the airfield," Kobets decided. "Alert them in case our friends try and flee."

"Yes, Comrade Major."

Chapter 4

The relic of the Patriotic War clung on to its usefulness as home for a pair of Polikarpov biplanes tasked with keeping a watchful eye on the Black Sea. Nestled amongst the flat farmlands, the airfield was nothing more than a high chain link fence marking a notional boundary and a cluster of wooden huts scattered by one end of the short cut grass. Around it were fallow fields, the locals driven away by the Soviet machine and its determination to keep this small patch of land away from prying eyes.

It wasn't on any maps. Civilian ones at least. Demchuk had found it using the MGB sheet on the passenger seat. A narrow dirt track led up to the lone guard house beside the only break in the fence. It was occupied by an equally lonely soldier who seemed relieved to have some company.

"We were ambushed," Demchuk explained as the soldier inspected his stolen MGB identity card and the bullet holes along the car's body. "My driver was killed."

"Is he dead?" asked the soldier, looking into the back of the car.

"Sedated," Demchuk lied.

"Why are you here, Comrade Colonel?"

"An airplane's coming to collect us. It should be here in thirty minutes."

"I've not been informed of this. Let me check."

"Of course you've not been informed," Demchuk snapped. "This is MGB business. Third Directorate. You have no need to be informed."

The soldier took a last look at the identity card and handed it back.

"Park by the huts while I confirm your story, Comrade Colonel."

Demchuk grunted. He slipped the car into gear and waited for the soldier to lift the flimsy barrier. It might have been easier to drive straight through it. Once the way was clear, he guided the car towards the huts.

Then he parked and watched the soldier in what was left of the rearview mirror. A face was at one of the windows watching the car closely.

Calmly, he leaned over to the passenger's footwell and unscrewed the petrol can. He tipped it over and let the fuel spill out. As he sat up, his fingers curled around the pistol grip between his legs.

"For you, my Olga."

His foot pressed hard on the gas pedal and the car lurched forwards. He ducked down as shouts and bullets followed him. One found its way into the cabin, and he jerked as it tumbled through his side. Another found a rear tire, slowing him and making the car harder to control.

He kept going. An airplane parked in one of two banked semi-circles became his target. He kept his foot on the pedal, ignoring the blood coughing up from his wounds and cancer. Another bullet found its way into his body, rendering his left arm useless.

It didn't matter.

The car piled head-first into the parked biplane. He was thrown forward and slammed his chest hard against the large steering wheel. Intense pain shot through broken ribs and he nearly blacked out. More bullets found their way into the car and then into his body.

He pushed the pistol's barrel into his mouth, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

The shot ignited the petrol fumes inside the cabin. It exploded, throwing flames and shrapnel outwards in a ball of fire and smoke.

Kobets was out of the truck before it stopped. He ran to the burnt-out wreck, barely containing his anger at the destruction. A handful of mechanics, pilots

and the soldier who'd stood guard stood swiftly to attention. One of the pilots, an officer's flash on his flying jacket, stepped forward.

"Comrade Major," he said and saluted.

"What happened?"

The pilot gestured to the soldier.

"An MGB agent arrived saying a plane was coming for him and his prisoner, Comrade Major. When I asked them to wait, he drove his car into the aircraft."

"You didn't get our warning?" snapped the Major.

"We have no radio," the pilot said. "We have to go to the village to use the telephone and collect messages."

Kobets ignored his complaints and peered inside the car's smoldering shell. He inspected the interior as best he could without touching the hot metal. There was little sign of the driver's body and only the charred remains of his passenger in the back. It stank of unburnt petrol and burnt flesh.

"Do you think an MGB officer would commit this sabotage, private?"

The soldier shook his head, overcome by the stupidity of what he'd said.

"This must be the old man," the Major said. "There was no woman with him?"

"No, Comrade Major."

"And you never saw the face of his prisoner?"

"No. He said his driver was killed and the prisoner was sedated."

The sergeant arrived and saluted.

"There's no sign of anyone else here, Comrade Major," he reported.

"No, there won't be. They separated when the truck crashed."

He pulled a map from inside his tunic and flattened it on the grass. The sergeant and pilot crouched down with him.

"Two people, one male, one female. We last had contact here," he said, pointing to where the truck had been wrecked. That was two hours ago and fifty kilometers away."

"The coast?" said the sergeant. "They must have a boat."

"A submarine?" the pilot suggested.

Kobets looked around the airfield. It dawned on him the second semi-circular park was empty.

"Where is the other airplane?"

"On patrol and due back in twenty minutes or so," the pilot said.

"As soon as it lands, refuel it and have it search this area," Kobets ordered.

"The pilot will be exhausted," the pilot argued.

"Then you fly it," Kobets snapped. "Sergeant, we will converge on this village. And give these fools a radio."

"Yes, Comrade Major," said the sergeant, saluting. He hurried away to carry out his orders.

Carefully Kobets folded the map and tucked it back inside his uniform.

"What is his name?" he asked gesturing at the guard.

"Mitnick," the pilot said.

"Belarusian? Good. He will come with me."

"He's under my command, Comrade Major," the pilot objected.

"And your command is now in tatters, 'Comrade'."

A minute later the truck turned around to leave. In the back was a Belarusian private, certain he was destined for guard duty in a Gulag.

Chapter 5

A patchwork of muddy, furrowed fields spread as far as the horizon. Long rectangles of dirt were stitched together with thin hedgerows and tattered fences, still healing from the ravages of war and drought. Here and there a small cluster of trees or farm buildings broke the monotony. The trees were a welcome place to rest, the latter best avoided.

Rush and Olga avoided the tracks and roads that cut across the landscape. They kept to the fields, skirting close to trees, using the drab olive of their clothes to blend into the scenery. The open landscape gave them an excellent view of any potential trouble.

There was little for the farmers to do, and they mostly stayed inside in the warm. The cold air and brief bursts of rain made sure of that. Even the birds seemed unwilling to venture out and fell silent.

"Where are we going?" Olga asked as they gathered at a gate.

"The coast," said Rush. He shivered as his body reminded him he wore only a tunic and a thin shirt. At least Olga had her heavy coat.

"You have a boat?"

"A canoe," he said.

"There's a harbor at Chornomorsk," she said helpfully.

He smiled and shivered again. She started to remove her coat, but he stopped her.

"I'm fine as long as we keep moving," he said.

"You'll develop hypothermia," she warned.

"I know," he said and held his wrist up. The fingers of his other hand pressed lightly on an artery as he measured his heart rate. He seemed satisfied.

Then came the sound they dreaded. An engine, laboring as it hauled a soft-skinned truck along the lane. The hedgerow became their uncomfortable hiding place. Olga pushed in front of him, raising her submachine gun in readiness for a fight. Rush held back, unarmed and struggling to hold back the cold's bite.

It stopped a few meters from their gate, and they listened as soldiers climbed down. They complained about aching limbs and the cold, as soldiers always did given the chance.

Rush looked around. They were exposed, easily spotted if anyone stepped over the gate. Olga might pick one or two off, but after that, she'd have to reload, and that's when superior numbers would win the battle.

"Ten minutes," an officer said.

A few meters behind them was a hollow. Rush tapped Olga's shoulder and she half looked at him. He gestured, making his intention known, and she nodded in agreement.

Carefully they moved back, using the soldier's boisterous preparations as cover for any noise they made. The hollow was less than a meter deep with a fallen tree blocking its entrance and branches from another casting a long shadow.

Rush went in first, clearing away brambles before lying at the back. Olga slid in and stayed at the front, gun aimed at the gate now hidden from view.

They froze.

Two soldiers clambered the wooden gate and dropped into the field. They looked around sheepishly, walking towards the hollow. Olga tensed, then relaxed when Rush tapped her shoulder and pointed at their slung rifles.

The man found what they wanted. A quiet corner by a tree where they could unfasten their trousers and empty their bladders. Steam rose up along with satisfied sighs.

As they relieved themselves, the escapees watched from their hiding place. Breath held. Muscles tensed in readiness for the fight.

Could Rush fight?

His hands shook with cold, and his fingertips were turning blue. He clenched his jaw shut before his teeth could chatter. Gently he pulled his knees to his chest, crossed his arms and put his hands under his armpits. Then he fought to stop the shivering.

One of the soldiers had finished and looked around at the fields. His eyes swept across the shrubs in the hedgerow until they settled on some detail that caught his interest.

"Look at this," he said to his friend.

The other soldier, still in mid-flow, grunted.

Olga felt the trigger move a little as her finger tightened. She took a deep breath.

He was coming closer, eyes fixed on a single spot. He stopped less than a meter away, staring at the ground as if trying to understand what he saw.

So close she could smell him. See the stitching in his great coat. Hear him breathe.

Had he seen her?

"What is it?" called his friend.

The soldier bent down, inspecting a tiny detail in the dirt. A footprint? A twig snapped as they snuck into the hollow?

Olga's gun was pointing at him. How easy it would be to blast him with a short burst, then turn on his friend with his trousers undone. And then what?

"Kalyna," called the soldier. "It's growing wild."

She let her eyes leave him for a moment and followed his gaze. A small plant grew barely a meter away, its leaves the unmistakable shape of the folkloric flower. Her spirit lifted a little, then settled as she forced herself to focus on him. All it would take is the smallest movement, and they'd be discovered.

"This is a good sign," the soldier chirped. "The country is healing."

A whistle blew, calling the men back to the truck. They hung back a minute more until the third blast demanded their return. Only then did they walk away.

Finally Olga could breathe.

Rush felt warm. His shivering had slowed to nothing more than a background tremor. The faint mugginess of encroaching cold passed, and he became more aware of his surroundings.

Of being held.

Olga was behind him, her body pressed in against his and her coat lying over them. The warmth in his chest came from her hands rubbing against him through his tunic.

"You're an idiot," she told him firmly.

"I'm sorry."

He shifted his hips. As warm and comfortable as he was, he felt awkward being so close to her.

"We should move," he said. "Sun's setting and we don't have much time to get out."

She grunted.

"Five more minutes of this, then we move. And we will find you some warmer clothes."

Chapter 6

The sun was low on the horizon, and a cold wind was coming off the Black Sea. Rush shivered as he sank beside the rotting fence at the edge of the tree line. A rough track ran alongside and on the other side, the remains of a stone wall around a farmhouse and its barn and storehouse. The outbuildings were left to ruin, but the house had been crudely patched.

"Cover me," Rush said.

Olga settled beside him, submachine gun at the ready. He broke cover, crossing the track in four long strides, and ducked down next to a gap.

They both waited for a shout or a light to come on. Even a shotgun blast would have been a welcome sign there was someone alive inside.

She joined him, covering the farmhouse door. No lights shone inside, not even the glow of a warming fire. Dirty curtains were drawn across filthy windows. No footprints went in or out.

The silence was shattered by the start of an engine. Shouting reached them, calling soldiers back to a vehicle. Then came the lights, spilling along the lane in front of the farmyard. If they stayed put, they'd be seen when the truck pulled away.

Olga moved as if to retreat to the trees. He grabbed her arm, holding her still. They couldn't see the truck, which meant the house was between them and it. For a few seconds it gave them cover.

They moved quickly and quietly, passing through the gap in the wall and over to the house. Rush watched the house like a hawk, waiting for certain discovery. A shimmering curtain. A face in a window. None of these came and

they flattened themselves against the rough stone wall, breathing hard from effort and fear.

The truck started moving, and Rush dared to peer around the house. It drove away slowly, rocking on the uneven road, its cargo of miserable-looking soldiers swaying in the back. He waited until the dim headlights had vanished before he dared to relax.

"We need to keep moving," Rush said. "There isn't much time."

"You need some warm clothes or you'll freeze to death," she told him.

He looked at the house, then at the door. It was shut and bolted on the inside. He tested opening it and both waited with held breath for a reaction from inside.

"Stay here," he told her.

The door popped open with a firm shoulder barge. He went inside, peering into the gloom. As his eyes adjusted, the broad brush of a farmer's kitchen became furniture and crockery. And the smell of death.

Deeper inside from the kitchen was the parlor. This was where he found her. An elderly woman wrapped in winter clothes that stank of decay. She'd died in a chair, starved to death as she warmed herself before the hearth in the corner. Blissfully unaware her time had come. Or hoping it had.

He left her and climbed the stairs to the upper floor. At the top was a room with a bed covered in perfectly arranged sheets and thick layers of dust on the blankets. In one side of a wardrobe were the woman's clothes. In the other were those of a man. Old and smelling of mothballs.

A heavy coat just fitted him, although lifting his hands above shoulder height was impossible. A scarf and hat added to his warmth. The gloves were too small. He took them anyway.

As he climbed downstairs, he paused at the woman's body. She looked peaceful, almost as if she were asleep. He said a silent thank you to her and left.

"How bad was the famine?" he asked once he was safely back with Olga.

She took the gloves from him. They fitted her well enough.

"Very," she said. "Stalin kept exporting our food even as we died. I was lucky. It doesn't help to have scientists starve to death."

The dim light from the truck's lights seemed brighter. It had stopped a mile or more away. Its cargo of soldiers would be on another fruitless search for the fugitives.

"There's only a couple more hours of sunlight," Rush said. "We need to keep moving."

Chapter 7

"Get down!"

He pulled her into the hedgerow as the airplane swooped down. It leveled out at under four hundred feet and sped across the field towards them. The pilot was brave - or foolish - as dusk descended fast and the light failed.

It flashed overhead, rocking its wings as the pilot and observer worked together. The biplane swept around in a wide arc, and Olga aimed the submachine gun at it. Rush stopped her from firing.

"They're not armed," he told her.

"But they can see us," she retorted.

The plane came back around for another pass. This time Rush paid closer attention and saw the observer peering over the fuselage, hand held to his mouth as he spoke into a radio set.

"We're spotted," he told her. "Troops will be on their way. Come on."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her out of their blown hiding place. They ran across the open field towards a copse of bare trees a few hundred yards away. A mad dash made as the plane flew low overhead.

As they ran, Rush scanned the horizon. There was no sign of the Red Army.

"We have a half-hour head start," he told her.

"How do you know?"

They were in the trees before he answered. The plane came around for another pass.

"No headlights," he said.

The pilot was getting braver. He was less than fifty meters up as he swooped down again. Without weapons it was a pointless gesture.

"May I?"

He took the submachine gun from her, pulled it into his shoulder and took aim. The plane descended once more, skimming so low it might have brushed the treetops. Not that the crew could see them. The shadows in the trees made sure of that.

Rush waited, listening to the engine's song. Waiting for the moment when the pitch rose as the pilot applied more power. It was followed by the nose rising, offering itself as a better target.

Ten precious rounds expended, each aimed not at where the airplane was but where it would be. They slammed into the nose, and one found something useful. The engine coughed and spluttered, and then a tendril of fire danced down its fuselage.

"Come on," Rush urged, heading through the woods to the track on the other side.

When they reached the gate he paused to help her climb over, then handed her the gun and followed. In the distance a ball of fire leapt into the sky as the downed airplane burned.

Chapter 8

After a mile they left the track. A river cut through the landscape, breaking the straight lines with twists and turns, rendering the land useless for crops with steep banks and wetlands. Rush insisted on following it, even when the river doubled back on itself. Better to do that than lose their way in the dark or stumble on a forgotten landmine.

A half-hour later, the horizon lit up with the glow of village lights. They pressed on, pushing hard against the cold night air and occasional rain-laden squalls. The wetness soaked into their clothes, conspiring to slow their advance.

Rush would have none of it.

In the distance he saw headlights move quickly along a straight road to the coast. Four sets, each belonging to a light-skinned truck with a gaggle of soldiers huddled together in the back for warmth.

He took note of the two trucks that halted at the village. The other two took different routes. One went up the coast towards the docks at Chornomorsk. The other turned in their direction. They both breathed a sigh of relief when it crossed a bridge over the river and kept moving.

Their advance slowed. Flashlight beams danced against the darkness and barked orders warned of advancing soldiers. Each step closer to the coast was a step closer to discovery. Or so it felt.

Rush navigated a route that avoided the soldiers as though he'd lived in the fields all his life. He used the banks and trees for cover, sometimes pausing to wait for a patrol to pass, other times moving in a silent dance that kept an obstacle between them. He seemed to know where a soldier would be

before they were there and adjusted their path along a map burned into his brain.

Then the cover ended. A small bridge crossed the narrow river and beyond was a wide estuary with only sandy banks on either side. They would be out in the open once they left the bridge's safety.

Movement caught his eye. Less than forty meters away was a barn, momentarily lit by a flashlight beam. He listened, tuning his hearing to the sound carried on the wind. It was a voice that spoke as if it were one part of a conversation.

"I have an idea," he whispered, pulling off his heavy coat and scarf. "Cover me."

Olga lay down beside him, the gun's stock pulled into her shoulder. She flinched as the flashlight danced over the clapperboard side of the barn. He placed a calming hand on her shoulder, and she took a deep breath. Then she nodded to show she was ready.

Rush darted across the open land, pushing his legs as hard as he dared. His feet crackled on the rough ground, and a small trail of dust was left in his wake. It couldn't be helped.

As he reached the barn, the flashlight appeared again. It came around the side, held by a lone soldier with a submachine gun over his shoulder and a chin yet to see a razor. He peered into the darkness, the feeble beam offering little to see.

Rush pounced.

One hand clamped firmly over the shocked man's mouth. The other came around his side in a sharp punch to the solar plexus, knocking the wind from his lungs and stunning him. As he bent double, a carefully aimed blow to his temple knocked him out cold.

Rush pulled the limp body up against the barn and stripped him of his weapons. The gun had a loaded box magazine, which would do for now. Hopefully he wouldn't have to use it.

Parked behind the building was a lone ZIS truck. A faint light came from the back, accompanying the one-sided conversation. A tall, whip-like antenna rose from a mounting behind the cab, and the engine was running, powering the boosted radio transceiver inside. There was no sign of anyone else.

As he crept towards it, he cleared the side of the barn. That was when he found the driver. Leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette. For a moment they both froze and looked at one another as if not sure what they were seeing.

The driver lunged at him, sweeping a knife out of its scabbard in one smooth movement. This wasn't a wet-nosed private. He had the scars of battle and the determined eyes of a killer. His thrust was aimed perfectly to catch Rush in the stomach. Except Rush had dodged to one side, and the blade plunged into thin air.

Recovering his balance, the driver swung the blade back around. He was in his stride now, feet firmly planted, left hand open and moving in a seemingly random circle as a distraction, right clutching the knife and waiting for the moment to lunge. Edging forwards, occasionally thrusting as he guided Rush to where he wanted him.

Rush caught the driver's wrist, but his grip wasn't strong enough to hold firm. His fingers slipped, and the blade stroked his arm, cutting into the thick, wet fabric of the tunic. The cold had saved him.

Another thrust. Rush stepped back, taking a longer stride that forced the killer to over-extend on his next attempt. This time Rush's grip held firm as he spun around, throwing the soldier onto his back. Still holding on, he twisted the man's wrist and dug his thumb in hard. The knife clattered away across the ground.

Legs flailed as the soldier tried to knock Rush over. He knew it was coming and dropped hard, elbow digging so deep into the man's stomach he thought he felt the ground. A final punch finished the job and put the man to sleep.

A soldier jumped down from inside the truck, pistol drawn. Rush was in the open, exposed and unarmed. They looked at one another as if guessing what the other might do.

Then, the soldier's expression changed to surprise. Olga was behind him, the barrel of her gun pressed into his back. He raised his hands in surrender.

Rush pushed past and clambered up into the truck. He ignored the sound of a body hitting the ground. Olga had decided it was easier to knock him out than guard him.

"What now? And you're welcome."

He pulled on the headset and fiddled with the frequency settings. There was static. Endless static. Apart from a tiny blip just where he expected it.

"Golden Eagle reporting location compromised," he said in perfect Russian. "Will exit in a civilian. Acknowledge."

Two clicks satisfied him.

"Well?" she asked impatiently.

"Hang on a minute," he said.

Again he changed the frequency until he found a babble of chatter. It was the one-side conversation he'd heard enough to pick up a few words and phrases.

"Unit four-seven to grid alpha-nine-seven," he said, still in Russian. "Sighting of target confirmed."

"Who is this?" snapped a reply.

"This is Major Kobets. Who is this?"

"No, I am Major Kobets," screamed the voice. "Who is this?"

"This is Major Kobets to all units. Our communications are compromised. Do not trust the radio. Get to grid alpha-nine-seven. I say again, communications are comp..."

He switched off the radio mid-sentence and smiled.

"Childish," she complained.

"Very. Let's find a boat."

Chapter 9

A hundred meters along the coast, a channel cut inland. It had been widened, and a rough wooden wharf built on either side. Four boats were tied up alongside, and none looked seaworthy.

Just one soldier stood guard. Young and nervous, he barely knew one end of his rifle from the other. Rush swapped his wet tunic for a dry Soviet Army kind and walked up to him calmly. Then he hit the lad so hard he fell down crying. Even Olga took pity on him, and they left him tied up with a discarded rope.

"This one will do," Rush decided as he lowered the engine cover. "It should run, but all hell will break loose when we fire her up."

"Blowing up the truck will make a good distraction," Olga suggested. She was at the wheel.

"Except we're not so easily distracted."

Rush froze. Kobets stood victorious with a pistol pointed at the two escapees. Beside him was the driver, freshly armed and sporting a bloodied nose.

"Gun down," Kobet ordered.

Carefully, Olga placed her gun on the deck. She put her hands above her head.

"I assume you plan to escape by submarine?"

"Turkish border," Rush lied. "I still have a couple of friends there."

Kobets laughed.

"No matter. I have informed our Navy to be vigilant for a Royal Navy submarine operating in these waters."

"Really? I thought that was illegal? Bosphorus treaty and all that."

Kobets was unimpressed with Rush's sarcasm and turned his attention to Olga.

"Your father is dead. He killed himself trying to break into an airfield. I thought you would want to know."

Olga barely registered the words, let alone their meaning.

"So much for 'British Intelligence'," Kobets mocked. "You will both last out your days in a Siberian Gulag. I am sure they will find many interesting ways of not killing you."

The two Soviets stepped back and gestured for their captives to come ashore. Olga moved first and placed one foot carefully on the wooden deck. As the boat moved she lost her balance and reached out before she fell. Instinctively she threw her hand out to steady herself, catching the gun. It clattered onto the deck.

"Next time I shoot you," Kobets warned.

Olga steadied herself and then took the extra step to firmer land. At that moment, Kobets was between her and the driver, and she sprung forward. He raised his pistol, wasting time that gave her more time to reach him. She struck him in the chest, and he fell back.

The driver swung to take aim at her but found his shot blocked. Rush dived to the deck, grabbed the fallen gun and rolled to his feet. He pulled it into his shoulder and took aim. A short burst cut the driver's legs out from under him.

Kobets landed hard on his back, knocking the wind out of his sails. Olga's legs settled on either side of his ribs, and she started pummeling him with clenched fists. He tried to grab her wrists, but she was throwing punches too wildly to get a grip. Then he covered his face with one hand and reached down with the other.

Steel flashed in the dark. Then he screamed as bullets shredded his hand. The knife fell.

"Come on," Rush shouted at her.

Still she lashed out, and he had to drag her away from him. He almost threw her onto the boat.

Soldiers were coming fast. They ran with flashlights ablaze, wildly searching until a beam landed on Rush. He hunched down by the engine, struggling to get it running.

"Can you shoot at them?"

Olga was in a daze as the enormity of her father's death crushed her. Oblivious to the world around, she didn't even flinch when a bullet thudded into the boat near her head.

"Damn," Rush cursed and threw himself at her. Bullets arrived where she had been.

He pulled himself around on his stomach back to the engine and tackled it again. Calmly he worked on the throttle linkage as shouting and shooting reached him in equal measure.

Suddenly it burst into life, and the boat lurched forward. He grabbed at the one rope holding them to the wharf and tossed it aside. The engine was running fast, but he didn't care. Not yet. All he had to do was get out to sea.

Olga finally started shooting back. Short, concentrated bursts that scared more than they threatened. When the drum was empty, she tossed it aside and loaded a box magazine. When that was empty they were already racing away into the night.

"I'm sorry about your father," he told her.

She sighed and dropped onto the deck, landing so heavily on her bottom that she gasped. Then she sat there with her head in her hands.

"I knew he was going to die. I've watched him die since he returned to Ukraine. Just not being there when it happened makes it harder."

Rush placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"He did it to keep you safe," he told her.

Before she could reply, flashes of light passed overhead. The rattle of a machine gun followed. Then came the sound of a marine engine.

"Damn!"

Rush took the wheel and opened the throttle, pushing the engine harder. It screamed, almost masking Olga's submachine gun spitting fire at their unseen assailants.

"Save your ammo," Rush told her.

Ahead was blackness. Behind was the rapidly fading glow of the coastal village. More flashes surrounded them, fireflies dancing in the night and splashing against the water.

He looked back and caught the source of the tracers. A machine gun resting on the foredeck of one of the other boats. As it fired, it lit up Kobets, holding on with one hand, the other wrapped in a bloodied bandage and waving as he urged his boat to catch the fugitives.

Rush pulled to port, cutting through the stream of gunfire. Then he pulled right and left again, leaving a confused tangle of wash and wake.

The following boat hit the waves hard and bounced on the surface. Rush had swung around, coming back on himself and using the darkness and change in direction to his advantage. Now beside him and facing forwards, Olga strafed the foredeck, silencing the machine gun. They barely heard the splash as both man and weapon fell into the sea.

As they ran alongside, Rush threw himself onto the boat. Kobets was there, shooting his revolver with his uninjured left hand at the twisting shape coming towards him. If he hit his target, Rush showed no signs of slowing and crashed into the Major.

The sergeant left the wheel and took a swing. Rush blocked him with his forearm and aimed low with his punch. It landed hard in the man's groin, and he screamed as he fell.

A lucky punch had Rush on his front. He rolled to one side, and Kobets' wild swing with a boat hook landed harmlessly. Rush grabbed it and pulled,

bringing the Major down. A knife flashed and thudded into the decking, catching a glancing slice of Rush's thigh.

Ignoring the pain, Rush pushed his assailant away and came back to his feet. He caught Kobets' wrist before the knife could sink into his flesh. He twisted it sharply, and the blade spun away, landing at the sergeant's feet.

Rush carried on twisting, turning the Major and keeping him off-balance. They came around together to meet the sergeant's wild attack with the knife.

Kobets stiffened as the blade plunged into his shoulder. Rush pushed him clear, and as the sergeant instinctively reached to catch the officer, swung a powerful right hook. It caught the man's jaw, and he staggered backward, tripped, and plunged into the Black Sea.

As Rush killed the engine, the boat came to a gliding halt. He turned, and Kobets made one final attempt for victory. The knife, dripping with his own blood, came down towards Rush's chest.

They locked in a battle of strength. The Russian's hands were on the blade, pushing it down. Rush, trapped by the cabin bulkhead, held both wrists. The blade edged closer.

Kobets screamed as Rush pressed on the stubs that had once been his fingers. He tried to fight through the pain as Rush pressed harder. His grip loosened, and he jerked backward, hoping to escape. Rush swept his legs out from under him, and he crashed onto the deck.

Rush stood over his vanquished foe, the blade now in his hand. The figure sprawled on the deck looked pitiful. Once a hero of a terrible siege, now full of fear as he faced his end on an anonymous boat in a dark sea.

"Not today," Rush told him, tossing the knife over the side. "You weren't supposed to be here."

The boat bumped as Olga brought her charge alongside. Rush jumped aboard, and the engine roared as it pushed them away into the black night.

Chapter 10

Kobets' boat had barely dropped out of view before Rush caught sight of their next problem. In the distance was a small cluster of lights getting brighter as they closed on one another.

"Soviet Destroyer," he told her.

A flash of light was followed by a column of water erupting less than forty yards away. A boom reached them a second later.

"They're firing at us?"

Rush peered into the night, hunting for the tell-tale wake of the submarine's snorkel. Another shell landed, this one astern but getting closer. They didn't need a direct hit, just one close enough to overwhelm the small boat.

"Jump," he told her.

"What?"

He grabbed her as he threw himself over the side. The water was freezing and he screamed with shock as it wrapped around his body. Another explosion hit nearby. With it came a cascade of water that threatened to swamp them both.

Rush stripped before the wet clothes dragged him down. Olga tried to do the same but was shaking so much that she barely managed to get her coat off. He helped strip her off her tunic and trousers.

"We'll die," she cursed.

"Wait."

The shelling quietened as it tracked its target. The empty boat raced across the Black Sea, tossed to a new heading with each shell that landed nearby. Leading the destroyer on a merry dance far away.

Around them the water churned. Rush held Olga tight, kicking against the waves threatening to push them away into the night. The conning tower of a submarine appeared around them and he skillfully guided them to its heart so that when the hatch popped open he looked straight into the surprised face of a submariner.

"Nice shot," he joked.

The submariner clambered up, caught between the two freezing figures and his duties. Behind him came the expressionless features of Harris.

"Get them both below," the skipper ordered.

The last thing Rush saw was the skipper shaking his head in anger.

Chapter 11

A submariner watched Rush closely, bent over with a stethoscope, listening to his heart pounding. A finger to his lips told the patient to stay silent.

There was no noise beyond the faint hum of electricity and the sea outside the hull. Everything was bathed in red light.

Gently Rush pushed his way out of the bunk. His legs were a little uneasy, but he managed to steady himself before pressing on to the control room. Harris glared at him as he clambered through the watertight hatch, then gestured him to come close.

"Soviet destroyer," he said, pointing upwards.

"How long?"

Harris looked at his watch.

"We can stay under another three hours."

A faint ping echoed through the submarine. Both men looked through to the sonar operator, half leaning out of his cabin with his eyes closed and hand pressed against his ear. Everyone held their breath while he listened to the faint whine coming off the destroyer's screws. Then he shook his head and gave a thumbs up.

"Fishing expedition."

Harris had undoubtedly positioned his submarine beneath warmer water, shielding them from the pings. But staying put was a fool's game. In the end they would have to surface.

The sonar operator gestured, signaling their shadow was coming around again.

"They know roughly where we are. They'll force us to surface and then we're done for."

Eyes turned to the slim blonde woman in an oversized overall standing at the hatch. Harris decided against distracting his crew further, and the two men joined her.

"I'm afraid this might be for nothing if we can't slip the destroyer," Harris said, his tone more conciliatory than it was with Rush.

She pushed past and went to the chart on the navigator's table. The surprised officer stepped back and pointed to where they were stationed, although she had already worked it out. They were about ten miles off the coast, trapped in a slight depression that shielded them from the destroyer.

"If you come up fifteen meters you can exit the depression and join this fast flow," she said.

"Yes, but that would mean exposing us to the destroyer," said Harris patiently.

"Not if they are looking the wrong way," Rush said, reading her mind.

"And how do we do that?" asked Harris.

"Do you have a torpedo and some tools I could borrow?" she asked.

"Think it'll work?"

The torpedo officer Benning rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a thick black smudge of oil.

"Should do," he said. He gestured at the chart, showing the planned direction for the torpedo. "We used an aft fish. It should run five or six miles on reduced power. It'll make some noise too."

"Speed?"

"Eight knots."

"If they take the bait it gives us an hour to run the other way, plus the time to catch up," Benning said.

"How long can we run submerged?" asked Rush.

"11 miles," Harris replied thoughtfully. "We can run at 8 knots underwater, 16 on the surface. That destroyer can do at least double that. At most we'll have a 2-hour lead, but I suspect it will come down to an hour."

"Better make the most of it," Rush told him.

Harris shot him a look that would melt steel.

All eyes were back on the sonar operator. He was in his own world, wrapped up in intense concentration as he tracked the destroyer's running. He adjusted his instruments, placing the vessel in the centre of his auditory field. The gentle quietening of its screws told him how far away it was.

Then his thumb came up.

"Fifty feet, silent," Harris ordered.

Rush and Olga looked at one another. There was doubt in her eyes as if she'd just realised some fatal flaw in her plan and didn't know how to explain it. Rush offered a comforting smile and she relaxed.

The boat lifted out of the depression, catching the current that flowed towards the Bosphorus Strait.

"Fifty feet, skipper," reported the helmsman.

"Release the torpedo," Harris ordered.

The crew held their breath. A hissing echoed along the hull, far quieter than they were expecting. The modified engine pushed hard against the water in the torpedo tube, and it slid slowly into the Black Sea.

"Torpedo clear," Benning reported.

"One hundred feet."

Rush watched the sonar operator's closed eyes trace the path of the decoy. Flicking left and right as he shifted his focus from torpedo to destroyer. The corners of his mouth curled up as he looked straight at Harris and nodded.

"Fifteen hundred yards aft," he whispered. "Destroyer's tracking the torpedo."

"Periscope depth," Harris ordered.

As soon as he was able he scanned the horizon.

"Make speed eight knots due south," he ordered.

The submarine hummed as the engines came to life, propelling the boat through the cold Black Sea.

"Ten minutes on this heading, then surface and run at full speed."

Chapter 12

Another explosion rocked the boat. Water from the broken pressure pipe hit Rush hard in the face. He ducked the stream and turned a valve wheel. The leak was just a trickle when a sailor arrived with tools and patches.

Calm settled in the control room as the shouting and panic of a rush to repair damage subsided. Voices lowered, and everyone caught their breath.

"Where's the bottom?" Harris whispered.

"Four hundred and fifty feet, skipper."

"Down. Take us to four-forty."

Rush was thrown off balance as the boat's bow dropped and she slipped deeper into the Black Sea. The hull screamed in protest, and he caught the terrified expressions on young faces. Older hands were calmer as memories from the war came back. And trust in the engineers who'd built her.

"We need another torpedo," Olga suggested.

"I'm not shooting at the Soviet Navy," Harris protested.

"Why not? They're shooting at us!" Benning retorted.

"Why aren't they firing more depth charges?" the helmsman asked, looking up at the ceiling as if that offered any answers.

"They're working out how to reach us," Rush told him. "We're below their operating level."

"Adjust bearing five degrees port," shouted the navigator.

The boat lurched again as it corrected course.

More shouting as the sonar reported an obstruction ahead. Hugging the seabed would as likely finish the submarine as escape the destroyer's clutches.

"I need a wetsuit and some explosives," Rush said. "And you better get ready to surface."

The submarine surfaced slowly in a gentle spiral that took her almost underneath the destroyer. Sensing victory, the depth charges stopped. Marines would be mustering, waiting to board the stricken vessel.

Rush surfaced first. He came up on the far side of the destroyer, a small black dot bobbing up and down in a sea just seeing the first light of day. For a few seconds he waited, watching the vessel for signs he'd been discovered.

"Heave to and prepare to be boarded," he heard a bullhorn shout in bad English from the far side.

Taking a deep breath, he ducked under the surface and swam hard for the hull. Currents and tides worked with him, and he reached it faster than he expected.

Down he went, sinking into the darkness with his hand pressed against the metal. Barely able to see, all he had to go by was touch and the water pulling him into the propellor blades. They turned slowly, helping the ship keep station with the submarine, and he could easily keep clear of their deadly edges.

He released the limpet mine fixed to his chest and guided it into position. It clanged against the hull. He pulled out the pin, went to the surface and took a deep breath.

Then he dived again, pushing down under the keel and coming up on the other side. A small boat was in the water, manned with a half dozen marines.

"Over there!" shouted someone from the topside. A light beamed down onto him and for a moment he was exposed. Again he went down, pushing towards the small boat. Bullets punctured the surface, slowing as they ran against the water's resistance.

He came up for air just as an explosion rocked the far side of the ship. There was panic as attention shifted from the waiting submarine.

A second explosion hit as a slow-running torpedo found its mark. Released as Rush had gone for the surface, it had tracked around on a long, lazy path that gave him time to disable their pursuer.

Rush pushed out for the submarine, still fifty yards away. Bullets splashed the water around him as the marines opened fire. A loud thud lifted their boat a foot into the air, and it started sinking.

The submarine dived. Rush grabbed the conning tower just before it went beneath the surface and let it pull him down. He fought his way into the open airlock. Benning waited for him, a rebreather in his mouth, ready to feed him much needed air.

"We might have just started a war," Harris told him.

Rush smiled and shook his head.

"Not today," he promised.

Chapter 13

The Scottish coast slipped silently past as the submarine made her way home. Five figures stood on the conning tower: her skipper, Rush, Olga and two ratings who kept a constant vigil. It was night, the half-moon casting a dull glow on the rugged coastline.

"I never thought I'd do this again," Harris said as he fastened a black flag to the mast. As he raised it, the skull and cross bones of the Jolly Roger unfurled and fluttered in the wind.

Olga looked up at it quizzically.

"Navy tradition," Harris explained. "Don't worry, I'll take it down in a minute as we didn't officially sink a Soviet Navy destroyer."

"And what of me?" she asked.

Rush offered a reassuring smile.

"You'll be debriefed, and any information about your father's work will be much appreciated. After that, perhaps a professorship at a University? It's just a shame the Demchuk Formula died with your father."

"Yes," she smiled. "Yes, it did."

Slow Boat to Basra

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Chapter 1

Footsteps broke the silence of the dark passageway. A glimmer of light followed; an oil lamp flickering as it swayed in his hands. He held it up, straining to make out each of the shallow steps curving down before him.

"The Cross of Al Cruc was quite the find," he told the man a few paces behind. "The inscriptions on it are still being translated, but it may be one of our oldest religious texts. Ah! Here we are."

He offered the light to his companion. He was short with a band of thin grey hair circling an impressive dome. Small eyes peered out from behind round glasses, the lenses held with a thin metal frame that betrayed their thickness. The price of too many years in dim light and intense research.

"Odd," he muttered.

"What is?" asked the man in the smart soldier's uniform.

"The lock is broken."

The soldier, a full head taller and slim and upright, eased the old professor to one side. A pistol appeared in the lamplight.

"Stand back."

There was no sign the door had been forced. He tried the key again and this time the bolt withdrew. He crouched down and pushed the door open.

Beyond was an office. On the far side was a small window, protected with bars on the inside and a wooden shutter on the out. To the left was a bookshelf crammed with notebooks, textbooks and folders. On the right was a desk, on which were various instruments and lenses used by someone examining a priceless object.

"Where is it?"

"The desk has a locked cabinet."

The soldier went in, pistol raised in one hand, lamp in the other. He flinched as an electric light came on.

"Sorry," said the professor.

Both men looked at the metal cabinet beside the desk. The door was open, twisted where it had been forced. Inside was nothing but empty shelves.

"No!" wailed the professor.

The soldier bent down. His gaze turned back towards the door, following the path the thief took to escape. A little off to one side he found what he wanted. It was nothing more than a slip of paper, torn from the top of a notebook. On it was written a single word. An Arabic name Romanized.

"Say nothing," the soldier ordered.

"But this is one of our country's most important archeological finds," protested the professor.

"Nothing," snapped the soldier.

The finality in his voice told the professor to be silent or be silenced.

"Your full cooperation will be required."

Chapter 2

Dark wooden panels lined the bar's walls, broken only for an occasional mirror and the shuttered windows looking out onto Kut's dusty streets. Where they ended and the walls carried on, once-white paint reaching to the high ceiling. A pair of fans turned gently, drawing up the warm air and lifting dust off the threadbare rugs. Around the place scattered battered tables and chairs, most occupied by local men drinking cold drinks and eating crude meals in near silence. They were here to escape the late afternoon heat not enjoy conversation.

Opposite the windows was the bar. It curved at one end and behind it was a counter and a mass of mirrors working hard to make the meagre stock look more expansive. Two white men propped up the bar, completing the impression an East End Pub had been lifted wholesale and dropped into the middle of Iraq. One was tall and well dressed, wearing the sort of light tan suit expected for a gentleman explorer. He half-sat on a stool, left foot resting on the brass pole that encircled the bar a little above floor level. His companion was much shorter, dressed in darker hues with a loose cotton shirt unbuttoned almost to the waist. His stocky build and bald head implied he was the muscle. Both nursed a dark liquid in mismatched glasses.

"What's good?"

The tall man turned his head and inspected the new arrival carefully. He was of average height and build, with short dark hair that started curling a little at his neck. He had a healthy tan and wore a loose blue shirt, dark fatigue trousers and brown boots. Unremarkable in most respects. He might even blend in with the locals if one didn't look too hard.

"The gin's awful," he said with a tone that anticipated respect. His attention turned to his glass, which he held up and turned in long, thin fingers with neatly clipped nails. "I have no idea what this is, but it is bearable."

The barman appeared, rising from a low stool that hid him from view. He was a slim Arab with a fine mustache and an almost comical fez. He gave the impression he wore it to set his foreign guests at ease. Or to mock them.

"No use," the tall man said. "He no speako English."

The newcomer and barman looked at one another.

"Peace be with you," said John Rush. "Forgive my bad Arabic, but I am still learning."

The barman smiled and said, "And with you. What will you drink?"

"Do you have tea?"

"Not like the red faces?"

Rush failed to hold back a chuckle, drawing the ire of his curious companions. Both had red, sunburnt faces.

"I prefer tea."

The barman hurried away, apparently pleased with Rush's choice. Or at least relieved. One less drunken English to deal with.

"You speak it then?"

"I was here in '43," Rush said. "Just for a couple of months. I picked up a bit."

"As I thought! I was just saying to Smithie, I'd bag you for Officer Class. Isn't that right, Smithie?"

There was no reply other than a growing resentment at being dragged into the conversation.

"Afraid I didn't have the pleasure on account of this," the tall man tapped his left leg with a battered walking cane. "Donaldson's the name. Lord Alfred Donaldson, but do call me Donnie."

The barman returned with hot tea. Rush thanked him and in a brief, faltering exchange, confirmed he had reserved a room for the night. Food was offered and gratefully accepted.

"Are you Mister John Rush?" asked Donnie. He looked at the chipped enamel plate with meat, figs and curry placed before the newcomer. A flat bread accompanied it.

"I am," said Rush as he scooped up a spoonful of the curry. Donnie looked on, wishing he'd known food was available. "Rush is fine."

"You're on the slow boat to Basra then?" Donnie continued. "Good to have another Englishman along. This old fart is my loyal valet Smithie."

"Nice to meet you. Royal Marines?"

Smithie nodded.

"Norway," he grunted. His East End accent was made for this bizarre tableau. "While you were running around here, I was probably in a camp. Sir."

"Bad luck," Rush said and watched the reaction.

"We should get back to the boat, your Lordship."

"Must we? I was hoping to enjoy some more conversation with our new friend here."

"It's still a few days to Basra, sir. Plenty of time to chat."

Donnie considered standing his ground. He was too drunk for that.

"Lovely to meet you, Rush. See you in the morning. Eight o'clock, I believe."

The food drew Rush back. He was starving and tired and needed to sleep.

As guest rooms went it was par for the course. The mattress was soft and the sheets washed, if not spotless. A net hung over it to keep most of the insects out, fluttering in the light breeze from the ceiling fan and half-opened window. There was a crooked table in the corner with a jug of hot water slowly cooling and a rucksack on the too-weak-to-sit-on chair.

Rush lay on top of the sheets, curled on one side and barely moving as he slept. Oblivious to the figure skulking in the shadows.

With slow hands, the shadowy form hunted through the rucksack. Whatever he wanted wasn't there. Just spare clothes, a wash kit, odds-and-

sods. It was all set out on the table and the hands dug deeper into the bag. There may be a secret compartment or something stitched into the lining.

Thwarted, the figure gently placed everything back in the order he found it. It had to be somewhere else. But where?

He scanned the dark room, lit only by a street light outside and a half-moon beaming in through the bare window. It was obvious Rush was sleeping with it on him.

The fist barely reached him, spoiled by the net's unexpected appearance. It caught Rush off-balance enough for a simple tug on the attacker's arm to bring him down off the bed. Time enough for the intruder to make his escape through the window.

It cracked hard on its frame and for a moment held him back. He pushed on and threw himself at the street two floors below.

Rush pulled himself to his feet in time to see the shadow caught up on the rotten frame. He let the assailant clear out of the way before taking after him. Just in time to see a skillful two-foot landing.

He followed, landing in the dirt with a heavy thump. He rolled to his feet and took after the shadow. They ran hard up the main street, their way lit by improvised lights on tall poles.

Rush was gaining.

The shadow knew the streets and took a sharp left. They dived into the dark alleys and side streets where only the moon lit their way. Kut was fast asleep.

Following the sound of boots on dirt, Rush kept pushing as hard as he dared. Even with his vision adjusted to the darkness there was little to see. Endless houses on the left and right, occasional breaks for wells or yards, or another alley going deeper into the sprawl. Always the risk of tripping on a rock or rut.

The sound was gone. Rush pulled up, listening to the night as he hoped to pick up anything that would tell him where the shadow was. And what then? Another chase?

He trudged back to the hotel.

Getting back in the window wasn't too difficult. There were enough ledges and bits of window frame sticking out, and he could see where the shadow had snuck in. Fresh scratches revealed where a knife had been slotted between window and frame to lift the weak clasp.

As he turned to close the window, the light came on. Reflected in the glass he saw the barman, dressed in a white nightshirt and holding a bolt action rifle to his shoulder. He still had the fez on.

"Someone broke in," Rush said.

The barman lowered the rifle and pushed past. He peered out into the night.

"Did you see them?"

"Only from behind."

"Arab or white?"

"No idea."

Rush emptied his rucksack onto the table and went through it quickly. Nothing was missing.

"I knew it was a mistake to help you," the barman complained.

"But Abdullah, we have such fun!"

His friend set the rifle down and carefully closed the window. A piece of rotting wood came away in his hand.

"Yes, yes, Mister Rush. But that was before. Now I have a bar. And I might have a wife."

"Might, you old dog?"

Abdullah leaned against the wall and watched Rush carefully put everything back in his bag.

"What were they after?"

"Not sure."

"That I don't believe, Mister Rush. You always know."

Rush closed his bag and put it back on the chair. His eyes closed and he relived the encounter in the room. Retracing every step as though looking over the shadow's shoulder. Watching him move towards the window. Push himself through and hesitate as he caught himself on the frame.

"Don't move."

He looked down at the floor in front of the window. A small circle of green plastic with four holes and pieces of thread leaped out at him. He bent down, picked up the button and inspected it.

"Interesting," he said and put it in his wallet.

Chapter 3

"John Rush as I live and breathe!"

Donnie pushed forward through the throng and thrust out his hand for Rush to shake. He was behaving as though greeting a long-lost friend, not someone he met in a bar the night before.

"Lord Donaldson," Rush replied. The Lord's hand was limp and the palm damp.

"Donnie, I said. Please call me Donnie."

Rush let himself be dragged through the bedlam. A market had formed at the entrance to the docks, and two stressed-looking security guards were being tested by those hawking goods and those who wanted to pass. There were a dozen or more stores, some nothing more than an enterprising soul with goods to sell from a basket, others expansive tents that partially blocked the trucks trying to unload cargo from the handful of boats moored on rough jetties.

"There's not much coming through now," Donnie said as he tried to fight through a crowd that decided to latch on to him. "The new roads are moving a lot around these days."

An elderly woman offered a fish up to Rush. He politely declined and when she heard Arabic spoken it was as if the Red Sea parted. Even Donnie looked shocked at the sudden ease of reaching the compound's entrance.

"Heard you nearly didn't make it," Donnie said, stepping aside to let Rush deal with security.

"Really?" said Rush as he negotiated his way through the gate. He noted the security guards had rifles with no magazines.

"Talk of the town," Donnie joked. He led the way again, leaning heavily on his cane. "Guess that nice soft mattress wasn't better than a night on the barge after all."

Barge was an apt description for the boat. It was a flat, shallow vessel, twenty meters from raked bow to steep stern. Aft was a white wooden cabin block, two floors high with stairs leading up to a wheelhouse perched on its roof. Midships was a mast, likely added as an afterthought as it had a traditional sail fitted to it. Tarpaulins covered cargo hidden in the hull, offering some protection from the harsh summer sun. The shape suggested she carried boxes and crates spread out from the centre.

She'd likely started life under steam as there were hints of a hopper and stack in the cabin block or at least the remains of where they had been. Now she was powered by oil with an exhaust rising into the air behind her.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Donnie said sarcastically. "I'm surprised she hasn't sunk."

The rust, flaking paint, and ad hoc repairs were more noticeable as they drew closer.

"Skipper likes to take things slow," Donnie warned. "Mostly currents and winds. Cheapskate won't put the engine on unless he has to."

The Captain was on deck, fixing a rope over a tarpaulin covering newly loaded cargo. He was a tall, spindly man with sun tanned leathery skin, uneven short grey hair and a long beard that reached to the bottom of his sternum. He wore almost black trousers rolled up past his ankles and a shirt that might have been white once. The hat still carried a Royal Navy insignia. Just.

"Come on, let's get you aboard and settled in," said Donnie as he bounded up the plank. The Captain growled at him under his breath.

"Excuse me, Captain," Rush said in Arabic. "May I come aboard?"

Narrow, almost black eyes scanned Rush.

"Yes you may, Mister Rush."

"Thank you."

They exchanged greetings as he stepped onto the boat. It was polite and formal with not a hint of friendliness about it.

"You have my money?"

"Yes."

A short pause as Rush was tested. A fool would have produced the money there and then. Rush was no fool.

"Come to my cabin, Mister Rush, and we will conclude our business."

The wheelhouse looked like it was added after the boat was converted from steam to offer the pilot shelter from the intense sun. There were doors on both sides and large windows held open on wooden shafts. Each had a shade drawn down over it so that it cooled the wheel down further when it was propped open.

It was a large wheel, made of wood with eight worn handles around its edge. Beside it was a small stand for a cluster of dials, a throttle and some other buttons and levers whose purpose wasn't clear. Further towards the port door was a map table with charts spread across them. Rush had the impression they were rarely consulted.

At the back were concertina doors that hid a small cabin. It was little more than a bunk with a miniature desk and some drawers beneath the cot. The only hint this was somewhere The Captain called home was a painting of a middle-aged woman carefully framed and secured to the wall.

"My wife," The Captain said, following Rush's gaze. "You have my money?"

Rush handed him an envelope filled with crisp notes. They were closely inspected.

"You know my rules?"

"Do what you say, keep out of the way and don't cause trouble," Rush recited.

"We moor each night and there are prayers," the Captain said. "You can pray to your own god if you wish, but do it out of my sight."

"Fair enough."

The Captain looked him over again. Suspicion gave way to something closer to approval.

"Who are my fellow guests?"

The Captain shrugged and said, "People who pay for a cruise to Basra without being asked questions."

"Fair enough," said Rush. "Now our business is concluded, may I give you a gift as a gesture of thanks?"

A dozen fresh figs were offered.

"Allah forgive me, but I would prefer whiskey."

A bottle of Johnnie Walker appeared from Rush's rucksack.

"I don't think you will be as much trouble as your friends," The Captain laughed.

"This is where you stay."

It was best described as a dormitory. The room stretched from one side of the cabin block to the other, plain slat wood walls punctured with a trio of portholes. Two doors led off the back, one down to the next level, the other into a washroom.

Bunks lined the port wall, four in total. The one furthest from the door was hidden from view by a sheet stretched from floor to ceiling like a curtain. Donnie appeared to sleep on a bottom bunk under Smith by the forward wall. Whoever occupied the next bunk slept on the bottom and placed their suitcase on the mattress above. This left the bunk beside the curtain for Rush to take.

"You will need this," The Captain said, handing him a heavy, battered metal water bottle. "There is water in the morning, at lunch and in the evening. You prepare your own food, except the evening meal when we all eat together."

"Thank you."

"That is where you will meet the rest of my crew," The Captain said, his voice carrying the weight of authority. "Remember they are my crew, not stewards."

"Of course," Rush said.

"You may come here and to the shade at the bow. Otherwise, this is a working boat."

The Captain said no more. He closed the door behind him, his feet clattering on the stairs signaling a return to the wheelhouse.

Rush tossed his rucksack on the bottom bunk, then swung to the top. He'd wait until they were underway before introducing himself.

Chapter 4

A loud put-put sound came from the bowels of the boat and a lazy haze of muddy brown smoke drifted out across the Tigris. The Captain was at the wheel, deftly guiding her into the faster flowing waters. Decades of experience made the difficult task look deceptively simple.

An improvised shelter had been erected at the bow from left-over tarps and poles. The shade offered an escape from the sun, and the gentle breeze wafting in from the boat's steady progress cooled the air enough for it to be bearable.

"Welcome to The Club," Donnie said. He lounged on a pile of cushions, plain covered book in one hand, water bottle in the other.

Beside him was Smith, who was asleep with a towel across his forehead. He'd later claim he was just "resting his eyes."

A large reclining deckchair was home to the third and final member of The Club. At first glance he had the appearance of another English Gentleman on tour in his white linen suit, cravat and wide-rimmed straw hat. A large handlebar mustache swallowed the end of his nose, and most of his mouth. Behind it lurked the features of an Iraqi in his early sixties. He appeared content to watch the river bank drift slowly past.

"So, what do you make of her?" asked Donnie, determined to make Rush feel like one of "the gang."

"She's well-maintained for her age. She'll be fine for a slow cruise to Basra." Donnie laughed.

"No, I meant HER. The dark-haired beauty amongst us."

Rush sighed. This would be one of "those" conversations for which he had little time.

"I've not met her yet."

"Quite the looker, Rush. Quite the looker. Not succumbed to my charms. Yet."

"Nor will I, Donaldson."

The woman appeared on the far side of the boat. She wore a white chador a little too long for her short stature, and her features hinted at a Kurdish heritage hidden in an accent from Baghdad. She moved with an easy grace, wide brown eyes skirting from man to man as she chose where to sit. A cushion pile by the entrance to the hold was her selection.

Rush offered a greeting in his bad Arabic. She grimaced, then returned it somewhat better than he had managed. Her tone was like a mother scolding a child.

"So you are the famous Mister John Rush who tempts our captain with alcohol," she said. There was no attempt to hide her disapproval.

"I'm afraid so," he confirmed.

"To be expected from a White Englishman," she complained. "You think you can bribe the natives with your wondrous whiskey and guns."

"That's a little harsh," he protested.

Her eyes narrowed. Now used to the gloom under the tarp, her intense probing made him feel like an exhibit at a zoo. A rare exhibit, at least in this part of the world.

"Yes," she said. "Perhaps too harsh. Indian?"

"Maternal grandmother," Rush confirmed. "My paternal grandfather was Romani."

She laughed.

"Not one of anything then," she said. "Perhaps you do understand."

Smith emerged from his slumber and stared long and hard. He made a judgment, then returned to sleep.

"Our Dina here is a bit of a campaigner," Donnie said as if apologizing for her.

"I simply dislike the way my country has become a puppet of the British Empire."

Rush knew he was being tested. He considered whether to pass or fail and decided silence was the best option.

"Steady on, old girl. Our friend Rush was here during The War. Isn't that right?"

Narrow eyes again dared him to pass her test.

"For a few weeks," Rush clarified. "Just passing through."

"And what were you passing through for?"

"Just the usual, 'stop the Nazis from causing trouble in the Middle East', things," he joked.

"Did you kill people?"

Dina regretted her question before it left her thin lips, but it was too late. The atmosphere darkened and even the elderly Iraqi lifted his chin to hear the answer.

"I try my hardest not to," Rush said.

In the silence that followed no one dared move. Dina and Rush looked at one another, each waiting for the other to react.

It was Smith who broke the stalemate.

"I need a shit," he said and scrambled to his feet.

"Yes, me too," added Donnie, flustered by the sudden turn of events.

"Perhaps not that, exactly."

Dina waited for the two men to reach the cabin block before she left. She walked on the other side of the deck to the men.

The Tigris brought a wide ribbon of life to the unforgiving Iraqi desert. Along her banks grew crops in fields irrigated with channels dug into the hard soil that followed routes set down millennia before. Mud huts, mostly flat-roofed and open-windowed, clustered in small villages. People busied themselves

with their agrarian lives, seemingly oblivious of the monument to modernity slowly winding her way toward Basra.

Rush paid the scene no more attention than it offered him. Dina's rebuke had unsettled him, unusual for someone so confident in the control held over his thoughts. He found himself wallowing in memories of those times he'd failed to avoid death. The times he had been forced to pull the trigger or plunge the knife and end a life. A precious life.

"I see all of them," the Iraqi Gentleman said.

He leaned on the edge of the hull, peering down at the wave rippling out towards the bank as he mopped his balding head with a large white cloth. Refreshed, he put his straw hat back on and tucked the cloth in his trouser pocket.

"I see each and every one. Those I killed. Those I caused to be killed. I pray for their souls and their forgiveness."

"That must be some comfort," Rush said.

"You're not a believer? Not even a Christian?"

"No."

"To each their own."

Rush caught sight of a woman on the far bank. She crouched at a small pool in the soft mud, swirling water through a wicker sieve. He wondered what she was cleaning. It was a welcome distraction.

"I take a cruise to Basra every year," said the Iraqi Gentleman, watching the woman working. "A few weeks drifting on the river is a perfect opportunity to let old ghosts come and go."

Rush sighed.

"There are too many ghosts."

"And there will be more, Mister Rush. You have the look of someone searching for something."

He patted Rush on his shoulder.

"You may call me Mohammed."

The boat's routine had a relaxed pace that Rush slipped into without difficulty. Rise with the sun, wash, pray, eat a light breakfast, get underway, exercise, read, lunch, read and nap, drop anchor at sunset, pray, eat dinner, relax and sleep. They took turns to prepare meals, though Donnie's was taken by Smith, and they ate apart from the crew. The exception was the evening meal on the deck behind the wheelhouse when the crew and passengers ate together.

Hamza, the skinny beanpole of a man who lived alongside the engine, always cooked this meal. He was in a permanent state of undress, usually wearing only a pair of shorts and sandals. His body was always filthy with engine oil and muck. However, he washed meticulously every night before prayers and preparing the meal.

The other crew member was a lad called Faisal, so young he'd barely started shaving. He had bright, wide eyes and a permanent nervousness around the passengers. Rush had tried to speak to him a few times, though he wasn't sure if the boy was too afraid to talk or mute.

Together they lived on the boat as she coasted in the currents towards Basra, pausing at night in calmer waters where the crew took watch as the passengers snored in their bunks.

Chapter 5

"My god! Look at it!"

Donnie barged past Rush as he dived into the dormitory. The contents of his two suitcases were strewn across the floor. Books, clothes and knick-knacks all discarded without ceremony.

It was the same for all of them. Their possessions were thrown across the floor and their bags discarded. Even Dina's possessions had been tossed to the winds. Rush watched while she quietly and methodically packed her suitcases. As she folded a brassier she noticed him and her cheeks flushed an embarrassed crimson. She hurriedly put it away, not so hurried that her hands instinctively placed it just so. A place for everything and everything in its place.

Smith slid quietly into the room and crouched by the heavy trunk at the end of his bunk. A small bare patch was within the piles of discarded contents pulled out and dumped without ceremony. It gave Rush a clear picture of how quickly their would-be thief had worked and hinted at what he was searching for.

Clearer was the image of Smith inspecting the trunk's insides and the barely perceptible nod he gave Donnie. The latter man seemed relieved.

"Was this you?" Donnie demanded. His attack was directed at Rush. "You were the last one on and we had none of this nonsense before you turned up."

"No," Rush replied.

"Is anything taken?" asked Mohammed. He seemed remarkably calm as he stood over his bunk, gently prodding the mess with the handle end of a long

shoe horn. Each item was turned over, inspected and then lifted into the air. He sniffed the material, then placed it on a crumpled pile.

"One of the crew then," Donnie continued. "Saw their chance for a nose when we all drifted off."

"Is anything taken?" repeated Mohammed. His inspection was complete.

The consensus was all their possessions were still inside the dormitory.

"I have seen this before," Mohammed said with the certainty of a wise head on old shoulders. "Sometimes people get a little carried away when there are foreigners around. Their curiosity gets the better of them. If nothing has been taken, I suggest we continue in the knowledge the miscreant knows they have done wrong."

"You're saying we forget it?" Smith snapped. He puffed out his chest like "hard men" do to compensate for not being threatening. "Maybe you were the one what done it?"

"Calm down, sergeant," Rush said in a firm, clear voice. It was enough to break Smith's vengeful advance on his prey. Enough to trigger a slight tensing in his muscles as if he was about to come to attention.

"Or what?" he snarled and added a sarcastic "Sir" for good measure.

"Four years in camp, wasn't it, Smith? I would imagine that was quite hard knowing your compatriots were fighting. Tell me, Smith, what did you do in those four years? Did you try to escape or just sit it out?"

It was a low blow but one well-aimed. Smith's anger was now trained on him.

"I certainly did things, sir. Camps can be brutal places at times. Especially when you're starving and the Nazis start killing people for sport."

Smith was lining up on him.

"Let's see how half-remembered training does against active service, shall we?" Rush prodded.

Smith came at him with fists flying. A right hook missed Rush's chin by a whisper and the following left hit thin air. Rush helped it along, snapping at

the thick wrist as it sailed past. Smith followed it, and a firm kick to the back of his knee put him down. A few seconds in a firm chokehold and the sergeant was lying unconscious on the floor.

Everything happened so quickly that the others had no chance to react. They stood open-mouthed as spectators to the power of calculating skill over brutish strength.

"What is this?" The Captain demanded.

"One of your crew went through our things," Donnie snapped at him.

"There had been a misunderstanding, Captain," said Mohammed, attempting to avoid further conflict. "Perhaps someone was curious."

The old boatman wasn't a fool.

"This is not acceptable," he told them. "If you wish to resolve your issues with who stole what from whom, do so on the shore. If there is more fighting I will clap you in irons and not feed you until Basra."

The Arabic threat was lost on Donnie and the unconscious Smith. The others confirmed they accepted the Captain's terms. Once that was done, he saw no reason to remain.

As the door slammed shut, Smith stirred. For a few seconds he was unsure of his surroundings and why he was on the floor. He put his hand to his head, hoping it would stop the room from spinning.

"Are you OK, sergeant?"

Rush crouched down. A brave move as it put him in striking distance.

"What the hell did you do?"

Rush stood and offered his hand. Smith looked at it, weighing up whether he should have another go. Wisely he chose to accept the offer. For now.

"Sorry about that," Rush said. "I think you needed to get that off your chest."

Smith sniffed, suddenly embarrassed he'd been read so well.

"I know what you went through was hell, and I respect you for coming out of it."

"Thank you, sir," said Smith in a more conciliatory tone.

"No more 'sir'," Rush insisted and Smith agreed.

Dina was less forgiving.

"This doesn't change the fact that someone has gone through our possessions."

"And what would you do?" Rush snapped at her. "Perhaps have The Captain put you off on the shore?"

She was shocked by his sudden switch in tone.

"No. I just mean..."

"No," Rush finished for her. "As Mohammed has said, whoever did this knows they are found out. It won't happen again."

An uneasy truce broke out. Once the mess was cleared, the men retired to The Club, where they successfully avoided talking about what happened. Dina remained in the dormitory, traumatized by the invasion. She'd feared some item of underwear was taken as a trophy, only to discover it hidden amongst the folds of her improvised curtain.

"I do not feel safe," she told Rush in a rare moment where the hard exterior fell away to reveal the vulnerable woman beneath. "That such a thing would be done to a woman? It is horrible."

"Do you want me to stay here?" he suggested. "I can sit in my bunk and read."

The hardness returned.

"No," she said firmly. "I do not need the protection of a man."

He believed it.

The truce held after the boat was tied up for the night. A shared meal of goat meat cooked in spices and tomatoes and served with fresh flatbread lightened the mood. Hamza prepared it in his engine-cave and entertained them with tales of pirates and bandits and stowaways. By the time the boat fell silent, it was as if earlier events had been forgotten.

"Do you not sleep, Mister Rush."

The half-moon was high in the sky, a little smaller than the night before. It cast a faint light across the river that held Rush's attention.

"Not always," he replied.

The Captain leaned against the railing on the small aft decking. He had two glasses that looked like treasured heirlooms cared for over many generations. Rush held them as a small amount of the Johnnie Walker whiskey was decanted in each.

"To keeping the peace," said The Captain, raising his glass.

They chinked glasses and The Captain swallowed his drink in one gulp. He gasped as the whiskey hit the back of his throat.

"May Allah forgive me," he muttered in silent prayer.

Rush took a small sip. He let it swirl around his mouth as he listened to the rhythmic clicking carried on the air.

"Crickets," The Captain told him. "Must be one on the boat."

Rush took another sip.

"You've not asked me if I did it," Rush said.

"Went through their things? I wouldn't care if you did. As long as you keep away from my crew."

"Fair enough. It wasn't me, just for the record."

The Captain looked at his empty glass. Rush took pity on him and handed his over.

"Then there is the water," he said. "It goes down too fast and Hamza has not found a leak."

"Drinking water?"

"Yes. I would not be surprised if the two Englishmen have stolen it for their drinks."

It seemed unlikely. Drinking water was kept in jerry cans in the storeroom under the dormitory. There was a lock on the door, and while it wouldn't

trouble a competent thief, he couldn't see either man taking the risk for something so trivial.

"Is it a problem?"

"If you mean because there is a thief aboard, then yes. If you are concerned about dying of thirst before our next harbor, do not be."

They settled into a comfortable silence. Even the cricket had stopped its chirping.

"For generations my family has sailed the Tigris, Mister Rush. This river is in our blood. Yet I am the last. When I am gone, there will be no more river-men to understand her ebbs and flows or read her mood in the waves. That is my fear, Mister Rush. Not who steals what from an Englishman."

"Is there no one to come after you?"

He sighed and dabbed the corner of his eye with the back of his hand.

"My wife Sara died giving birth to my son. He didn't last an hour without her."

"I am so sorry," Rush said.

"Don't be. They are with Allah and one day I will join them. One day when my mistress has no need for me."

With this thought they fell silent once more.

Chapter 6

A scream brought the men running to the cabin block. Dina was on the floor by the washroom, blood pouring from her nose. Rush crouched beside her, tilted her head back and pressed on the bridge. She winced.

"Someone was in there."

Smith reacted with typical brutishness. He pulled the door open hard, diving inside with fists clenched in the hope of a fight. Barely a second later he emerged, shaking his head.

"They shoved me as I went in," she complained. "I hit my head."

Rush looked around, hunting for details with his keen eye. Nothing appeared out of place, aside from the toiletries spilled across the floor.

"Are you sure?" Donnie said, unable to hide his doubts. "I didn't see anyone coming out."

Suddenly aware she was in a state of undress amongst men, she pushed Rush away and pulled her knees to her chest. Mohammed, who arrived a little late and out of breath, took a sheet from her bed and draped it over her. She almost looked thankful.

"I think you fell," Donnie told her, as sure of his facts as if he had been in the room when it happened. "Simply a trick of the light startled you."

"I was pushed by a man coming out," she protested.

"Yes, of course, dear," he said with a dismissive flick of his hand. Having had enough of her theatrics, he chose to limp back to The Club. Smith followed.

Mohammed was more sympathetic and helped her stand. She kept the sheet tight and backed into the washroom. Rush watched her a little too closely and she scowled at him as the door slammed shut and locked.

"Another misunderstanding?" Rush asked the retreating Mohammed. The reply was a shrugged shoulder.

Carefully Rush collected her toiletries, spread wide across the floor. A few bottles, scissors, tweezers, some Western makeup, and a bar of soap. He put them back in a small, brown leather zip bag. It left him with the impression something was missing.

Down on hands and knees he looked around again. Under his bed was a woman's razor, seemingly out of place for something that had just fallen. He picked it up, inspected it, then put it in the bag.

He tapped lightly on the door and said, "Dina, I've left your things outside the door."

She was sobbing.

A breeze blew in their favor and The Captain ordered the sail be set. Faisal climbed the mast quickly, unfurling the square sheet as the engineer hurried to tie down the ropes. It was a crude arrangement designed for propulsion rather than nuanced sailing.

The sheet partially hid Rush as he watched Mohammed from the dormitory door. The older man looked around, checking he was alone before he crouched down. A casual glance would show nothing more than tying a loose shoelace. Yet he was down for too long and his lips moved as if talking to himself.

Rush broke cover and clattered loudly down the stairs to the deck. Mohammed looked up with all the guilt of a child caught with his hand in the sweetie jar. It lasted barely a second before a jovial smile appeared beneath that bushy mustache.

"Odd business that," Rush said.

"Very. But sometimes women can be hysterical," Mohammed replied.

He struggled to stand and Rush left him crouched for a moment longer.

"Perhaps," he said. "I often find they're quite trustworthy."

The Iraqi smiled awkwardly. Rush had stepped in too close for him to stand without assistance.

"How long were you in the Police?"

The smile vanished.

"What makes you think that?"

"I know a Policeman when I see one," Rush chuckled. "You're the same the world over."

"And I know an intelligence officer," Mohammed countered.

"Touché."

"I am wondering what takes British Intelligence to Basra that needs a slow boat?"

The policeman inspected his suspect, hunting for clues in the tanned, expressionless face before him.

"Perhaps our English friends are of interest?"

"Perhaps."

"And what do you make of his Lordship and the loyal retainer?"

Rush didn't reply. He looked aimlessly across the horizon, letting his attention drift from an isolated farmhouse to a cairn to the wisp of a dust cloud on the horizon.

"Nice chat," he said and left Mohammed to ponder the encounter.

The jetty didn't reach far enough to dock alongside, so the boat was anchored as close as The Captain dared. A young man rowed a small boat alongside.

Rush watched the negotiations. The Captain shouted down from the wheelhouse and the young lad shouted back. Prices were negotiated and terms agreed. In the end the lad got a better price than he hoped, and The Captain paid less than he wanted.

Rather than tie up the crew with something so trivial, Rush volunteered to accompany The Captain with the jerry cans. The small boat was round and

difficult to control, the lad waging constant war between the direction he wanted to go in and the tendency of the craft to spin. The Captain smiled at Rush and winked knowingly.

As they waited for the lad to fill the containers from the well, Rush looked out at the horizon and located the dust cloud. It appeared to be getting closer.

"Those stories Hamza tells about the bandits, are they true?"

"Oh yes," The Captain assured him. "Embellished perhaps, but true."

"Would they be following a cargo boat bound for Basra?"

The Captain followed Rush's finger to the horizon. When he saw the dust cloud rising lazily into the sky he laughed.

"Ah yes, bandits they are! My competition. The road, Mister Rush. They are trucks on the road. A new highway that runs all the way from Baghdad to Basra. They can do the same journey as us in half the time, though not with a tenth of the cargo."

A shout signaled the last can was full. The Captain handed over the final payment and watched Rush load the three jerry cans onto the boat. It dipped alarmingly low in the water.

"Perhaps we should go back one at a time," The Captain decided.

With fresh water loaded and the boat settled into the faster flow, normality returned. The sun was still high and hot, perhaps too hot for resting in The Club. Only Donnie dared to stay outside, asleep in a chair with his stockinged feet resting on the seat of another. The others were in the dormitory where the comfort of a soft mattress compensated for the lack of a cool breeze.

The tarps covering the cargo were pulled tight against the deck with old ropes threaded through metal eyelets. It formed the rear wall of the shelter and hid Rush from the rest of the boat. There was just enough slack to force the rope off the hook holding it down. With one less hook holding it firm, opening a gap large enough to slip through was quick work.

Donnie stirred, muttered something incomprehensible and went back to sleep. A change of plan crossed Rush's mind. He picked up a small stone from the floor and skillfully tossed it into his Lordship's left shoe.

The cargo was packed so that a corridor was formed along the boat's centre line. It made loading and unloading easier when they paused at harbors to carry out the trade that was the boat's purpose in life. Whereas the deck implied the cargo was stacked a meter or so high, the hold went much deeper into the bowels of the boat, adding another meter or more to the height of the corridor. Enough for Rush to stand upright.

Light spilled in from gaps in the tarps, fluttering as boat and breeze worked on the fabric. Canned food and machine parts bound for Basra made up most of the load. All carefully stacked and tied down. Without opening up boxes he wasn't sure what else he would find. Perhaps a little contraband smuggled in here and there. Enough to pay off a port official.

Then he caught sight of a familiar mark painted in black on a plain wooden crate. There was another beneath it, identical in shape and form. The unmistakable form of a container for rifles, and two words that sent a shiver down his back.

Nevin Industries.

The same boxes he'd seen in Central America a few months before. Boris Nevin, the industrialist whose fame and wealth snowballed after the war, had counterfeited US weapons and sold them to insurgents in Central America. Rush had thwarted the plans, uncovered a plot to test chemical weapons on the indigenous people, and finally caught up with Nevin in Cuba.

Were these leftovers from the attempted coup that had found their way onto the black market? Or were they still being manufactured in one of Nevin's hidden factories? And who were the rifles intended to arm?

He was tempted to open a crate and see what was inside. It might offer answers or at least clues. It would also announce their discovery, which would scupper his mission. The mission had to come first.

Suddenly, he slammed against the cargo wall. A brutal hit to his back put him on his knees and gasping for breath. Instinct threw him to one side, and the intended killing punch landed against splintered wood. The assailant stifled a pained shout.

Rush lashed out. A crude kick caught the figure's knee. He was too far back for it to cause more than a stutter in the assailant's escape. He pulled himself up, fought past the nausea rising from his gut and pushed on.

The assailant broke out onto the deck, surprising Smith. The sergeant took a swing, his fist flying high above the man's head. Then he doubled up as he was struck in the stomach.

Lumbering onto the deck, Rush saw the man clearly for the first time. Arab, close-cut black hair, worn-out khaki fatigues, bare feet. He looked left towards the cabin block, where Smith was preparing to mount another attack. Right where Rush was lining up to take him down. Then he went straight over the side into the Tigris.

"Where is he?" shouted Smith.

They looked over the side at the wake cutting up the brown-blue sheen of the Tigris. Desperately hunting for any sign of the stowaway. A bobbing head. Someone swimming away. A body face down. There was nothing.

"Bastard!" Smith snapped.

Rush threw up.

Chapter 7

He'd passed out after emptying the contents of his stomach over the side. Smith carried him into the shade, put him on cushions and removed his shirt. Dina examined him.

"A woman can be a medic," she told him as he came around.

He winced when she pressed on his back under his ribs. He was sure she pushed a second time just to punish him.

"You were lucky," she told him. "A little lower and you might have lost a kidney."

"Thank you," he said and coughed loudly.

Donnie was still in his chair, though now it was turned to face the pile of cushions. He offered Rush a glass of something cold and clear. Hopefully it was water. Actually it was gin. He grimaced.

"My private stock," he whispered as if letting Rush in on a grand conspiracy. "Don't tell the captain. I think he likes a drink."

The Captain and Mohammed were at the entrance to The Club, engaged in a heated debate. Hands waved and heads shook as they argued. The policeman won. Likely he pulled rank or threatened The Captain with punishment over the contraband hidden in the hold.

"Our captain is concerned about how this trip is unfolding," Mohammed explained. "I must say, I share those concerns."

"What does he propose?" Donnie asked, attempting to sound disinterested.

"We will run by engine to Basra. This will shorten our journey by three or four days," Mohammed said. "From there my associates from the Police will question everyone."

"Over a stowaway?" scoffed Donnie. "Don't be so ridiculous. The fellow is gone."

"May I remind you that our female compatriot was assaulted and our items ransacked. This is a serious matter."

Rush watched closely. Dina was calm and unmoved, as if she had expected this to happen at some point. Donnie managed to keep a lid on something close to panic. Smith was the oddball. He had the look of a man making plans.

Chapter 8

"The engineer is dead!"

Rush stirred slowly from slumber. He remembered the fight with the stowaway, the argument that followed, going into the hold and finding the small den hidden inside a wooden box. It had bedding, a water bottle and a candle. Its discovery made Mohammed more determined to make landfall quickly. Donaldson hadn't complained. Why not?

Mohammed looked down on him and he remembered falling asleep outside after they had moored for the night. The cushions were more comfortable for his aching back, and he'd drifted off to the soft whisper of a breeze and the gentle chirping of a cricket.

"You must come now, please."

Once home to a steam engine and its coal hoppers, the engine room looked empty now all it had was a diesel engine and its fuel tanks. The engine was mounted inline with the propellor shaft, seemingly attached to the hull with a multitude of custom parts and constant repairs. The hoses that fed fuel into the motor were old and worn, though spotlessly clean. A workbench was against the forward bulkhead and a cot next to that.

Hamza's lifeless form lay beside the workbench in what looked like a pool of spilled oil. The weak electric light cast a pale glow that turned blood black. There was no sign of a struggle or any other cause of death.

"He fell and hit his head," The Captain said. He crouched beside his friend, patting the dead man's shoulder as if to reassure him.

"Convenient," observed Rush. "Can we run to port on the engine?"

The Captain grunted disapprovingly and glared at Rush with such anger another man would have felt ashamed.

"Yes. If we are careful."

"Do the others know?"

"Not yet," said Mohammed. "We both thought it best to talk to you."

"But you're the policeman," Rush scolded.

"And you have a talent for finding trouble."

For more than an hour the two men inspected the scene. Mohammed wrote and sketched in a small hardback notebook with a pencil, occasionally pausing to sharpen it with a pocket knife. Rush preferred to observe without pausing to make notes.

There were no signs of a struggle. No marks on the floor or bruises that appeared after death. The open toolbox yielded nothing that had been used as a weapon. Quite the opposite, it was clean and tidy and the tools cared for. It was the same on the workbench. A pile of folded rags were placed in one corner and a car battery in the other. Between them was a spotless surface. All signs pointed to the shabby, oil-covered engineer being meticulously clean and organized when it came to his work.

"See this?"

Mohammed removed his glasses and moved one lens closer to the mark Rush pointed at. He touched the end with his pencil and watched it move.

"Blood and hair?"

"It's where he hit his head."

Rush watched him try to recreate the scene. First, facing the workbench, then pretending to fall backward before meeting his demise against the edge of a cooling fin on his beloved engine.

"He fell," Mohammed concluded. "A simple accident."

"You think he just fell over and hit his head?"

"Yes. There is no foul play here."

"So an experienced sailor just fell over?"

Mohammed sighed and a mournful look crossed his large face.

"Sometimes men die," Mohammed said. "A heart attack or some other malady as yet undiscovered on the victim. The body is under much stress in the engine's heat and that of the desert."

Rush wasn't convinced. His few encounters with Hamza suggested a man who, though in his late fifties, was fit and healthy. A sudden, natural death wasn't impossible it just didn't seem likely. Not with everything else that happened around them.

"We should prepare the body," Mohammed said. "This is a task for the Muslim men on this boat."

The boat was held at anchor near the bank while the engineer's body was wrapped in strips of sheet and blanket. Those not involved waited at The Club in solemn silence, no one in the mood to talk or drink or share any of the usual frivolities. Donnie drifted off to sleep and snored softly.

"It's a bad thing," Smith finally said.

"They pray for him, that is all," Dina said, unable to hide her annoyance at being banished from prayers. A faint chanting had risen from the cabin block a minute or two before.

"Not that," Smith said. "Him being killed like that."

"You heard the policeman," Dina said. "Our brother died in an accident. He fell and hit his head."

Smith stood and paced up and down in a short, fast circuit. One hand was on his hip and the other rubbed the back of his bald head. A grey-brown forest of short stubble had formed where his hair still grew.

"I don't like it," he muttered. His agitation carried through to his voice. "Our stuff gets gone through, there's a stowaway and now this."

"And I was assaulted."

Smith didn't acknowledge her.

"Likely by our friendly stowaway," Rush said. "I suspect you surprised him while he was searching the washroom."

"Thank you," she said, relieved someone had taken her side.

"But why was he here?" Smith snapped.

"The monarchist's secret police are everywhere," Dina told him. "Our captain is not beyond accepting contraband in his hold."

"Drugs, weapons, stolen museum pieces," Rush shrugged. "All being smuggled up and down this river by boats just like this one."

Smith slowed to a crawl. He looked down at his feet as he walked, examining each step in fine detail. Deep in thought, he was unaware how closely he was being watched.

Mohammed stumbled into the scene and mopped his brow with his white cloth.

"Could everyone come to the wheel?"

Donnie was shaken awake. He pulled on his shoes, winced and instinctively tipped the trio of stones out of the left. For a moment he hesitated and might have reached down had he not realised how closely Rush watched him.

"Coming, Lord Donaldson?"

"Yes, yes, of course," he stalled.

Accepting Rush was not going to leave first, he put on the shoe, took his cane and walked steadily towards the cabin block.

His limp had changed.

There was enough room for passengers and crew to gather in the wheelhouse. The Captain and Mohammed stood together by the wheel, a focus for the loose semi-circle of passengers and Faisal. Rush was furthest from the door, quietly watching events unfold. Smith was closest and still agitated. He shuffled from foot to foot as he released some of his nervous energy. Between them was the disinterested Donaldson and Dina, who stood with her arms wrapped firmly around her waist.

"My friends," Mohammed said in a clear voice, "we must change our plans a little more given the disaster that had befallen us. I am afraid we will need to stop sooner than we anticipated."

He looked from one person to another as he spoke. Rush watched their vague reflections in the bridge window. Not a single guilty-looking person was among them. How odd.

"By our custom, Hamza must be buried quickly. He has no family but the crew on this ship, and to that end we shall stop at Al Shaqir."

Donaldson groaned. The Captain glared at him, threatening to unleash hell if he made another sound.

"The delay will be two or three days, as our Captain will have to hire a new engineer for the journey to Basra. If you wish, you may leave us and find a different way. Once the interviews have concluded, of course."

"Different way?" hissed Donnie, looking at his watch. "I have to be in Basra as we planned."

"That will not be possible."

"You ignorant fool!" snapped The Captain in passable English. "My friend lies dead and all you can think of is your own petty needs."

"All I can think of is the contract we agreed to and the hefty payment I made."

Dina looked up at him, probably to make a protest. When she saw how red his face had become, she stayed silent and turned her eyes down to her feet.

"You should be thankful I do not detain this boat and question all of you," snapped the policeman, adding to the mounting tension. "Such things can take considerable time in Iraq."

A blue vein rose on Donaldson's neck, pulsing in time to his quickening heartbeat. Frantic eyes darted from policeman to sailor, moving so quickly they became a blur. His brow furrowed and became thick with sweat.

Steel glinted as it caught the sunlight and wood clattered when it hit the ground. Donnie posed like a fencer, ready to cut down the first to disagree with him with the sword hidden in his cane.

"A sword is hardly a worthy weapon to hijack a boat with, Lord Donaldson," Mohammed cautioned.

More metal flashed. Smith had a Webley revolver aimed squarely at Dina's skull. For a brief moment she tensed as if preparing to fight for her life. It passed and she relaxed into submission.

"This better?" Smith asked.

Chapter 9

Jaw and stomach ached as Rush slowly came around. He flinched, then jerked as he found his hands tied and held above his head. More rope held his chest back against the bunk bed. Smith had finished the job with loops around thigh and ankle that forced him to kneel on the hard floor.

As he gathered his wits, he took in his surroundings. He was unconscious when he was dragged in here and had no idea of the fate of his fellow captives. It was a relief to find them all with him, albeit under the watchful gaze of the young deckhand.

The boy sat on a chair by the door with a shotgun resting in his lap. Until half an hour before it had belonged to The Captain and was tucked away under his bunk. The barrels were sawn down, and much of the stock removed to make it a more useful weapon for close-quarters fighting. Less accurate but far more deadly in the confines of a boat.

Tied against each bunk was a prisoner. The Captain was closest to the door with Mohammed beside him. Both had their hands tied to the frame above their heads. The woman was against her bunk, though her hands were tied in front of her and joined to her ankles.

"How are you?"

Aside from the aches and pains from Smith's brief but intense beating, he was in remarkably good shape. The short spell of unconsciousness had been enough to get over the worst of his recovery, and nothing felt broken. Only his knees hurt where the unusual position stretched them. That was likely to be Smith's objective.

"Seems no one is who they say they are on this boat," he rasped with a dry mouth. He chose English.

"Does that include you, Mister Rush?" the policeman asked.

"Me more than anyone," he laughed. It set off a small coughing fit that quickly passed. "You come aboard as a lonely retired gentleman enjoying a cruise. The captain here is a smuggler. Dina is ... well, let's say she's not a fan of the king."

She glared at him.

"The crates downstairs are yours, I assume?"

The glare intensified.

"I also assume you're not Iraqi, or you've lived outside the country for a while. Your accent is good, but sometimes the Russian edge comes through."

"And you? British Intelligence?"

Rush sighed and said, "Something like that."

"You are working for the Soviets?" exclaimed Mohammed in disbelief.

"Women are a powerful resource," she told him. "You will learn this in time. By then it may be too late."

"What are you doing in my country?"

When she didn't respond it fell to Rush to speak.

"Technical training," he said. "You've got anti-monarchists who are a disorganized rabble. Our friend Dina will train them so they become an effective insurgency. Give it a couple of years of terrorist attacks and a repressive response by the monarchy, and the people will beg them to mount a coup."

"We learned this from British colonizers," she spat.

"And our friends on the bridge?" asked The Captain.

"Mohammed knows this one."

"Art thieves," the policeman said. "I knew they were aboard and had several items with them."

"The Cross of Al Cruc," Rush said.

"Yes, that is one. I assumed you were after them too."

"No, she's mine," he said, gesturing at the bound woman with his head.

"Sorry, Dina."

She growled.

"I was hoping to intercept them when they made their sale," said Mohammed. "Items have been leaving Iraq and turning up in private collections - and museums in London - for some time. To stop such a ring would be a great victory for the stolen heritage of this country."

"I assume you know where it is?" Rush said.

"I couldn't find it. And before you all ask, I did not ransack the room. I had searched their luggage before they boarded."

"Bottom of the trunk," Rush said.

"We tried that."

"Did you turn it over? After the ransacking, Smith checked the trunk hadn't been moved. Everyone looks for a false bottom inside the trunk, but theirs is on the outside."

Another short coughing fit unsettled Rush. He looked at the young lad, who watched him with suspicion and concern.

"You have eyes like the gods," laughed Mohammed.

"And ears. Not crickets, Captain, but Morse. Well, a form of Morse. The Soviets used it in Leningrad for a while to confuse the Nazis. Dina was using it to communicate with her handlers. She has a small radio set concealed around her luggage. I noticed it when her razor was kicked under my bunk."

"You were in Leningrad?" Dina asked, unable to hide her surprise.

"For a few months."

"Always a few months with you, Mister Rush," Mohammed roared.

"I am a fool!" The Captain complained.

"No you're not," Rush reassured him. "What's more likely? Insects or a Soviet Spy signaling their shadow?"

"After what you did in Ukraine? It was too important not to say I had found you."

Rush shifted his weight from side to side. He became a statue for five or six seconds, and even his chest didn't move. Then his stomach spasmed. He coughed once, appearing to stir out of a state of unconsciousness with a surprised look on his face. The coughing intensified, lasting for several seconds. It ended when he coughed a globule of blood-red phlegm onto the floor and slumped down in his bonds.

His fellow prisoners watched on helplessly. Mohammed called to the deckhand. He stayed seated, watching the drama unfold with his finger perilously close to the trigger. He was reluctant to leave the safety of his chair.

"Faisal," shouted The Captain. "I am still your captain. You will see if he is harmed."

Cautiously, Faisal stepped forward. He held the shotgun in one hand and reached out with the other. A dribble of blood slipped out of Rush's mouth, swaying gently in the drafts around the dormitory.

"Is he alive?" The Captain demanded.

Faisal prodded the limp head with the end of the shotgun. When it didn't react, he bent down.

A hand flashed down, catching the top of the stock. The thumb pushed hard on the release, popping the barrels faster than Faisal could pull the trigger. The hammers snapped forward, striking the cartridges without touching the caps.

Rush threw himself forward and the shotgun went tumbling across the floor. He pulled hard on the deckhand's shirt, dragging a chin into range of a downward hook. His fist didn't land as hard as he wanted.

The boy twisted, breaking Rush's hold, but not getting far enough back to avoid a second punch hard in the chest. All Rush had were his fists and with his legs not yet free he had to keep the fight close.

Faisal took control, flipping his body around and landing on Rush's back. His thin, strong arm curled across Rush's exposed neck and he leaned back, choking the brawling prisoner.

Rush pushed against him, momentarily releasing the pressure on his neck. He dug his thumb between Faisal's thumb and forefinger, pressing hard on the pressure point that rendered the hand useless. A wild punch thrown backwards forced Faisal to withdraw right into the trap. Rush threw his weight to one side, pushed himself clear and spun around, not once releasing his grip on Faisal's hand. The hand came around with him, locking the elbow straight and putting a temple in Rush's range. A short, sharp punch knocked the boy out cold.

Barely pausing to catch his breath, Rush pulled the ropes off his body. He slid across the floor to the shotgun, loaded the two discarded cartridges and aimed at the door. There was a nervous silence as everyone waited for the clang of feet on metal stairs and the inevitable appearance of a pistol-wielding Smith.

Satisfied they weren't coming, Rush set about untying The Captain.

"I will go and take back my boat," he announced. He grabbed ropes and started tying Faisal. His knots were more secure than Donaldson's weak efforts.

"No," Rush told him. "Stay here with Mohammed. We need you to pilot the boat."

"And you will take the bridge alone?" asked Dina. "I can help you."

Rush looked at Dina and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"I think I'll manage."

Rush slipped silently in bare feet up the stairs to the wheelhouse. The windows were propped open, leaving cooling air to flow inside and their voices to drift out.

He moved closer, daring to peer inside from the edge of the door. Donaldson was at the wheel, looking the part of a skipper with his blue shirt undone to the waist and light slacks marked with hints of engine grease. Smith was by the door to the captain's cabin, wrestling with the radio set screwed down on the chart table.

"Say again, over?" said Smith.

The brute listened to the voice crackling over the radio through earphones. Not enough sound leaked out for Rush to make out what was being said, though it appeared to be directions. Smith's podgy finger traced a line down the chart until it tapped a point on the map.

"Bate Kareem, over?" Smith confirmed, committing murder with his pronunciation. "Yes, I have it. Five kilometers due east? Yes, but it isn't on my map."

Another long pause. Smith fiddled with the tuning dial, making a fine adjustment. Then he shook his head and switched the set off.

"How far?"

"Nightfall at this rate. It'll cost us five percent."

"I've got to back off," Donaldson said. "The engine doesn't sound well."

Smith picked the chart up off the table. He held it with both hands and left his revolver behind. Rush seized his chance and burst in with the shotgun aimed at both men.

"Don't do anything stupid," he said. "We need that chart without your blood on it."

Rush was far better at tying rope than Smith. Both men were bound hand and foot, then dumped in the corner of the wheelhouse. Smith struggled for a minute or so until he accepted escape was impossible. Donnie sat smiling.

"This is a pickle," he joked.

The two prisoners were brought up from below. He put all four together in the corner and tied their ankles together.

It fell to Mohammed to watch them. He took the chair from the cabin and sat on it with his back to the windows. The Webley revolver rested comfortably in his big hand and he had the look of someone waiting for a reason to fire it.

The boat was back in The Captain's care. He'd slowed the engine to a gentle burble that kept her moving faster than the currents. With his hands on the wheel and watching the riverbank pass by, he looked happier than Rush had seen him in a while.

"What happens now?" Dina asked. She looked at Rush with her eyes narrowed.

"I say we carry on as we planned," Mohammed offered. "I can arrange for more of my friends to meet us and deal with these miscreants."

"I meant me. We have unfinished business," Dina said.

"My orders are to deliver you in one piece," Rush told her. "If I remember correctly from your signals, yours are to keep me in one piece too."

He looked at the chart, following the line of the river with his finger and struggling a little to read the Arabic. When he found Bait Karim he allowed himself a yelp of joy.

"What is there?" asked Mohammed.

"An abandoned British Airfield," Dina said without thinking.

"The items these thieves have stolen must be worth a pretty penny if their sponsors are willing to fly them out," said Rush.

This was Donnie's chance to negotiate. The upper-class accent evaporated, and he spoke in a more frantic tone with an accent closer to Smith's.

"It's worth a lot," he said. "Let us go and we'll cut you a share. Big share too." Smith groaned.

"I will not betray my heritage for a few pounds!" shouted The Captain. "What say you, Mister Rush? What price for your King's Crown Jewels?"

Rush didn't hear. His head was out of the window, looking back from the starboard side. The dust cloud was much larger and he caught flashes of the two trucks causing it.

"I think your competition might be armed," he said and returned to the chart.

The Captain replaced him at the window.

"You are right."

The river meandered to port, following a gentle curve before returning to its former course a kilometer or so further on. The road ran straight and slotted in beside the river for a few hundred meters before the two parted ways. They would only meet again long after Bait Karim.

"I think this is where your bandits will ambush us."

"They'll want the cargo," The Captain said.

Rush looked ahead.

"The bank is rocky here," The Captain said, reading his mind. "The road is their only path."

He looked down at Dina and said, "Friends of yours?"

She shook her head and said, "No. They are still a day or more away. And anyway, they will meet us further down the river when the odds are better in their favor."

He looked at the dust again. Two trucks, each with ten or twelve armed men. It was likely they knew how to stop a barge on the Tigris and had the tools to do it. All the boat had was a Policeman with a revolver, The Captain who needed to pilot the boat, and Rush with a shotgun and a pocketful of shells. Hardly an army.

Yet in the cargo hold were enough carbines to arm a platoon or two.

"They'll take the woman," The Captain said. "They might take Faisal. The rest of us will have our throats slit. Or worse."

Rush looked at Dina and for a moment there was fear in her eyes.

"A truce until it's time for your people to try and take me?" he asked her.

"The enemy of my enemy is my ally," she said. "Yes, a truce."

He untied her. She stood and stretched, rubbing her sore wrists.

"I'm a pretty good shot too," said Smith.

"No," said Mohammed. "I would not trust these criminals as far as they could be thrown."

Rush had no time to argue. Better three men down than waste time debating the finer points of justice.

"They'll come at us from starboard," Rush said. "We need to protect The Captain and this side of the ship."

"Allah will do that if he so wishes."

"I'd rather put my faith in something practical."

Rush left Mohammed and Dina to prepare the wheelhouse and slipped into the cargo hold. He hunted down the crates from Nevin Industries and broke into one. It held a dozen American M1 Carbines, empty magazine clips and boxes of ammunition.

They were counterfeits though not the ones he'd see in Central America. These had the same metalwork but used a different wood for the furniture. Each one smelled of the machine shop where they'd been made. Hopefully they were ready to use.

"Yours, I presume?"

Dina picked one of the weapons out of the box and cleared it. She held it in her hands as she judged its weight and balance, finally offering a faint flicker of approval.

"No, I thought they were yours," she said. "It wouldn't do for an anti-monarchy rebellion to use American weapons."

"Better to use one stolen from the locals, right?"

She took a clip, pressed bullets into it and loaded the weapon. With practiced skill, she raised it to her shoulder, took careful aim at the far end of the hold and gently squeezed the trigger. It fired.

"It needs to be sighted, but it is acceptable."

He sized her up, trying to find a way through the controlled exterior she presented. The coldness was gone and she'd turned on what Donnie might have called her "feminine charms". Widening the eyes, letting the headscarf fall back a little to reveal her dark brown hair, and a slight pouting of the lips.

"What happens to us afterward?" she asked softly.

"How about we get through the next ten minutes?" he suggested with a firm, focused voice.

She deflated and didn't notice him take the loaded rifle from her until it was too late.

"Take four of them and the bullets and mags," he told her.

The Club became a sniper's nest. Rush pushed cushions and boxes and whatever else he could find to the starboard side, favoring speed over careful arrangement. The Tigris had curved back towards the road and the dust cloud was so close he could taste it. Occasional breaks in the high banks and rocky outcrops offered tantalizing glimpses of the two trucks rapidly closing. His best guess was they were old Bedfords left behind after the war. They had the frames for canvas covers over the beds, though the material had been rolled forward so as not to obstruct the aim of those on the back.

He settled into his first position and eased the M1 into his shoulder. His index finger rested on the wood over the trigger and he lined up the sights on where he thought the first truck would appear. He'd adjusted it as best he could.

A gentle curve to port and the Tigris cleared the hill it had meandered around. The road came into view, barely a meter higher than the river, and placing trucks and boat on an almost equal footing.

Rush ducked.

The deep thud-thud from a pair of .50 cal machine guns echoed around the river banks. Shells tore into The Club and tarps over the cargo, sending

splintered wood and burning shrapnel far and wide. Hell lasted for barely two seconds, but the message was clear.

Heave-to.

A volley of rifle fire from a dozen guns followed. It was wild and inaccurate, which gave Rush time to recover his position. He took aim and fired.

Where it landed was anyone's guess. He corrected the rear sight, using the recoil as a rough guide. Another correction and his third shot landed on its target.

The lead truck swerved as the front tire exploded. Somehow the driver kept it on the road.

Gunfire erupted from the wheelhouse as Dina and Mohammed joined the fight. His shots were wild and unorganized, punctuated with a markswoman's rifle's cold and calculated shooting.

It drew the machine guns.

Shells slammed into the cabin block. The wheelhouse fell silent as its occupants hid behind mattresses pushed against the starboard side. What good it would do them only time would tell.

Rush emptied the rest of his clip at the second truck's machine gun. It was mounted on a makeshift tripod towards the middle of the flatbed, one man firing it, another feeding ammunition from a belt. They fired short bursts, conserving shells and protecting the barrel from overheating.

It felt wrong. Too disciplined for a bandit attack.

He put two bullets in the back tire of the lead truck. Finally it gave up the chase, coming to a jolting halt as it hit something hard. A couple of men were thrown onto the road.

Shells came his way. They should have strafed The Club and turned it to rags. He was ready for it and pressed his body as flat as he could against the hull.

They didn't.

Shots went wide, hitting the cargo hold.

Time to test a theory.

He threw a shredded tarp to one side and stood, pulled the rifle hard against his shoulder and took aim. Bullets flew through the air around him, one whistling so close he felt its breeze. He ignored them, holding focus on his target until he was sure he could get the shot.

The machine gun fell silent as the gunner fell back, clutching his wounded shoulder.

Still the shooting missed him.

Then came the grenade.

It landed on the tarps with a thud and almost bounced back into the river. Caught on the edge of the hull, it rolled away before exploding. Rush already had his head down.

A second explosion hit the cabin block under the wheelhouse. The rifles fell silent and he feared the worst. His spirits lifted when Dina's methodical shooting resumed.

Spinning onto his knee, he caught sight of the man poised with a grenade in the back of the truck. He fired twice.

Panic gripped the vehicle. Men threw themselves off it, hitting the road hard and staying down. Then it exploded, sending flame and rock and bits of truck high into the sky. Whatever ammunition was left aboard was engulfed by flame and began spitting bullets in every direction. No one dared look up.

Except for one man. Dressed in khaki and brandishing a colt pistol, he ran to the shoreline, took aim at Rush and smiled. Then he ducked as the truck exploded for a second time.

While Rush had escaped injury, the same couldn't be said of his companions. The wheelhouse took hits from the pair of fifties, which tore holes in the wooden walls and passed straight through the mattresses pushed against the wood. Shattered glass lay spread across the floor, mixing with blood and sweat and splinters.

The Captain clung to what was left of his wheel with an almost maniacal expression. He didn't dare take his eyes off the Tigris for fear of what was behind him. Yet his only wound was a slight graze over his left eye.

Mohammed wasn't so lucky. He slumped against the wall, left leg soaked with blood and a tourniquet improvised from his tie. Dina knelt beside him, stitching the deep gash as best she could with needle and thread. Her shirt was torn across the shoulders with hints of burnt flesh visible beneath and the smell of singed hair. There was blood on her right arm from a long, shallow cut.

"What happened?" Rush asked.

"Grenade," Dina said.

Faisal, or what was left of him, was lying face down on the floor, covered with a blood-soaked sheet. His last act of redemption was to throw himself on the bomb as it clattered around inside.

"He was a good lad," Donaldson said. His left leg was also soaked red, though the wound was shallow and it only needed the constant pressure from a handkerchief to stop it bleeding. "I guess I'll have a real limp now."

That left Smith. Propped up against the wall, head sunk into his chest, seemingly unharmed. His hands were still tied, which was some small comfort.

"Will we make it?" Mohammed asked. His voice was weak and broken.

"She does not sound well," The Captain said.

"We're not taking on water," Rush told them. "There were a few fires in the hold, that was all."

"We should check the engine," said The Captain.

"Will they try again?" asked Donnie. "I'm not sure I can take another pasting like that."

"They're down a truck and the other one is damaged," Rush said. He looked at what was left of the chart. The wrong part had survived.

"Radio for help," Mohammed suggested. He was close to passing out. "The police can meet us."

"You need a radio for that," Donnie laughed. He was in shock.

"We might have a shortwave Morse transmitter," Rush said, looking straight at Dina.

"I can get it," she conceded. "If it survived."

"No!"

Smith was on his feet, ropes lying around him. His left hand was bloodied, wrapped in a rag and clutching the shard of glass he'd used to cut his ropes. In his right was the Webley, moving between targets with the mania of a confused mind in shock.

"Keep going to Bait Kasim," he ordered.

"There's no charts," chuckled Donnie.

"In here, mate," Smith said, tapping the side of his head. "Photographic memory."

"Useful skill in the camp," Rush observed.

It drew the pistol in his direction. That was where it stayed.

"Made me the wonderful human being I am today."

"Whose idea was it to be the valet? Yours?"

"Yeah," Smith said. "See, I got the brains, but I draw too much attention. He needed money and he's good with people."

"Good one with the extra stone," Donnie said. "Guess you spotted the old actor's trick."

Rush moved back, never taking his eyes off Smith's. The rifles were in the far corner, not that they would be much use in a confined space. The shotgun was nowhere to be seen. Behind him was the hole where the port door had been. It was just hinges and memories now.

"None of it matters," said Smith. "Girl and the old man's got potential as hostages. We need the skipper to steer. Which just leaves us with British Intelligence. Now there's a contradiction in terms, sir."

The snark in that last word irked more than the bad joke. Not that Rush let it distract from his intense focus on the revolver. Smith raised it and straightened his arm as he took aim. It was too far away to snatch and there was the glass knife.

"I guess so," he said coldly. "You'd better get it done then, sergeant."

A shot rang out and Rush stumbled backward. He hit the guardrail at the top of the stairs and it shook as rusted bolts gave way. Smith lined up for a second go, but his victim was already over the side and plummeting down into the Tigris.

Dina pushed Smith out of the way. She scanned the river, looking for a sign Rush was still alive. Then hoping for one he was dead.

She turned and fixed Smith with a glare that crushed him into submission.

"If you want to survive we will talk," she said.

Chapter 10

A lifeless figure drifted towards the shore. Waves, the last remnants of the boat's wake, pushed it onto the bank. The soft mud held on and stopped it from drifting further.

Cool water lapped against its legs, bringing it back from the brink of death. It stirred. Took form.

Foggy memories appeared of a pistol fired. A head rolled to the left a fraction in time before. It was almost enough to dodge the bullet. Almost. A painful burn cut the side of its skull, making what came next confused. Did he push himself further from the boat's edge, or was that momentum? Did he swim underneath the hull to make good his escape?

"John Rush, I presume?"

That was his name. He remembered now. The boat, the gunfight, a woman called Dina. Everything flooded back in at once and he groaned as his head screamed for it to stop.

Looking down at him was a man dressed in khaki with gold braid on his shoulders and a friendly smile.

It was the oddest hallucination Rush had experienced.

Seventeen men sat in a circle around the prisoner. Rage simmered beneath the surface, barely held in check by the orders of the man with the gold braid. Rush had listened to Farak negotiate a peace, reducing threats of murder to first hearing his story and then deciding whether to abandon him to the desert.

Rush set out his experience from the night he arrived to when they found him. He chose English, safer in case he stumbled or caused offense, but slipped in Arabic words and phrases as a sign he might understand their complaints. When he paused to let Farak catch up with his translation, he sipped on stale water and chewed on dry flatbread. And got the measure of his captors.

That they were soldiers and not bandits was obvious. Their uniforms were rough khaki shirts and trousers with deep pockets on either thigh. Most wore British webbing, and each carried a .303 bolt action rifle. Their chins were shaved, though peppered with a few days of stubble, and several wore bushy mustaches of various styles.

As the officer, Farak had his gold braid, which he wore with a hint of pride. He'd come by a Colt automatic pistol with a few scratches on the grip that he wore in a holster on his hip. He had the manner of someone one part professional soldier, the other skilled diplomat.

"I do not think they believe you," Farak whispered.

The men had split up into small groups, huddled around campfires that lit the rough landscape. The sun was down, and there was not much moon left.

"Nothing I can do about that," Rush shrugged.

Farak leaned towards the fire that had been the centerpiece of the gathering. He spooned out a small plate of stew and handed it to his prisoner. Rush was glad of the spiced meat and vegetables.

"I am their officer and their leader," Farak explained, "but the desert is wide and lonely. The sort of place where the hierarchy of command can soon be forgotten."

"How many?"

"Three," said Farak. "All lost when the truck exploded. It was some shot to bring down a man with a grenade primed to throw."

"I am sorry."

"You also cost me a truck," he added, waving at the remaining Bedford MV. The canvas was pulled back over it, though the barrel of a .50 Browning stuck out midway down the bed.

"Why were you looking for me?" Rush asked.

"Orders," said Farak. "Always orders. Your man Abdullah talks to a man who talks to more men I never meet. Then they say, 'Farak, go find the Englishman and do not hurt him.'"

"That's not all of it though, is it?" Rush pushed.

"No," Farak conceded. "I was already following the boat. Or rather, I was following the items the English aristocrat and his butler stole from our museums in Baghdad."

Rush soaked his bread in the stew. It made both come to life when he ate them.

"They're not aristocrats," Rush told him.

The Iraqi chuckled.

"Does that make it sound strange to send out the army to bring back art?"

"I think it says how important it is to Iraq."

"Says the Englishman."

"Is Mohammed your man?"

The desert echoed to Farak's laughter. It drew the soldier's attention.

"Elderly gentleman in a white suit? No, he was a policeman some ten or eleven years before. Then he became something in the national museum until the thefts started and he was 'retired'. Now he coasts up and down looking for smugglers and pretending to still be a policeman. Sometimes he is useful. Sometimes he is not. It is hard to tell which he is today."

"Well, your items are on the boat. As I think Mohammed found out from that man."

Rush pointed at a short, slim soldier whose appearance he would always remember. The man recoiled in surprise and then smiled and touched his forehead.

"You have a good eye. Mosul said you nearly stopped his escape."

"Mohammed was working with you?"

"Not such much a formal arrangement. More a casual exchange of information."

Rush sipped the last of his water. Farak topped his mug up with more.

"It must have been hard not shooting to kill," Rush said.

"My orders were clear. I was not to harm you. The others? Shall we say they were of less importance."

"And now?"

Farak's sergeant walked towards them, the campfire casting an ominous glow across his haggard face.

"Now we find out what is to become of you."

Farak's map called it the "Baghdad - Basra Highway". Rush's backside thought a better name was a dirt track. The surface was nothing more than compacted earth, rutted in some places, lost to the desert in others. Thankfully, the Bedford's suspension soaked up the worst the broken road could offer.

He sat in the cab on the left side, with Farak in the middle and the driver on the right. A pair of rusted handcuffs held his wrists, another pair wrapped around his ankles. Between them was a heavy chain locked to a ring on the floor with an old brass padlock. It was to make the soldiers feel safe, Farak had explained. As long as Rush was alive and hunting his quarry he didn't care. That and he'd freed himself less than a minute after they set off.

One of the soldiers reached through to the cabin and tapped Farak's shoulder. There was a brief exchange, hidden by the roar of the engine and air rushing over the windscreen.

"My radio operator says there is no airfield at Bait Karim. British or otherwise."

"I'm not surprised."

Another tap on the shoulder brought more news.

"It appears your boat has slowed. We may be able to catch them."

The Captain was right about his boat. The engine had been unwell and with no Hamza to nurse it back to health they were at the mercy of the currents and winds.

Farak pulled his map out of the thigh pocket on his fatigues and hunted over it. He found Bait Karim and followed a line with his finger to the Tigris. Dust swirled around inside the cabin, making his task more difficult.

"Al Sariq would be a sensible place to leave the boat," he decided. "It is close and has a small dock. We should catch them there, perhaps around early afternoon tomorrow."

Rush agreed and looked in the wing mirror again. He'd been tracking a dust cloud behind them for the past hour. It was following the road and growing larger.

"Yes, I think three vehicles are in convoy," Farak told him. "My men have seen it too."

"Are they after us or trying to get to the boat?"

Farak shrugged.

"They may just be merchants traveling together to fend off bandits."

"You think so?"

"No," Farak laughed. "By the way, do not show the others you have slipped the chains. Believing you are bound is reassuring for them, Mister Rush."

He decided he liked Farak.

Driving at night was dangerous in the desert. A rock hidden in shadows or a confused bend had finished the lives of many a truck driver. Even an experienced army man might make a mistake if he is tired.

Besides, they were low on fuel and water.

Fuel dumps and water stops were spread across the landscape for the long-range army patrols. They were restocked every few months and this one had been visited less than a fortnight before. Or so Farak had been told. Sometimes the reports were not entirely accurate.

The men dispersed almost before the truck had come to a stop. Two pairs set off to patrol a perimeter, another set about preparing meals, and the rest unearthed the fuel barrels and water pumps hidden in the sands.

"We should stop for the night," Farak told him. "The men are tired."

"Do you want me to take a watch?"

"I would trust you, but my men? And do you trust them?"

That wasn't an easy question to answer. The majority accepted his story and the explanation, though they were far from happy. A couple, notably the sergeant, were still hostile.

"Get some rest," he said. "We shall leave before sunrise."

Rush sat alone, resting against the front wheel with his eyes closed. His belly was full, and the lightheadedness that came with modest dehydration had passed. The worst of his aches and pains had faded too. With a soft desert breeze blowing around him and the cloudless sky allowing the heat to radiate away into space, he felt relaxed and almost peaceful.

Hard as he tried not to, sleep came to him.

Chapter 11

"They come!"

How long? A few minutes at most judging by the position of the men. They were almost exactly where he'd left them when he nodded off.

Remembering to hold on to his chains, he got to his feet and shuffled towards the small hill at the back of their camp. Farak was up on it, scanning the horizon with binoculars. Not that he needed them. Three sets of headlights lit the rough road they had bounced down less than two hours before.

"They know this is here," Rush said. "Are they yours?"

"No," said Farak. "I think those are Soviet trucks."

The officer sprang to life. He barked orders and directed his men, clearing every sign the camp had existed in barely a minute. Even the truck's tracks were dusted as the driver guided it into a dried-out wadi half a kilometer away. The soldiers dispersed around it, weapons at the ready.

Rush and Farak watched from higher ground as the three trucks arrived. They pulled up in a defensive triangle around the fuel dump, and men climbed out and stretched aching limbs. Their clothes were similar without being a uniform and each had a pistol at their hip. Several had M1 carbines slung on their shoulders. The Iraqis had moved swiftly and with discipline, but these were more casual. They bordered on disorganized.

"What are they saying?" whispered Farak.

A light breeze carried the voices across the open ground. Rush listened carefully, straining to make out words and sentences from the fractured

sounds. He heard Russian, though the various accents and dialects suggested it was a lingua franca.

"Mercenaries?" asked Farak. "Perhaps for the anti-monarchists?"

"They're getting fuel and water, then moving on."

"They will be ahead of us!"

"Easily. They were catching up anyway."

A quick count found fifteen men. A fair fight, if Farak wanted one.

Mosul the stowaway was summoned.

It was impossible to see where Mosul was, only where he had been. That was marked by a damp patch under a truck, or a tire slowly running flat. The men were too tired and busy talking, eating and drinking to notice.

As the saboteur worked, Farak placed his men. A plan was already in place, and the men fanned out as it dictated. Each moved to their assigned position with steely determination and steadfast professionalism. These were trained fighting men, and their officer was rightly proud of them.

"Protect the truck," was his last order before they parted ways. "Without it we die in the desert."

Rush was given a rifle. An older, weary-looking man with no teeth and the glint of someone eager for action was assigned as his partner. They took the vanguard, working their way forward silently until they were at the hill they'd just abandoned. It was from here that he could see Mosul's handiwork.

A shout rang out from the far corner of the camp. Two of the mercenaries dragged an Iraqi between them, the man kicking and struggling as he was led into the centre of their improvised camp. Two more went over while others looked on, enjoying the distraction. Rush heard fragments.

"Where? ... Check the trucks ... What do you mean? ... Where are you from?"

The toothless soldier swung his rifle around. He held off when Rush put his hand on the bolt, blocking the sights. A gesture to wait until the truck's engine started was grudgingly acknowledged.

It was a long shot. Two hundred meters with a rifle he didn't know and a soft breeze blowing across the compound. Too far and too risky to pick off the men crowded around Mosul. Two held him on his knees while a third punched his stomach and a fourth demanded answers to questions in muffled Arabic.

There was a better target and Toothless agreed with a wide canyon of a smile.

The Bedford's engine burst into life. As its deep growl boomed across the desert the mercenaries reacted. There was confusion for a moment as the wadi spread the sound everywhere but where it came from.

A shot rang out from Toothless's rifle. It went straight through an oil drum, spilling petrol over the sandy floor. Rush fired twice in quick succession, intended to keep heads down rather than kill or maim. It was enough time for the fuel to spread, and Toothless to load a single round he'd kept in his top pocket. He took careful aim and fired. A white streak flashed across the desert and struck another barrel.

As the drums exploded, men scattered left and right. Some were caught by falling fuel and screamed as they burned. One drum bounced off the bonnet of a truck, covering it in petrol that immediately caught alight.

Rush watched the small group closely. They fanned out and now he had a measure of his rifle. He aimed and fired.

The man questioning Mosul fell, clutching his leg and joining in the screams. His compatriots released the Iraqi and swung their guns around. One aimed at the fleeing man and was brought down with a hastily taken shot to the shoulder. The other two wisely stayed out of sight.

"Now they shoot at us!" laughed Toothless.

Wild gunfire vanished into the desert. The mercenaries had recovered enough to shoot but had no idea what to shoot at.

"We go," said Toothless.

"I'll wait."

He was fixed on Mosul, following the man's fast, curving run. It was clever, making it harder for the mercenaries to get a clean shot. Anyone who tried heard a bark from Rush's rifle.

"They've found us," Toothless warned.

They must have seen the flashes from Rush's gun. Bullets smashed into the dirt around them, though not near enough to trouble him.

Mosul was clear, having finally sprinted behind the hill. He looked up at Rush, tapped his forehead again, and vanished into the dark.

The mercenaries advanced in pairs, one laying down covering fire while the other ran forward. Getting closer meant their aim was more accurate.

Rush tapped Toothless on the shoulder and sent him on his way. He put down a man getting too close for comfort, then slipped back. That was when the second pair of Iraqis opened fire.

They were further back and off to the left, away from the wadi and the Bedford. The mercenaries were drawn to the new flashes of light like moths to a flame.

Rush reached the truck in time to see the third pair start. They were off to the right, pulling the mercenaries back across the way they'd come.

A man appeared at the edge of the wadi a hundred meters away. Toothless raised his rifle and took aim, holding it when Rush gestured for silence. The truck was still in the channel, bouncing around as the driver fought to get out.

Suddenly the tires found flat land and the vehicle lurched forward. Its engine revved loudly and the mercenary turned around. He almost had his weapon raised when Toothless dropped him.

More mercenaries found the wadi and the truck struggling to get out. They understood its importance, ignored the attacks from left and right, and focused on its destruction.

Rush and Toothless held them off as best they could. The attackers found their rhythm and their carbines had a faster rate of fire than the Iraqi's bolt action rifles. It wouldn't be long before they got the upper hand.

"We go!" shouted Farak.

The two men backed towards the truck, shoulder to shoulder as they picked targets and covered the last pair running in from the desert. Once they were aboard, Rush and Toothless climbed up and the engine revved hard. The truck pulled away into the moonless night, accelerating across the flat plain. The headlights came on and in the reflected light he saw his new comrade looking at him with wide excited eyes and the dark canyon of a toothless smile.

For thirty minutes they charged across the dirt plains at full pelt. The headlights lit the way, though the driver seemed to instinctively know where to go. He dodged unseen rocks and crevices, putting as much distance between them and the burning fuel dump as he dared.

The truck slowed. As far as Rush could tell they'd joined a road, or what passed for one. There were ruts for tires to run along and raised land between them. They kept to one side and rode the rough lands beside it.

He climbed forward into the cab. Farak moved to the centre seat, face alight with the excitement of lingering adrenalin and a job well done.

"We took out two of their trucks and ruined the third," he shouted. "Not bad for a bunch of Arabs, no?"

"Never doubted you," Rush told him.

"West Point for three months," Farak said, tapping his chest proudly. "And six at your Sandhurst."

"Is that where you learned to deploy like that?"

"It is where I learned the workings of the M1 Carbine," he said. "I am asking why mercenaries would have American rifles, speak Russian, and drive Soviet trucks."

A hand pushed through to the cabin, offering a water bottle. Farak drank some and offered it to Rush. The water was cool and fresh, pumped by hand from the underground well they had just destroyed.

"There were weapons like that on the boat. Counterfeit ones."

This troubled Farak.

"We know firsthand how effective they are," he said. "High rates of fire, accurate even in the hands of a woman."

"Don't underestimate women," Rush cautioned. "You'll be blindsided by half the population."

Farak fell silent as he pondered the warning.

"You admire her? This trainer of yours who shoots so well."

"Respect is a better word."

"This is hard for us," he said. "We see women differently to Europeans. They have a place and we expect them to be in that place. To find them in the world of men with the skills and appetites of men is ... challenging."

"Try not to think, 'Here is a woman with a gun trying to kill me,'" Rush coached. "Just focus on a person with a gun."

Farak thought for a moment, then threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Yes, yes, good advice. And I for one know what this 'person with a gun' is capable of."

They were silent again. Rush looked up at the Milky Way arching across the sky. Without lights or a moon to dull its majesty it looked quite beautiful.

"Our driver will need to rest soon," Farak said, prompted by the man's yawn. "We will carry on until we reach the highway, then camp for what is left of the night. You should sleep."

"I'm fine," Rush assured him.

"No, my friend, you will need it. You will have first watch."

"You trust me?"

Rush handed the water bottle back. Mosul took it from him, grinning from ear to ear. He touched his forehead and Rush reciprocated.

"I think they do."

Farak shook him awake. At first he thought he was dreaming as the desert had gone. In place of the rugged landscape were lush green fields of wheat and corn.

"You snore," Farak laughed.

To the left was the muddy-blue band of the Tigris and ahead a small village of a dozen mud huts clustered along a rough road worn into the dusty ground. Ten or twenty meters further on was a wooden jetty, a trio of small boats tied up alongside. Then there was the boat. Rammed into the soft, muddy bank.

She wore her scars well. There wasn't a surface that hadn't been punctured with a bullet, burnt by fire, or blown into splinters with a grenade. Thick black smoke billowed out from the rear of the cabin block, though the fire hadn't caught the wooden structure yet. The tarps over the hold were gone, pulled aside in a frantic search for the cargo inside. Rush knew what was missing.

"Where is everyone?"

The driver and radio operator remained with the truck while everyone else made their way down to the village. They walked in two lines on either side of the road, weapons ready, enough distance between each man that an enemy couldn't catch them all in one blast.

Farak called them to a halt just short of the first house, and they each crouched down and brought rifles to their shoulders.

Gestures sent pairs of men into the streets, one advancing while the other covered them, then swapping roles. The soldiers were well-trained and moved with a swift, professional purpose.

Rush found himself with Toothless again. They were first to the largest hut in the middle of the village. Every other building was empty, abandoned as though the occupant had simply upped and left in the middle of whatever they were doing. Pots bubbled on fires, clothes hung on poles or soaked in bowls. A child's toy sat on a threshold waiting to be played with.

It was Toothless who found them. Five men and four women huddled together in the centre of the meeting space. They folded up on one another, slumped with no purpose or design. Under them all was a child.

Rush fought back his nausea and eased past his stunned comrade. He dared to crouch down and touch the child's neck. It was cold and still.

"Allah have mercy on their souls!" cried Farak. He stumbled to his knees and threw his hands forward, offering a prayer.

Standing back, Rush focused on the scene. They'd been rounded up and brought here, then gunned down as they looked at their captors. There were marks on the far wall, some where a bullet had missed, others that had passed through a human body. He heard the screams and shouts. Felt the terror.

"It happened a couple of hours ago at most," he determined. The blood was still wet enough to glisten where it caught the light.

"Why?"

By his foot he found a spent casing. It was alone and struck him as unusual. Surely a massacre like this would have left many more lying around?

".30 carbine casing with an American maker's mark."

Farak lifted himself to his knees. He took the casing from Rush and turned it over in his fingers, examining it as a welcome distraction from the horror before him.

"Captain!" shouted someone from further in the village. "We found people. Dead people."

It was the same scene, though with four victims. They were older, likely too old to move fast enough for their killers.

"This is more than one person," Farak said. "Your friend had help."

Another shout, this time from the bridge of the boat. Farak set off at a quick jog, relieved to escape the massacre. Rush walked slower, looking around at the details the officer ignored. There were scuff marks on the ground from pairs of boots, usually with one pair in front of the other as they walked.

Occasionally they stopped side-by-side, often with the ground disturbed in a way that hinted at someone bending over to pick up spent cartridges. Sometimes they missed one. Or left it on purpose.

He identified three pairs of boots with similar military style treads. One pair was small enough to be Dina's. It looked as though the two larger pairs (men, most likely) had walked through and around the village and then met Dina at the jetty. A different set came in further along the river, flat like a farmer's sandals. With them were the hoof marks of six or seven donkeys.

There was a fight. The farmer was knocked down. He got up and ran to the riverbank. His body was face down in the mud with a trio of bullet wounds seeping from his back.

Another fight. The small boots pivoted around and then there was blood and dust thrown up by a heavy man hitting the ground.

"Two other men from the same organization with donkeys," Rush thought aloud. "I don't think she liked what they did."

"I do not think she was in a position to complain," Farak shouted down from the wheelhouse.

The scene was brutal. Rush knew these people, and he felt their pain as he traced events around the small wooden shack.

Mohammed had gone peacefully. He'd bled out from his wound and was grey and cold and slumped against the wall. The Captain had labored on but surely knew his fate once the boat was anchored. At some point he tried his luck and a small knife, the sort a river-man might keep to hand, was stuck out of the floor behind him. There was blood on the edge.

It belonged to Donaldson, the fake Lord who died a lonely, painful death on The Captain's bunk. A wildly opportunistic swing slit his throat and he retreated to the bed, desperate to save his life. No one had come to his aid.

Smith lunged at The Captain. Dina stopped him, her bare hands twisting spine and skull to an unnatural angle. He'd fallen on Donnie and the two thieves had died in one another's arms. More or less.

And finally back to The Captain. His bid for freedom sealed his fate. He tried one last time to save himself, powering the boat as hard into the bank as its weak engine could manage. Dina blew the back of his head out with the shotgun.

"Poor man," said Farak, crouching by Mohammed's lifeless corpse. There was genuine fondness in his voice. "I suppose my men are to blame for this?"

Rush ignored him and looked down at the hold. With the crew dead and the boat slammed into the bank, Dina took advantage of the unexpected cargo. He was sure she didn't know what was in the hold, which begged the question who was it meant for? Or was this how the voyage of the slow boat to Basra was always destined to end?

The cargo had been pulled apart to get at the crates. The hole they left suggested eight in total. With a dozen rifles in each, she had enough to equip a small army. Or at least the start of an insurgency.

"Secret Police," he shouted and slammed his hand against the wall. "What's the feared instrument of any authoritarian regime?"

It took Farak barely a second to put the pieces together.

"A secret police carrying weapons gifted by the King's new ally," he said. "The rebels carry out their attacks with surgical precision, but it is the King's men who massacre villages. Here is the evidence, they say. Cartridges and bullets from American made guns."

"It's brilliant," Rush said, rubbing his head. "It's why she didn't know about the M1s. They weren't going to the same place she was. She's training the rebels, not the 'police'."

"And the Cross of Al Cruc? What role has that in this subterfuge?"

"None," Rush told him. "These three idiots just blundered into it and screwed everything up. Without them, Dina would have been dropped off here without any drama and the weapons would be on their way to Basra. Only they turned up, I showed up and you came in guns blazing. Take the

guns was all she could do. I'm guessing her companions were trigger-happy. It looks like they did it before the boat beached."

"So the Cross is here?"

He thought of the trunk and its secret bottom. Surely it would have survived all but a direct hit from the .50?

"It's worth money and it has a buyer. She's got it," he decided.

He looked down again. Two soldiers were going through the cargo, aimlessly searching for anything interesting. Dina's men had left a mess when they cleared it out. And something else.

"Get out," he shouted in bad Arabic.

The man holding up the tin of fruit realised his mistake too late. An explosion engulfed him in flame and ripped the bottom of the boat out. A fireball limped lazily into the sky, marking the end of her voyage down the Tigris.

It would have been the end of Rush too if he'd not looked down and seen the flames running across the deck towards the cabin block. He grabbed Farak by the arm and threw him through a shattered wall. With the same momentum he followed, hitting the water hard and for a moment lost his bearings. He kicked to the surface, rising beside a coughing and spluttering Farak. Rush took a deep breath, then pulled them both down just as the second explosion tore the rear of the boat apart.

Chapter 12

"There is no airfield on this map," Farak complained.

That didn't stop it being there.

The airstrip was over a kilometer in length and twenty or so wide. It stood out as a clear path of hard rock and dirt amongst the stones and low plants of the scrubland. It settled on an almost perfect east-west alignment, the far end pushed out into the desert, the eastern side ending in a bowl of high cliffs and steep hills, formed as if an almighty explosion had torn a hole in the Iraqi landscape.

Just outside the bowl, on the southern edge of the strip, was a raised bank with firing positions dug into the dirt thirty meters away. Behind it was a tent city of over a dozen off-white canvas homes, each large enough for eight men to live comfortably with their equipment. A larger tent with a rusted metal chimney was furthest from the airstrip, serving as a mess. The latrines were hidden in a small recess.

Southeast, at the end of the strip, where it widened into an apron, was a tower of thick wooden poles covered with four flat surfaces of a pitched roof. A radio mast hinted at its dual purpose as a lookout and control tower.

North of the strip was a dirtier pair of tents that served as stables for the donkeys used instead of trucks. Beside them were three prefabricated wooden huts painted to blend in with the brown soil. One had windows that implied its use as a training room. The others were windowless storerooms.

Towards the end of the bowl were two squares formed by piled-up dirt on three sides and covered with camouflage netting. The one nearest the huts was empty, though tracks suggested an aircraft had been stored there at

some point. The furthest was half-full of oil drums and a bowser truck was parked in the open.

"I think we know why our Russian-speaking friends were at the fuel dumps," said Farak. "They are nothing but common thieves."

Rush scouted around the camp, counting heads. He saw ten in total, a rag-tag bunch in loose shirts and baggy trousers, struggling to look like they wore a uniform. Most were in pairs, nestled down in semi-circular guard posts with loose tarp covers to protect them from the sun when it was high in the sky. One pair walked side-by-side around the huts, bolt-action rifles in hand and with the disinterested look of men on guard duty for too long.

No doubt there would be more in the tents.

"Interesting," said Rush and pointed at the guards.

Farak shielded his eyes from the sun and peered down where Rush was pointing.

"They don't have carbines."

"Yet," Rush said.

Coming down a trail behind the stable were seven donkeys. They came in pairs, the one in front with a rider, leading one with a pair of crates strapped to its back. The final rider had an extra beast to carry the last of the eight crates. They'd even salvaged the box Rush had ripped apart before the gunfight.

"It seems the straight road by donkey is still slower than a Bedford," joked Farak.

Men ran out of the tents. Most were Arab, but mixed in with them were two tall Caucasians. They greeted the riders warmly.

"Is that your woman?"

Dina jumped down from the lead donkey. She wore a billowing white blouse and tan jodhpurs that, with her dark headscarf, made her easy to keep track of. The mercenaries surrounded her as she gesticulated wildly. She kept pointing into the hills, almost straight at where Rush and Farak hid.

"She knows we're coming," Farak said. "Not a surprise with our truck."

An Arab much taller than those around him emerged from the tents and strode across the open ground with the authority of someone bred to it. The small crowd hurriedly unloading the donkeys parted and he bent down at the broken crate. He tried to talk to one of the mercenaries, who directed him to Dina. Speaking to a woman appeared to require a great effort on his part.

She took a carbine from the broken box, loaded it and fired. The radio mast wobbled, which impressed the tall man greatly. He took the weapon from her and inspected it.

"This is interesting," Farak said. "We are twelve against forty. They have modern weapons but have not trained with them. We have old weapons and much skill, though I fear we do not have surprise."

The mercenaries walked with the tall Arab to the huts. Dina remained behind, looking up at the hills.

"Maybe," said Rush.

He could swear she looked straight at him.

Rush barely reached the bowl's edge when the truck arrived. It was an old Soviet design with burnt woodwork on its bed and a canvas stitched together from at least two other sheets. Four men were onboard, five counting the one they carried to the tents. Under his burnt clothes was burnt flesh, yet somehow he survived. The commotion was the distraction he needed to get closer to the huts.

He crouched beneath a window on the side of the training hut and listened to the voices from inside. It was a fast-paced back-and-forth between two men in Arabic. The deeper voice belonged to the tall Arab, occasionally called "General" by the other man. He spoke more slowly as he considered each word and a Russian accent intruded on his speech.

"We need that petrol," snapped the General. "And the trucks. We were promised the trucks."

"I've lost most of my men and you worry about trucks and petrol?" shouted the Russian. "There are other fuel dumps you can raid now you have your precious guns."

"This is not good enough! This is not what I was promised."

Dina's soft voice brought calm to the argument.

"It's a setback but not a disaster. The plane coming in has enough fuel to return, and more can be brought by air tomorrow or the day after. Captain, we'll have to find a way to bring in more trucks," said Dina.

"It will be a month at least," said the Russian.

"A month! Our plans are far behind already. I cannot accept delay."

"You have no choice," said Dina.

"And you! A woman! I was promised someone skilled in guerrilla warfare and they send me a woman!"

There was an almighty crash as a table was thrown aside. The General yelped, then choked.

"I was in Stalingrad fighting Nazis while you were eating dates with your whores and planning revolutions you couldn't hope to win," Dina spat.

Rush held his hand over his mouth to stop his laugh from escaping. The world still had a lot to learn about the role women could play in war and revolution. The General was going through that process.

The hut door slammed open and shut as the two interlopers exited. They walked towards the truck, parked where the donkeys had been not an hour before.

"I swear these people will be the end of me," the Russian said in his native tongue. "All this for a piece of desert."

"Be patient with them, Yuri," Dina urged. "They think theirs is the only war to be fought."

Yuri sighed.

"I will check on my men. I do not think Kasparov will last much longer."

Dina stayed a little longer, unaware she was being watched from the shadows. She looked up into the hills, turned and jogged towards the tents.

Barely a minute later the tents emptied. Dozens of men piled out and formed three loose lines facing the General. He was flanked by the mercenaries.

Orders came thick and fast in Arabic and Rush struggled to keep up. He barely had time to dive under the nearest hut and hide in the shadows as men ran past him toward the dugouts.

What was left split into two squads, each led by a mercenary with a carbine and a short-wave radio on his back. One squad entered the hills from the south, the other from the north. Farak and the twelve soldiers he'd brought from the village were somewhere between them. Twelve against almost fifty.

Rush stayed still. The huts sat on blocks that left enough space and shadow to hide in. It also put him in a line of sight with the dugout between the huts and the fuel dump. All it needed was for one of the two men huddled inside to look around and he would be discovered.

Dina, Yuri and the General walked swiftly to the training hut. They switched effortlessly between Russian and Arabic, setting out plans to defend the camp and hunt the soldiers in the hills. Rush heard his name mentioned and someone called "Junkers".

The floorboards creaked as they entered the hut. Muffled voices reached him. Dina's mostly as she gave out orders over the radio. The General didn't like it and it sounded like another demonstration was needed. He hit the floor so hard Rush thought he might come straight through.

Gunfire crackled in the hills. With both sides using the same bolt action rifles, it was hard to make out who was shooting at whom. The crackling sounded like near-constant fire as the rebels expended their ample supply of ammunition. The occasional pop from one of Farak's men was buried in the sound.

Quickly the crackling quietened. It ended with a single pop from a pistol.

Silence settled across the camp. Lookouts scanned the tracks and paths, hoping to see a cheerful mercenary and his merry band of would-be rebels bounding toward them. Secretly accepting it would be the Iraqi army they saw next.

Gunfire erupted from the southeastern hills. A rapid volley from four rifles hidden in the rocks above the tents dug up dirt and dust around the nearest dugouts. Someone screamed. They kept screaming as their wound bled out.

The rebels fired up into the hills. At first it was only the dugouts near the tents, but it quickly spread around the camp until a hail of bullets rose up into the hills, none of it aimed at anything. The militia was shooting at ghosts.

With the defenders looking outwards, Rush broke cover. He rolled clear and crouched beside the training hut, his rifle half raised in case he was discovered. He stepped towards the door.

Sporadic gunfire came from the hills, masking a new sound carried on the wind. His eyes hunted for its source on the horizon, and he quickly spotted the faint dot getting steadily larger.

"In the hills south of our position," he heard Dina say. She was at the door, microphone in one hand, the other holding an earphone in place.

The airplane quickly took the distinctive three engined form of a Junkers Ju-52. It came in at a few hundred meters altitude, appearing to line up for a landing. Then it climbed, curving off towards the south as Dina had instructed.

Dina whistled and drew the attention of the mercenary commanding the tent defense. She pointed up into the hills with two fingers. He acknowledged her and barked new orders.

Six rifles blasted in unison, sending bullets into the rocks and crevices where soldiers might be hiding. They fired at random, barely picking targets as shot after shot went upwards, hopefully keeping heads down and stopping the attackers from responding to what came next.

The Ju-52 jinxed left, then right, coming into a tight bank high above the battle. Over the roar of its three engines came the bark of machine guns, and tracers floated down to the ground in an almost hypnotic dance. Hundreds, if not thousands of rounds pumped into the ground, obliterating anything in their path.

After three or four seconds, the aircraft came level and powered away in a swooping, banking climb that put it out of range of any return fire.

"North of our position," said Dina to her radio.

She stepped out of the hut and turned the corner, straight into Rush.

He punched her hard in the chest, knocking the wind out of her in a loud, crunching gasp. The blow sent her back and she pushed hard, keeping herself out of reach of the second he'd planned to land. She fell on her backside, flicked her legs over her head and rolled back to her feet.

"You!" she hissed.

A blade flashed in the sunlight as she came at him. Her movements were swift and fluid. A slash that would have cut his throat. A thrust aimed at his stomach. Another at his chest. Constantly advancing and pushing him towards the half-dozen defenders in their foxholes. If one looked around, he'd be finished.

She caught a lucky strike and the blade slid across his bare forearm. As he winced, she pressed her advantage and lunged. He flicked his arm and for a moment she was blinded by his blood. It was time enough to catch her wrist, turn it and send the knife thudding to the floor.

His grip failed and she pulled back, taking a crouched fighter's stance with fists raised. As he advanced, she lashed out with well-aimed punches and kicks. He blocked each in turn, keeping his forward momentum and soaking up the nagging aches as bruises formed under her hard hits.

Suddenly she darted left and came back at him from the side. She threw herself up on his shoulders, using her momentum to spin him around and

getting a hard punch with her knuckles to his temple. His vision blurred, his head spun, and he was unaware of hitting the dirt.

Her arm wrapped tight around his neck and she pushed her knee hard into his back for extra purchase. He coughed and gasped as he struggled for air. The world was going dark.

He put all his fading strength into the sharp jab with his elbow. It connected with her crotch and as she yelled her grip loosened. Instinct pushed his hand up through her arm, breaking her hold on him and he kicked away.

Both back on their feet, both struggling to regain their breath, they glared at one another.

"You're good," she told him. "Crude, but good."

She lunged, ducked his swinging hook and aimed a hard uppercut at his crotch. He grunted and she yelled as her hand connected with the hard cup of a cricketer's box.

As she fell back he grabbed her by the waist and flipped her over. She was so light she nearly completed a full turn before landing heavily on the ground. He went down behind her, locking her in a sleeper hold. As she passed out he punched her temple for good measure.

He threw her over his shoulder and picked up his rifle. The door to the nearest store hut was unlocked and he bundled them both inside.

She stirred as he tied her with nylon cord. Hands behind her back, then to her ankles. He left her hogtied on her side and leaned back against the wall to tend to his wound. His handkerchief made a reasonable bandage for the cut on his arm.

The shooting outside had died down to occasional exchanges between defenders and Farak's men. He wondered how many had survived the Ju-52s attack. It was circling high overhead, waiting for its next instruction.

Dina snapped out of unconsciousness and struggled against the ropes for almost half a minute before she gave up. All she'd achieved were a few friction burns from the cord on her wrists and ankles.

"You bastard!" she hissed and spat at him for good measure.

"Love you too, Dina."

The Junkers made a low pass overhead as it turned away towards the end of the landing strip.

"What now? You think your cavalry will rescue you?"

"That's the Americans," he told her. "I have the Iraqi army."

No one had fired a shot since she stopped struggling. She laughed.

"Hear that? Your pathetic attempt to capture me has failed. My men will mop up whatever banditry you brought with you, and then I will have you as my plaything for a very, very long time."

"Bit of torture, that sort of thing?"

She laughed again.

"You will beg me for death," she promised.

The door burst open.

As Yuri unslung his carbine, it caught on the door frame.

Rush was already on his feet. He grabbed the fouled weapon and pulled hard, dragging Yuri inside. The Russian stumbled and landed on the uppercut already rising to meet his chin.

He collapsed, and would have gone down in silence if the shooting hadn't started. A pair of bullets hit his back and he screamed. Rush went down with him, using him as a shield as more bullets slammed into the hut. He saw the General firing a carbine with a wide grin on his thin lips. Whether his target was the Russian or Rush wasn't obvious.

Rush pushed back as he hit the ground and used the momentum to take both of them inside. He kicked out and the door slammed shut, bullets thudding into the wood. Twisting, his foot caught the edge of a shelving rack and brought it down, blocking the doorway and crushing the dead Russian.

Keeping low, Rush stripped the man of his M1 and ammunition. One half used magazine in the carbine, plus nine more in his webbing. Enough to hold out for a few minutes. Longer if he was careful.

"You're surrounded," Dina snarled. "Surrender and I promise to only keep you alive for a month."

He ignored her. A handful of soldiers ran towards the hut with rifles raised. He popped up at the window, breaking the glass before unloading what was left in the magazine at them.

Bullets thudded into the walls. A window smashed and showered the floor in sharp shards of glass. None close enough for Dina to use to cut herself free.

"You know you won't survive either?" he told her.

The door thudded as it hit the shelving rack. Rush dropped to his knee, aimed and fired twice. There was a pained scream from outside.

"There's only forty more to go," Dina mocked. "I am sure they will all line up one at a time."

The Junkers was coming into land. The roar of its engines wasn't loud enough yet to mask the planning outside. Burning down the hut was their current idea.

Carefully he lifted himself enough to see the two men running towards the fuel dump and its parked bowser. Dropping them would be easy enough, but they'd just send another two. Or they might realised the Junkers could finish the job with its machine guns.

It took an entire magazine to finish off three tires on the truck. Then he hit the ground as the rebels let loose with their rifles. An occasional bullet found its way through the wood, reminding him not to think he was invincible inside.

A crackle of glass and he spun in time to dodge Dina's kick. Feet and fists flew at him, and he covered up to soak up the hits. The space was too narrow for her to get much strength behind her. Not that he wanted to wait for her to tire.

He dived at her, both hands hitting her chest as he pushed her hard against the shelves behind her. She shouted out and tried to swing at him, but he

blocked it and punched her stomach so hard she nearly threw up. As she went over he brought his elbow down and sent her crashing to her knees.

Her hand flashed out, grabbed the rifle barrel and pulled it away from him. She spun it into her hands, lining up for the shot as he charged.

Pulled the trigger.

Click.

He pushed the rifle hard into her shoulder and she went back, cracking her head on the shelving. For a moment she looked at him, eyes wide with shock, then slumped down.

A rebel was at the door again. He was shooting through it, hoping to blast a hole big enough to see. Rush snatched the carbine up, dropped the empty magazine and loaded a fresh one. He dispatched the rifleman, then tied her again. This time he pulled her hands up above her head and tied her thumbs.

The Junkers was down and taxied along the runway towards the huts. He'd lost track of the outside in the fight, but he knew what was coming from how rebels were running away.

Was there a way out? One of Yuri's grenades might be enough to blow a hole in the wall. Then he'd have to fight his way out with Dina in tow. Or he could just leave her.

Too late.

The thud-thud-thud of a machine gun filled the air. He dropped, curled into a ball and put his hands over his head. If he was lucky...

Nothing happened.

It was a .50 he heard. Farak's improvised Browning on a tripod firing from the hills. Its heavy shells ripped through the Junkers' corrugated metal hull, tearing at it until it found something flammable.

Yuri's grenade blew a hole in the wall, and Rush slipped out. He dragged Dina behind, threw her over his shoulder and ran like hell towards the hills.

Rush carried Dina like she was a hogtied suitcase. She grunted and groaned as she bounced against his thigh, swearing to end his days in numerous painful ways. He dropped her in the dirt in front of Farak.

"This is your troublesome woman, Mister Rush?"

Farak crouched down and lifted her chin. She spat at him and he laughed.

"How did you do?"

"Two more died heroes," said Farak with a mix of sadness and pride. "A third has a serious injury. Other than that, I think most of us have more scratches of one sort or another. Something to boast of!"

He looked around at the airfield. By the tents sat no more than twenty men with their hands on their heads and the dejected look of the defeated. Two soldiers stood guard, both now armed with M1s. There were more than enough to go around.

"They're all good lads," Rush said. "You've trained them well."

A sound on the wind drew their gaze westward. Another airplane was approaching.

"So many have died for what?" Farak asked. His eyes were on Toothless, who stood guard over two rebels tasked with collecting bodies from the battlefield. Farak's men had brought others down from the hills.

"Politics and big plans?" Rush shrugged. "At least you stopped a rebellion."

"For now," hissed Dina.

"For now is good enough," Farak told her. "Do you think she will tell you about the 'politics and big plans', Mister Rush?"

"I will tell you nothing," hissed Dina.

"You don't need to," Rush said.

A plane loomed large in the sky. It was twin-engined, silver, and sleek.

"Dakota?" asked Farak.

"Something like that. I'd offer you a lift, but I think you'll be needed here."

"Yes. I will have to watch these for the night. Ten men against twenty."

"Tie them up, shove them in the hut and don't give them any water," Rush suggested. "They haven't the heart to try a breakout."

"Idealism met the battlefield and died," Farak pondered aloud.

They watched the airplane land on tricycle undercarriage. It stopped a few meters short of the smoldering Ju-52. Little of the workhorse could be identified from what was left.

A section of the hull popped open forward of the wings. It unfolded towards the ground, and steps slid down. A man in a deep blue coverall appeared at the opening with a pistol in a holster under his left arm. He saw Rush and waved, then bounded down the steps.

"Good to see you, Major," the new arrival beamed. "This the cargo? Well, we'll get her onboard and then get some proper restraints on. What do you say?"

Farak suddenly came to attention and snapped a smart salute at Rush. Awkwardly, he returned the gesture and then offered a hand of friendship.

"I hope to see you again, Mister Rush."

Rush lifted Dina. She kicked against him in protest. A futile gesture done more for her honor than any hope of escape.

"You might want to see what Mosul has, Captain," Rush said. "I suspect it's that cross you were looking for."

"Of course you knew it would be here."

"This has to be funded somehow," he said. "I think the late Lord Donaldson and his valet Smith worked on a 'cash on delivery' basis. They chose the wrong buyers."

Farak watched as Rush and the newcomer carried Dina into the silver machine. There was a last wave from his friend before the hatch closed, the engines roared and the airplane lifted into the desert sky.

About The Author

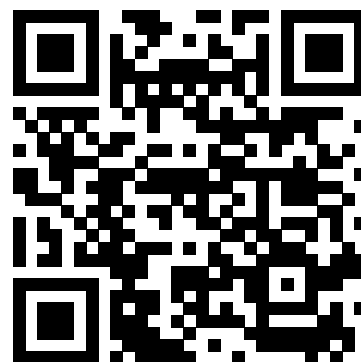
Alex Hori was born in the early 1970s in England. After a pretty dull career in Insurance, he moved to Japan with his wife and set up home in the mountains. He's the author of The Maku Files, a series of fast paced cyberpunk short stories and novellas, set in an alt-future Kansai.

You can keep up to date with his latest short stories and novellas on substack.

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