

LOKOMOTIVE

C S Dows

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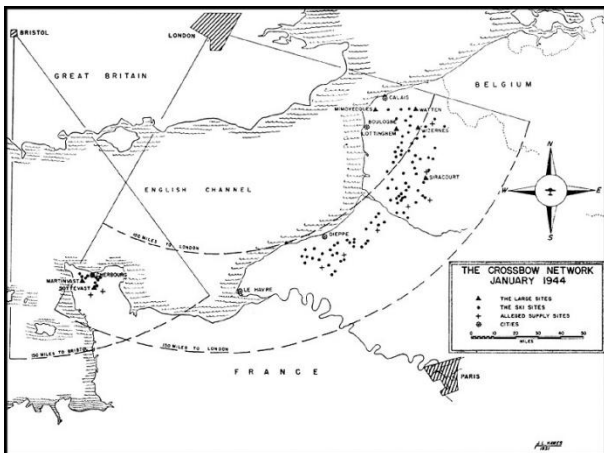
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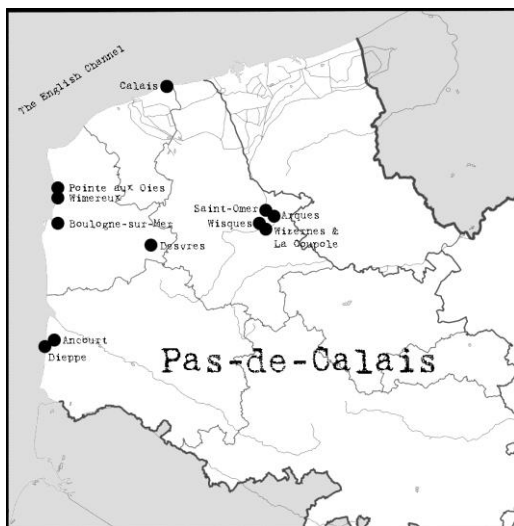
This book is dedicated to those who died building La
Coupole, and to those who lived because it was never
completed

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The Crossbow Network of V bases 1944



France's Pas-de-Calais department 1944

1. Saint-Omer

Gottschalk closed his eyes and let the hiss of steam rush into his ears, the stink of burning coal and axle grease fill his nostrils. He was, of course, furious the journey had taken twice as long as he had planned but right now, on this historic evening, his head was light with the intoxication of the moment. This was due in part to the glorious acrid stench of the station, but mostly down to the disorientating effect of not sleeping properly for the best part of two days.

It was debatable whether his excitement at finally taking this journey would have allowed him to feel any more rested or relaxed had it made good time. Fatigue had been forced somewhere in the background by the adrenalin rush of stepping onto the platform, and was being kept at bay by the sheer enjoyment of this moment. Given the opportunity, he would spend his entire life on a train. With his eyes closed, he still felt as if he was moving but this did not bother him. More than once he had imagined himself like a Prussian prince, moving around the Reich's territories on some elaborate European tour. Just as now, he pictured himself rolling grandly into station after station on important business.

Important business for an important man.

The faint smile playing on his thin lips faded. For all the relief and joy of arrival, he should have been here last night. This lack of respect for his stature would not be ignored. For the inconvenience alone, he would find everyone he felt remotely responsible for the delay along the journey's route and have them punished. Severely.

Eyes opened, he turned to admire the huge BR-52 Kriegslok locomotive squatting with dark malevolence behind him. It did not quite have the grandeur of a royal

train, but it was a good, reliable engine. Its brutal lines were in direct contrast to Saint-Omer station; even though the sun was setting and light fading, the structure's cream stone presented its classical chateau style with typical French ostentation. With such undeniable style, he could forgive the lack of canopies on two of the three platforms. If anything, being exposed to the swirling currents of wind made it even better. Layers of sound and smell faded in and out as the direction of the wind changed, engine smoke drifting into the cooling night sky before disappearing completely. He had chosen his grand entrance well. Memory was made of sensation, and today promised to be one of the most significant of his life. He wanted to savour every second of it - and ensure the entire town knew that someone of great power now walked amongst them.

To that end, the station had been cleared and secured before his arrival for over three days, causing significant disruption to the normal running of the busy line and alerting the whole of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais to the event. Finally, the late October stillness had been shattered by the four camouflage-painted coaches rumbling onto Platform 1, the turret of the rear armoured carriage facing backwards with menacing intent. Such was the size of the entourage, a dozen men in matching dark grey uniforms still hustled boxes and equipment out of the freight car connected to the gun, ferrying the trappings of his entire staff to a precise line of cars and trucks idling noisily outside the station.

Gottschalk was aware of the well-ordered commotion, but chose to concentrate on the hissing and rumbling of the machine behind him. He thrilled to the vibrations it created through his tired body, some sounds so low they were felt rather than heard. It was a private moment in the most public of places, but he deserved it. As if to agree with the sentiment, other than his two aides patiently waiting near the single passenger carriage, everyone else

avoided him as best they could. Gottschalk could sense the adjutants were keeping a respectful distance. While they differed in just about every way, both knew better than to disturb the SS Oberführer's private communion with the train. Even this pleased him.

Gottschalk took another breath and looked over to the dimly lit circular clock in the middle of the platform. His passion for the railways was almost equal to his fanaticism for timekeeping. A cloud passed over his enjoyment like an escape of steam from the Kriegslok's release valves. By God, someone was going to pay for them being so overdue. Earlier that year, Gottschalk had overheard a newly-arrived junior adjutant joking with a colleague about the connection between punctuality and trains being somewhat ironic given his own experience of the railways as a younger man. Within twenty minutes he had been marched away by armed guards, protesting his innocence and desperately trying to apologise for his gaffe.

No one asked if he was still laughing while he froze to death on the Russian Front.

Time, thought Gottschalk as he drew in the rapidly cooling air, was his. With truly brilliant design and execution, his plan had finally come together. It had taken a long time, just over a decade from inception to this tantalising point of near-completion, but that did not matter. His determination and conviction had not wavered, just like that of his beloved Führer. Once again, a flash of anger threatened to spoil his mood. All these mutterings the war may not after all be won outright by Germany was little more than propagandist treachery to be dismissed and punished. There was no way they could lose, particularly with the project he had journeyed all this way to control. Equally, there was no way his wonderful, perfect plan was going to fail. It was so brilliant, it could not.

His conviction was ultimately reinforced by the fact he was standing in Saint-Omer, actually physically there, and

the timing of events from this point would now be entirely controlled by him. All the hard work had effectively been done. It was what he had cheated, blackmailed and extorted his way towards for the best part of five years. Gottschalk closed his eyes again. He saw his plan as a huge network board of myriad branch lines feeding into a single, arrow-straight main route – iron rails forming an iron will. Everything had journeyed from its destinations spread all over Germany and beyond, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, but now all the connections had their points set to 'proceed'.

Gottschalk smirked to himself. Full steam ahead, indeed.

And yet, how different it had all started. Some might find it odd he loved railways considering his old life as an overlooked, overworked and under-appreciated junior clerk of the Deutsche Reichsbahn-Gesellschaft. The degrading experiences he had endured under so-called superiors who refused to recognise his exceptional talents in coordination and logistics still made his stomach drop at the recollection. However, unlike others in the SS who had shared similar experiences of frustration and rage, he did not want to forget the bitterness he had felt - still felt - against those tiny-minded people. In fact, he owed them a debt of thanks.

It had been his fury at being controlled by such inferior people that had propelled him into the loving arms of the Nazi party in 1932. Meeting such kindred spirits who understood the damage the Jews and others had deliberately inflicted on his country had taken his breath away. In the bierkellers and taverns around his office, he found men – and women – finishing his bitterest sentences with words he would have chosen himself. Despite his diminutive stature, his bright mind and brutal opinions quickly led him towards the SS who, following state control of the rail network in 1937, found a home for his brilliance. And look at him now. A mere six years later, he

had a staff of thirty, his own train (one of many!) and had become a force to be reckoned with thanks to the close friendship he had carefully orchestrated with none other than Hans Kammler. He had even heard some feared Gottschalk as much as the legendary SS General.

His smirk broadened all the more.

'Oberführer Gottschalk. It is a pleasure to meet you Mein Herr.'

Gottschalk inhaled deeply through his nose and sighed. He did not recognise the breathless voice, so he might choose to keep his temper depending on who it was. Turning slowly, he took off his newest pair of Himmler-styled spectacles, retrieved a silk handkerchief from his long coat pocket and slowly wiped the soot from the lenses in tiny circular motions. Standing before him was an obese man dressed in a frock-coat that had seen better days and a top hat he had either owned since being considerably thinner or had taken from a dead relative. One of the aides began to move forward but Gottschalk caught his eye and shook his head gently. Replacing his spectacles, Gottschalk put his hands behind his back and raised his chin so he could literally look down his nose at the station manager. He was clearly some Vichy-instated collaborator who'd had the good sense to realise the hopelessness of fighting against those born better than him. His German was not great, but at least he was trying.

'Monsieur Surat, I presume.'

The fat man looked surprised Gottschalk knew his name. Sliding a pudgy hand inside his coat, Surat pulled out a discoloured handkerchief and mopped the sweat trickling down his temple. Gottschalk noted the heavy watch chain stretched in a near-horizontal line across his straining buttons was worn down to the base metal. It was not even solid gold. Gottschalk found this disappointing and irritating in equal measure. After a couple of shallow breaths, the fat man spoke again.

'The very same. Welcome to my station.'

Gottschalk's gaze snapped to the spotless neat flagstones stretching back along the carriages and out into the rapidly growing shadows cast by the sun disappearing below the horizon. Somewhere behind the shaking man and the platform's ornate support columns would be the beautiful entrance and ticket hall to Saint-Omer station, something Gottschalk looked forward to seeing on his way out. Either the station manager spent more time looking after his station than himself or someone else did all the hard work. First impressions were of a well-run and well-ordered terminal which, taking into consideration it was being run by the French, was surprising.

'Monsieur Surat, you certainly maintain your station well.'

Gottschalk could have easily continued 'far better than you look after yourself, you scruffy fat bastard', but kept it to himself.

'Now tell me, notwithstanding the unacceptable lateness of my arrival, what is the average punctuality of your daily traffic as a percentage? I will allow you one minute or over as a late benchmark.'

Surat stared at Gottschalk then looked to the two immaculately dressed officers a few paces away, one middle-aged and stocky, the other fit, strong and young. Both were holding attaché cases, but the one grasped by the powerful looking SS officer was attached to his wrist by a thick silver-coloured chain. Surat's eyes flicked up to meet his only to be rewarded with a sneer of disdain. Shaking his head, the officer looked back to Gottschalk, clearly expecting Surat to provide an answer to his master.

'I will... have to consult my records.'

Gottschalk's expression did not change. Out of sight from the sweating Frenchman, his hands clasped tightly together behind his back, the soft kid leather of his gloves hiding white knuckles of excitement. He was enjoying the spectacle of the station manager's terror. That was the power he held, and that was the power he enjoyed.

'Lead the way monsieur.'

Surat blinked at the sudden change in tone. Taking off his top hat, he swept his arm out towards the pillars behind him, inviting his terrifying guest to lead the way. For his part Gottschalk nodded once, providing the station manager with an excuse to shuffle away. He puffed and panted almost as much as the locomotive on the platform.

'Ordonnanzoffizier Bauer, send my luggage on to the motte castrale. Stay with my car. I will be with you presently. Kessering, come with me.'

Gottschalk stalked into the impressive baroque ticket hall. On the left, the huge glass frontage overlooked the stone bridge linking the city to the station. Beyond that, Saint-Omer proper. The hall was empty save for a couple of sentries who snapped immediately to attention on the Oberführer's appearance, the sharp jangling of straps echoing along with the clop of jackboots. Gottschalk sensed Kessering taking up his place a couple of steps behind him, and from seemingly nowhere two heavily armed SS guards appeared and took up position at the rear. Gottschalk could hear the heavy chain attached to Kessering's wrist swaying in time with their brisk march, but if it posed any kind of irritation the Obersturmführer kept it hidden from his master. Not that Gottschalk cared a jot about his comfort anyway.

In the lead, Surat reached a set of heavy double wooden doors and fumbled with the pantomime-sized bunch of keys to the administration building flanking the main station. Gottschalk tapped the heel of his boot impatiently, and Kessering was just moving forward to hurry the fat Frenchman up when there was a click and the left door swung open. Such was Surat's agitation, he completely forgot to hold it open for his guests and disappeared into the gloom of the stairwell, much to the disgust of Kessering who muttered something insulting behind Gottschalk. In a blink, Kessering strode forwards and past Gottschalk, just managing to stop the door

locking itself with the toe of his polished boot. Turning smartly and without making eye contact with Gottschalk, he pushed the door wide for him to enter. With a sigh, Gottschalk swept past Kessering and into the narrow stairwell, his eyes adjusting to the gloom as he climbed the mosaic-tiled steps up to the first floor mezzanine. Behind him, he heard Kessering bark an order to the guards to allow no-one to follow them up. They responded with the rattle of machine pistols being angled ready for action and by the time Kessering had taken four steps, the door to the ticket hall clacked shut behind him.

If Gottschalk's impression of the station was favourable, the same could not be said of the manager's office. The room was much like its owner; over-sized and poorly maintained. The condition Surat had allowed it to degenerate into did a huge disservice to the beautifully styled interior. Battered and peeling filing cabinets stood in haphazard rows along the deteriorating walls to the shorter wall on the right and behind him on his left, papers sticking out of partially opened draws and piled in dusty stacks on top. Directly opposite the doorway, three tall windows formed a backdrop to the huge leather-top desk at which Surat now stood, his preposterous hat now resting precariously on a rickety chair in the near corner of the room. Cast into shadow by the remains of the day, he rummaged through a less dusty pile of papers and files, flicking on then tilting his green glass banker's lamp at an angle and squinting at the lines of information typed in neat rows on the crumpled paper.

Truth be known, Gottschalk was not in the least bit interested in the facts and figures Surat was desperately searching for. His reason for asking was to get inside this excuse of an office and, in particular, to take a close look at the feature that dominated the short wall on the far left. Swallowing down his excitement, he strolled as casually as he could towards the huge network map, the *real*, day-to-day network map, not the one dreamed up by someone in

DRB headquarters. With Surat occupied in his search and Kessering closing the door gently behind him, Gottschalk knew no-one would see the look of delight on his face as he gazed upon it. He might have felt light-headed on the platform, but the adrenaline now coursing through his body was making him giddy for an entirely different reason.

'I think... Herr Gottschalk... that I have the -'

'Is this network map accurate, Monsieur Surat?'

Gottschalk turned briskly to face the station manager, who blinked away more sweat from his piggy eyes, his jowls wobbling as his head moved from side to side. He did not wait for an answer, instead turning back to the highly detailed map and studied the close-scale detail of the surrounding area. It was all here. *Thrilling.*

'Yes sir. It is.'

Gottschalk noted the printing date was pre-war, which was hardly surprising as updated documents such as this would be highly valuable to the enemy and would certainly not be given out to anyone outside the military. However, because Gottschalk knew how railways worked and, in particular, how station managers worked, he would have been astonished (and apoplectic) if Surat had not annotated his existing map in exactly the way he was now observing. He could tell by the tone of Surat's voice his pride had been pricked at the question, and suppressed a grin as he waited for the Frenchman to continue.

'I have made several corrections to ensure it is up to date, what with the expansion of the network around Wizernes and Helfaut.'

Gottschalk stood quite still and let the manager's last few words hang in the air. If Surat had been hot and flustered before they had got into the office, he now felt the man might explode. Gottschalk turned slowly to face him, clasping his hands behind his back and raising his head once again in a superior manner. To his right, Kessering shifted the weight on his feet. The movement

distracted Surat, who gave the adjutant a quizzical look.

'What do you know of the work there?'

Gottschalk's voice was low and deliberate, loaded with dark suggestion. Surat's gaze snapped between the two SS officers and he frowned in confusion.

'Monsieur, surely you understand it is my duty to ensure my station operates to its best ability? I cannot work efficiently without an accurate and up-to-date network map.'

Gottschalk did not move a muscle. Neither did Kessering. Slowly, he repeated the question, the patience in his words laboured to the point of a threat.

'What do you know of the work there?'

Surat swallowed. It was clear he realised the danger he had suddenly fallen into.

'Only that engineers from the Organisation Todt are constructing lines to a new site sir. I have the official communiqué here... somewhere. I believe it is going to be a gravel works or suchlike.'

Gottschalk looked over to Kessering, whose eyes were in shadow from his peaked cap. He nodded imperceptibly. That, indeed, was the cover story for the upcoming construction. It had clearly worked as planned. Surat spotted the nod and blurted on.

'Monsieur... Herr Gottschalk... If a station manager does not know of extra traffic potentially coming down the network there would be hell to pay - and rightly so. Saint-Omer is a major station. I have to be aware -'

Gottschalk held out a hand to silence the man, pushed his glasses back up on his nose then turned back to the map. Peering closer in the growing gloom, he tapped at a series of sidings a few kilometres east of their current location.

'These sidings. Are they well protected?'

Gottschalk imagined the colour draining from Surat's face and heard the rustle of papers dropping onto the table top. There was a creak as Kessering leaned back against

the door of the office. Gottschalk knew Kessering's habits. The Obersturmführer would already have his free hand resting lightly on the highly polished holster of his pistol. Surat's voice wavered like that of a frightened child.

'Those sidings are out of bounds to all of my workers Oberführer... In fact to everybody. They have been heavily guarded since very early in the... since you...'

Gottschalk traced the red dotted line drawn around the area with his gloved finger until he had completed a full circle. He stared for seconds at the map over his glasses, not blinking once. Surat had also drawn a couple of rectangles to one side of the narrow lines denoting rail sidings, tucked in between woodland that ran much of the way along the tracks. One had '40/07' written next to it, the other '43/08'. The August date bothered him; there should have been a new junction drawn in there by now. Gottschalk spoke without turning.

'These rectangles you have drawn. What are they?'

'They are engine sheds, sir. Two have been constructed in the last three years, the latest completed a couple of months ago. I have been given orders not to approach nor inspect them. I have also been given orders to deny their existence if anyone ever asked.'

The fury within Gottschalk began to rise. All the dates coincided with the orders he had given over the last couple of years. It was living proof of his plan, drawn to scale and perfectly represented. A total success in pencil and ink – for all to see. Surat spoke again, some confidence returning to his voice as he felt the danger had passed for him. He could not have been more wrong.

'I have been careful not to identify them as anything specific on the map; you will be aware there is significant Resistance activity in the area. For my part, I need to know their exact position and size in case of any accident or emergency.'

Gottschalk closed his eyes and shook his head. His hands clasped together into fists, the leather creaking with

the strain. The fat oaf's words made absolutely no sense at all. Any reasonably intelligent person would surely realise if they had been told to avoid something and deny its existence, the last thing they should do is draw it on a map in bright red pencil. Naturally, there had been attempts at sabotage - he had factored in the potential for attack at the very beginning of his plan in 1939 - but the building had been undertaken exactly on schedule. Perhaps, thought Gottschalk, he was being unreasonable not expecting the station master to indicate it on the network map. After all, how unusual is it to construct engine sheds next to railway sidings?

As Gottschalk stared at the two pencilled outlines, he tried to calm his fury. Despite this gross and potentially catastrophic breach in his instructions, those rectangles still meant his own little *Bahnbetriebswerk* actually existed. He could barely wait to visit them. Gottschalk turned and took a couple of steps towards Surat, who had not moved since their exchange began.

'Those punctuality figures, Monsieur Surat. What are they for this month?'

Surat looked with relief to the dropped papers on his desk and began hunting through them. As he did so, Gottschalk strolled over to the middle window directly behind the frantic man and looked out to the faint outlines of Saint-Omer across the canal. As he watched, the sun disappeared behind the tips of the cathedral in the near distance, the temperature dropping almost immediately in the room. Gottschalk had not visited Saint-Omer until today, but the amount of research he had undertaken presented a vista strangely familiar to him. Somewhere close to where he was staring, his new home was being prepared in the grounds of the medieval building. Again, he felt almost regal in his demeanour. The ancient Teutonic Kings had felt their power a God-given right, their actions guided and shaped by divine providence. It was fitting he would be living in the shadow of a great

cathedral and while he could barely see the town in the twilight, it was already proving to be the perfect choice.

Mere kilometres away, his treasure lie waiting.

You could go there now if you wished.

No. He would not give in to temptation. It was too delightful a torture to cut short. That would all come in time. For now, there was a single minor thing to attend to before he left the station.

'For October they are... an average of -'

Blood and brain exploded across the desk and onto the worn carpet, a scarlet fan coating paper and cloth in a spray of gore. Surat fell like a slaughtered pig onto his desk with a crash, smashing the lamp in the process then flopping onto the floor. Placing his smoking Walther P38 on the desk, Gottschalk beckoned over to Kessering as he wiped a speck of blood from his cuff.

Picking his way around shards of bone, the impassive Obersturmführer retrieved a small key from his trouser pocket, unlocked the bracelet around his left wrist and offered the case with a curt nod.

Gottschalk pushed a heap of spattered papers to one side and placed the case gently on the smooth leather surface of the desk. Taking off his gloves, he stuffed them into the deep pockets of his great coat then undid the top buttons above his belt. Perching beside the case, he retrieved a set of small keys from his tunic's now exposed right breast pocket and unlocked the heavy duty clasp on the case's side. Clicking the lid upwards, he began carefully sifting through its contents as Kessering flicked on the main room lights and moved over to Surat's corpse at the far side of the desk. In his peripheral vision, Gottschalk saw the Obersturmführer staring with his hands on hips as if he was trying to work out how best to clean up a coffee spill.

Gottschalk slid off the table edge, put his keys into his

pocket and walked back over to the network map with a piece of paper in his hand. Holding it up to the orange glowing bulbs hanging from the ceiling, he squinted at the pattern, looked back at the map and placed the sheet over it. He rotated the paper ninety degrees over Surat's hand-drawn section, sliding it backwards and forwards until key points lined up. Smoothing it flat with his other hand, Gottschalk fished into his left breast pocket and pulled out his Greif fountain pen – a gift from General Kammler for services rendered last year. Giving it a sharp flick, he unscrewed the top by clenching it between his uneven yellow teeth and began tracing over Surat's recently drawn lines to update his sheet's copy of the area. The cap in his mouth distorted his speech, so he spoke slowly as he worked.

'Get the deputy manager down here and find out what he knows. If it is anything equal to or more than Surat, dispose of him. If you think he is genuine, put him in charge until the replacement arrives from Germany and then kill him. We need to control everything that happens here and within a thirty kilometre radius.'

Despite his physical strength, Kessering's reply was breathless from the exertion of dragging Surat towards the door. He had abandoned using the lapels of the corpse's jacket as they had immediately torn away due to the Frenchman's weight.

'Yes sir. I shall arrange that first thing in the morning.'

Gottschalk stepped away from the map, screwed the pen back into its cap then tucked it into his pocket. He suddenly felt very, very tired.

'You coordinate everything Kessering. If that moron could run the place without it falling apart, I am sure you can keep it ticking over until the new man arrives.'

If Kessering was insulted by his comment, he did not show it as Gottschalk returned to the desk and put the paper back into his case. Retrieving another sheet with a list of names and numbers on it, he studied it for a few

seconds then picked up the heavy handset of the ancient telephone. After a quick check to see if it had any blood on it, Gottschalk tucked it under his chin then tapped on the receiver with his fingers and waited for a connection.

'Switchboard, put me through to German Naval Command at Wimereux.'

Gottschalk did not care for the French language, but had studied it because he fully expected to spend much of his life in the country once victory had been achieved. As the line crackled and clicked, he watched Kessering as he manoeuvred Surat's body to the door. His aide was a strong, capable man, but Gottschalk was amused at the problem he had left the officer. Kessering knew he could not afford to block Gottschalk's exit from the office, so he squatted down and, with a mighty heave that tipped his cap from his head, rolled the body towards the nearest line of filing cabinets. Kessering's efforts were a little too successful. Surat crashed into them with a loud bang, then came to rest on his back, eyes staring lifelessly and mouth gaping like a landed fish. Gottschalk gave Kessering a warning look and was about to say something when the receiver crackled into life.

'Kommodore Arnold please.'

Kessering hastily retrieved his cap and with some annoyance realised it had a chunk of Surat's skull sticking to it. Kessering was not the only one getting angry. A haughty voice on the other end of the telephone was telling Gottschalk the Kommodore was at dinner. Gottschalk could feel his face reddening as the tiny broken blood vessels on his cheeks coloured rapidly.

'I do not care where he is. Tell him it is Oberführer Gottschalk and I will talk with him. Now.'

There was a pause, more loud clicks and then a deep voice growled into the receiver.

'Arnold here.'

There was no warmth of familiarity in the tone of Arnold's voice. To Gottschalk, that was no surprise at all.

'I am in Saint-Omer. I just arrived.'

Gottschalk pictured the opulence Arnold was likely sitting in at the Naval Headquarters north of Boulogne on the Côte d'Opale. Gottschalk's eyes flicked back down to the paper in his hand. It had become one of his most prized documents, protected at all times in the locked case and chained to either Kessering, Bauer or himself. What he held before him was the last part of his plan and while Arnold had proved to be a highly unwilling accomplice, help him he would – whether he liked it or not.

'I have your list. It is very short.'

Gottschalk rubbed his eyes inside his spectacles as Arnold gruffly justified himself. Gottschalk was not really listening. Fatigue swept over him. He needed to sleep.

'Yes, I suppose my requirements are quite complex. Who would you recommend above others?'

Arnold paused. There was far more to his reticence than his clear hatred of Gottschalk. The Obersturmführer had heard such tones many times before in his ruthless politicking towards his goal. The name Arnold eventually gave was said with bitterness and regret. Gottschalk knew everything about the candidate and had hoped Arnold was going to suggest him. The fact it displeased the Kommodore to recommend him made it all the more satisfying, his control over the naval commander complete now that it had caused him additional discomfort.

One more piece of the puzzle fits effortlessly into place.

'Yes, I agree. I like the sound of him. Send him to me tomorrow at the motte castrale. They are my new quarters.'

The last few words were said with some pride. Unlike Kessering still struggling with Surat's fat corpse in the shadows of the office, Gottschalk had come from humble stock. That was the real beauty of the Nazi party and, in particular, the SS. You were not tied to restrictive, pompous class structures to get on like the Wehrmacht or, even worse, the navy. Arnold's next question was said with

unhidden distaste. Gottschalk thought for a few seconds before responding, making the man suffer even more. His dinner, late as it was, had been ruined enough.

'No, I will not need you there. In fact, you can consider this the last conversation we will have.'

Gottschalk smirked to himself as he put the paper back into his case and closed the lid.

'For now at least.'

Gottschalk replaced the receiver, locked the clasp on the case and clipped the handcuff around his left wrist.

'I am going to the motte castrale. I expect this place to be immaculate on my return tomorrow.'

Gottschalk picked up his pistol, slid it back into his holster with his free hand and buttoned his coat. Walking carefully to avoid the slick trail left by Surat's slow progress across the floor, he clopped down the steps to the ground floor to find his SS guard waiting patiently in the beautifully apportioned ticket hall. A minute later he was enjoying the welcoming warmth of his staff car, sitting next to Ordonnanzoffizier Bauer who he considered berating about it not being the Mercedes he had requested. Still, the Horch 930 was good enough and gave him pleasing views of Saint-Omer's darkened streets as his convoy sped into the town.

Given the proximity of his new home to the station it was hardly worth taking off his cap, but he did anyway. Running a hand through his slicked back greying hair, Gottschalk was delighted the smell of the locomotive was still clinging to his unbuttoned coat. Bauer was attempting to update Gottschalk on the logistical operation to the motte castrale but it was only so much white noise. Gottschalk's mind was on other things, none of which had any official connection whatsoever to him being there.

2. Cold Morham

Shepherd couldn't feel his left foot. This wasn't a new sensation for him; sometimes he was numb from his ankle to his hip on that side, other times it itched like hell if he ignored the damaged skin and let it dry out too much. The reason he couldn't feel his foot was, however, unique in his experience. While he considered himself a patient man, crouching behind a damp stone wall for three and a half hours in the freezing cold to prove a point was perhaps pushing even his fortitude. Then again, the point he had to prove - the point he had to very clearly make - was worth some discomfort.

His eyes had long adjusted to the darkness of the deserted farm. Low cloud had mercifully reduced the chances of him being easily spotted, and also prevented the temperature from falling to potentially dangerous levels. In comparison to where he squatted, there were places in which he could have hidden that promised relative comfort, but they did not offer the luxury of the view before him. The faint glow of lights from the haphazardly arranged outhouses and dilapidated farm buildings helped to frame the hulking form of the ramshackle barn not fifty yards away.

He didn't need any light to see the well-worn path between the buildings; the image was fixed in his head from countless journeys. Much of it would be in deep shadow thanks to the lack of a moon, providing perfect cover for a would-be assailant. However, he was sure it wouldn't be used tonight. No approach would come from there. The man coming after him wouldn't take such an easy path.

Arching his toes upwards, Shepherd heard the creak of heavy leather below his sand-coloured woollen puttees. He was sure they were wicking every bit of moisture from the wall they could, and the first time he'd been issued with his

new uniform he'd thought that part of it ridiculous. That was until the RSM had seen the look on his face and offered to supply him with an alternative made from the finest kick up the arse. Sah.

Something moved in the darkness behind him, his peripheral vision proving to be as useful as he had been trained to employ. It was out in the rolling fields stretching back towards Amersham, which he found surprising because he'd concluded the wetness of Buckinghamshire's ploughed fields would give any approach away. Cocking his right ear towards the sound, he focused on the wet, plopping noise - too light and fast to be a man. It was likely to be some poor starving fox skulking around for scraps from the mess halls on the far side of the farm's compound. Sure enough, after a few erratic movements the sound took on a rhythmic quality and the creature padded off into the early morning.

Shepherd exhaled slowly into the crook of his tunic to prevent the steam from his breath drifting out over the wall. He'd learned a lot of things in the last few hard weeks, but that had been something that struck him as particularly clever.

Sensation returned to his foot, a spiky itch that filled his boot in waves. Shifting his weight onto his right knee, the fizzing reached a peak and then began to subside as the blood flow re-established itself. Perhaps the only advantage of having a chronic condition was a greater pain threshold, something he'd been unsurprised to be questioned over during his first interview for 30 RN. His previous life in the Naval Intelligence Division hadn't exactly been cosy, regardless of what the great majority of his wildly varied mix of compatriots in the squad had accused him of. He had been on several dangerous and uncomfortable missions during his odd career in reconnaissance and information gathering, none of which he could mention to defend himself due to their top secret nature.

He had taken the life of an enemy soldier in hand-to-hand combat (a frantic, messy experience that taught him the meaning of dying badly), and had nearly been killed twice travelling to and from missions. This was known to very few people outside NID, and that was the way he liked it. So, he was no stranger to pain and as accustomed as anyone could be to danger. He also had to admit that, despite the chill creeping into the small of his back, so far he'd enjoyed every second of his unorthodox instruction in this relatively new regiment based at Cold Morham.

Glancing around his position once again, Shepherd briefly closed his eyes and visualised his location from the air. Despite having served in the Naval Reserve after leaving University and then the navy proper a few years before the outbreak of war, a good amount of his early military career had been spent scrutinising medium and low-level photographs of enemy naval emplacements, structures and construction sites.

On occasion, he had been tasked with going out to recon them with a view to suggesting how they might be obliterated. He'd seen some action at sea just after the outbreak of hostilities and felt he more than deserved his rank of lieutenant, but his skill-set had quickly attracted the attention of the Intelligence division keen to use his specialist knowledge to their advantage.

Other than his bloody leg (which he'd proved time and again was no hindrance to his overall fitness) and forays in the bellies of freezing bombers or his teeth being rattled out of his head in a speeding PT boat, the worst physical discomfort he remembered was almost constant backache from leaning across table-tops full of overlaid photographs for weeks at a time. Many of his Intelligence colleagues marvelled at his ability to keep on going into the small hours, poring over images made vague and fuzzy by enlargement well past the optical limits of the lenses with which they had been taken and the resolution of the film on which they had been recorded.

As he had edged his magnifying frame in tiny movements across the sprawling maps and pictures deep in the bowels of the Admiralty, his great patience and aptitude for spotting unusual, artificial shapes had really come into its own. It was funny this very same attention to detail used to drive his mother and, in particular, his aunt absolutely mad. He'd never guess about anything, never be impulsive or impetuous. While his friends would dive head-first into a river, Shepherd would carefully inspect the banks and the flow of the water before committing himself. On more than one occasion he'd been pushed in for his troubles, much to his annoyance and the laughter of his guardians.

Yet it was this fastidiousness that would give him the edge tonight over someone far more experienced and, to be frank, deadly. Right now, he was calling on his theoretical and practical knowledge of materials, structures and environments. His ability to extrapolate three-dimensional shapes from two-dimensional images wasn't of any great use at ground level, but because of his attention to detail and the reconnaissance he had undertaken, he knew every detail of his surroundings. That gave him confidence and, he hoped, the advantage.

The crunch was soft, but since the fox had plodded away he'd attuned his senses more into hearing than vision – alien, perhaps, to someone used to relying on visual cues, but he had come to 30 RN to embrace and employ new skills. If someone wanted to creep up on a person over a ballast road, it was the sound they'd make gently transferring their weight onto the ball of their foot and rotating it slightly to minimise the noise. Shepherd started to move, inching slowly around and pushing his back against the wall, the rough stone catching on the material of his ribbed woollen cap. The sound's creator knew it had been too loud, and was likely cursing himself at that very moment, looking for any sign acknowledging his mistake. Well, it wasn't going to come from Shepherd. Despite his

extreme discomfort, he wasn't about to give away his position, even if he could claim at this moment he'd proved his point.

No, he'd wait until it really could be pushed home.

Lowering himself onto his hands and knees, Shepherd angled his shoulders and gingerly slipped off his thick webbing straps, placing them gently beneath him. Feeling for the ring-pull sticking out one of the bandoliers, he fished around in his trouser pocket for a length of twine (never be without a length of string lad - it might save your life) and knotted one end around the ring. There was no time for anything fancy. Besides, he'd always been utterly useless at knots, something that had amused his fellow naval academy cadets no end. Gnawing the twine to a six inch length with his teeth, he tied the now-soggy end around a short wooden stake he'd fashioned while waiting, feeling for the notch towards the top and wrapping it as tight as possible before pushing the wedge deep into the frosted ground with a soft crunch.

A quick waggle satisfied him it would stay in position, and he placed the webbing on top of the stake so it was hidden, careful to ensure the line to the ring was not snagged. Arranging the straps to make the webbing look as if it had been quickly discarded, he began a slow crawl along the side of the low wall. This would take him in the opposite direction to the would-be assailant, his progress hidden – hopefully – by the wall itself. Sure enough, as he passed around the ten yard mark from where he had started, he heard another sound - a whisper of snorted breath - on the other side.

Someone was getting angry with themselves.

The low stone wall terminated fifteen yards in front of him. It was shrouded in shadow, being that bit further away from the feeble light cast from the barracks and mess halls across the rambling farm. Shepherd moved as fast as he dare, all the while hoping his attacker would keep going in the opposite direction on the other side of the wall in

his own stealthy progress. Getting to the end, Shepherd knelt up slightly, careful not to put his head over the top line, and wiped his filthy wet hands on his khaki trousers. Carefully, he reached into his top tunic pocket, retrieving a small mirror. Looking behind and along the length of the wall to check he'd not been spotted, he laid down flat on his stomach then edged slowly forward and around its three-brick width. Angling the mirror down to prevent any stray light picking up the reflection, he moved it forwards until he could see what was happening along the other side, his entire body now covered in the darkness cast by the wall.

It was difficult to make out clearly, but a man's silhouette could just be seen. He was crouching at the far end of the wall, adjacent to the spot Shepherd had crawled from. For long moments the outline paused, then turned to the barn behind him. The sound of a bolt being pulled back clicked in the night air and, with a lunge, the man turned back and swung his STEN over the wall. He did not move for seconds, clearly dumbfounded he was aiming at some discarded webbing. Straightening up, Shepherd heard the safety of the weapon being thumbed back into place.

Shepherd smiled.

The figure turned full circle, STEN weighing ready in his hands, now certain he was being watched but unsure from which direction. Shepherd knew he couldn't be seen from his position thanks to the darkness and his own carefully-applied greasepaint, so held his breath to steady his hand. Warily, the man started to walk away towards the barn and Shepherd's jaw tightened. That wasn't what he wanted to happen. Shepherd sensed something was going to happen and readied himself to move. His instincts were right; in a blur, the man turned and threw himself back over the wall towards the webbing. Shepherd saw it coming; his boot cleared the bricks just as the man trained the muzzle of his gun to where he had crawled. Shepherd

rolled into the opposite side of the wall, suddenly exposed by the lights from the barn and gingerly brought his mirror out. Once again they were at either end of the wall on opposing sides, reversed from where they had begun. The man, his upper chest picked out by the barn lights, was poking at the webbing Shepherd had discarded. Satisfied it was safe, he stooped to pick it up.

The flash from the flare threw a jagged shadow onto the wall and beyond, making the man swear in surprise. While his reactions were fast, he couldn't move quickly enough to avoid being enveloped in choking red smoke. To an accompaniment of coughs, retching and curses, Shepherd was up on his feet and running as fast as he could, ignoring the discomfort from his leg and disregarding how exposed he now was. His target's noise drowned out Shepherd's approach, and while there was a fair chance the man might start firing indiscriminately into the night it was one he'd just have to take.

Shepherd's booby trap only gave him a few seconds of cover. The man rolled backwards over the wall onto his feet. He was out of the fumes but had inhaled a lot of smoke. He did not see Shepherd's approach until it was too late. Shepherd kicked out with his right boot, the man's STEN sailing into the air and clattering onto the stony ground some yards away. Infuriated, he swung one arm out while the other tried to wipe the smoke from his streaming eyes but Shepherd turned and ducked under the huge fist. Kicking out again, the outside edge of Shepherd's boot connected with the side of the man's right knee and he cried out in pain, leg buckling underneath him.

Moving behind, Shepherd reached over the man's helmeted head and grabbed a hold of the front ridge, pulling it backwards so the man's face lifted upwards. This gave Shepherd enough exposed neck to drop to his knee and lock his left arm around the burly man's throat, choking the breath out of him. Both arms came up and

started to tug desperately at Shepherd's sleeve, but by then he'd reached down to the scabbard on his belt with his right hand and brought his dagger up to beneath the man's right ear. A spot of blood appeared as he pressed the tip of the long, narrow blade into the skin and the man stopped his struggle lest he got fatally stabbed in the process. Shepherd felt three sharp pats on his right arm, and he relaxed his grip slightly, allowing his victim to gulp in ragged breaths for a few seconds. Leaning in closer, Shepherd whispered into the man's ear.

'Now then Sergeant. What was that about sailors making shitty commandos?'

3. Wimereux

Fieseler stepped into the dark of Rue Carnot and shivered. He had considered bringing his great coat, but it had been such a lovely mid-October evening he had trusted his uniform would be enough to keep him warm on the way back to his billet. For a man who had spent a good part of his life near or on the sea, it was a pretty stupid mistake to make and as he patted his pockets to confirm he had also forgotten his gloves, he thought of making for the Casino to borrow something warm from the long list of drunks and reprobates who would certainly be present this late at night.

The consideration lasted seconds. Fieseler deliberately chose to spend his off-duty time at the unremarkable Cafe des Arts standing with mild Gallic contempt behind him because it was just about the furthest place to drink from his comrades in Wimereux. He did, of course, take a considerable risk being the only German in the place, particularly on a Friday night, but the good majority of its clientele were so addled on Ricard they probably did not even notice his uniform. He had no doubt the local Resistance knew his movements and those of a dozen other senior officers, and on more than one occasion Fieseler had managed to out-manoeuvre potential problems in the town way before they came to anything. At least that what he told himself; a little paranoia went a long way in his line of work.

Pulling out his broad lapels and folding them over his crisp white shirt, Fieseler thrust both hands into his tunic pockets and started walking. This end of the curving main street was relatively deserted, the large glass shop-fronts on either side reflecting what little light there was from the street lamps. Other than the sound of his own boots on the pavement, all that could be heard was the occasional bark of a dog and, ever-present, the deep rhythmic rumble

of the sea to his left. Human traffic would increase the closer he got to the centre of town, but the noise would consist of vaguely recognisable voices from familiar uniforms. Fieseler considered heading down towards La Digue and bypassing the main street altogether, but he was tired and wanted to get home so he stepped up his pace and put his head down.

Fieseler had relaxed into a comfortable rhythm when the squeal of tyres from behind made him spin around. One of the circular, high-mounted headlights of the car was broken, the other tracing out the crazy weaving path created by the driver taking the corner too fast. With a bang the offside front tyre hit the raised pavement then jolted violently to the left, throwing the large vehicle to the wrong side of the road. Fieseler got a brief flash of a Wehrmacht code painted on the door.

He immediately committed it to memory in case there was an accident, but bellowed laughter from the occupants coincided with a shrill squeal of brakes and the car weaving back over to the right and accelerating down towards the church. A few curtains twitched from the apartments above the shops on either side of the road, shafts of feeble yellow light picking out the tramlines snaking off into the distance. Fieseler shared their thoughts - just another German drunk.

The cold had left his body, driven away by the sudden excitement and he quickly resumed walking pace. Many of his contemporaries thought it laughable Fieseler did not use staff cars or drivers around the town; he was, after all, of a suitably high rank to demand one. But no, Leon had to walk everywhere - part of his fitness fanaticism some would declare in over-loud voices, while others whispered it to be a deliberate attempt to spend as little time as possible with his compatriots. Both explanations were correct, and while there was suspicion of everything from his family background to his combat abilities, he had taken no heed, happy to keep his own counsel and remain

something of an enigma. This had been the way since he had first been posted to Wimereux, and the comments might have continued had it not been for the unfortunate events of a couple of months past.

Fieseler's mind drifted to that August evening. Having finally relented to continuous pressure from an eager young officer to join him at the Casino, Fieseler had actually started to enjoy himself when an extremely drunken sailor - a clearly traumatised and broken U-Boat Kapitän - had overheard Fieseler's name when the young officer had called over to ask which red Fieseler preferred for his next glass. The Kapitän had laughed uproariously with his rowdy crew, but instead of staying with his shipmates who were all clearly ready to go somewhere far less grand and far bawdier, the grizzled man had taken it upon himself to shout crude jokes about Fieseler's name. Of course, Fieseler had heard it all before, and decided to disarm the situation by raising his near-empty glass from his seat by one of the large windows running along the side of the café. Unfortunately, it did not work.

Instead of doing the same as his crew, most of which had good-naturedly raised their beer glasses to the KorvettenKapitän in response to the 'okay I think we've heard enough' gesture, the increasingly aggressive Bavarian (was there any other type?) did not want to let it go. Over at the bar, the young officer who was trying to make a good impression on Fieseler had frozen on the spot as the Kapitän continued to shout question after rude question to his superior. Was 'visel' a big womaniser? Was 'visel' popular with the ladies? Disquiet grew around the café with every slurred challenge. Regardless of where the assembled patrons might have come from in Germany, virtually all of them recognised that Fieseler was one of those names very close to a dirty word you looked up in a dictionary as a child and sniggered about when someone said it - or something that sounded like it. Fieseler = visel. It was a reference most children abandoned in their late

teens, and Leon had heard every variation of it in the playground a hundred times before.

Fieseler had not wanted to think about that night, and frowned as the recollection of events flooded back. To be fair to the Kapitan's crew, once they had realised the way things were going they had tried their best to calm their out-of-control C/O. One very large man, probably the Chief of the boat, had tried to remind him that, despite the Kapitan's numerous decorations, he was still an officer and should act like one. On top of that, he was also insulting a superior officer. But the Kapitan, all wide eyes and froth, would not back down. Even then, sitting at the table in the increasingly quiet café, Fieseler had known what the likely sequence of events would be and its inevitable conclusion. Just the same as that evening, as he walked down the main street, the back of Fieseler's neck began to itch – his very own early warning system flicking on like the British's marvellous RADAR.

Having received no response to his demands for Fieseler to reply, the Kapitan had swayed to his feet with a crash of bottles and loudly announced the reason Fieseler would not talk to the submariner was because the KorvettenKapitän had an itch a woman could not scratch. Despite the coiling tension in his stomach, Leon had let that pass with a warning stare and a final sip of his now-spoiled wine, immediately alert to exactly how many people were standing, sitting, leaning, moving forwards, moving backwards, exchanging nervous glances and trying to decide what to do in his field of vision. Fieseler had broken his gaze at the glowering Kapitan, taking a slow, quiet breath as he looked out of the window to the sea, hoping there was still the chance the situation may develop no further.

There would be good reason this crew had been called to Naval Command so far away from the sub pens, and this was surely contributing to their current inebriated state. They were likely staying at the Hotel Splendid across

the way, and having drunk that dry after their award ceremony or detailed debrief or whatever the hell it was they were here for, had decided to continue blowing off steam at the Casino. Given the nature of what they had to endure out at – and under – the water, Fieseler did not begrudge them that one bit. However, there was only so much slack he could cut the Kapitan who, he could see in the window's reflection, still believed himself to be in a Wolf Pack, and would not be diverted from his target by his increasingly agitated crew.

A shower of broken glass heralded the Kapitan attempting to gather himself. Falling back into one of the huge mirrors lining the interior wall, he knocked back another over-sized glass of neat alcohol, pushed two of his protesting subordinates out of the way and set a course for the jumped-up prick across the cafe.

Load forward tubes one and two.

Fieseler did not have to watch the progress of the Kapitan - he could hear it behind him and see the slowly turning heads of the officers at the long, ornately gilded bar. Staggering into the middle row of tables and chairs, the Kapitan had righted himself with a slurred curse and continued his way towards where Leon sat. Turning away from the window, Leon had regarded his now empty glass on the polished wooden table. The glass rocked on its base as the Kapitan stumbled into the chair directly opposite Fieseler's position, blocking his view of the bar. After a few swaying seconds, the drunken man had leaned forward, his hands outspread and Iron Cross dangling from his torn and stained double-breasted tunic. Fieseler could still smell the stench of carbolic soap and diesel oil on his clothes, and recalled how bloody and bitten the man's finger-ends had been, nails chewed to nothing in a thousand hours of terror.

Yes, he was a disgrace to the uniform. Yes, he clearly

cared little for the beauty of his surroundings. Even so, Fieseler was still willing to give the Kapitan one final chance - if he would back off. One filthy hand clenched and banged on the table for attention. Leon obliged by looking up into the smirking face of the Kapitan - but there was no warmth there. The Bavarian was a large fellow, but Fieseler had the advantage of height, youth and strength. The Kapitan might have realised this, but clearly did not care as he dropped the tone of his voice to a near whisper, somehow pushing the enormous amount of schnapps he had consumed to some far-off part of his brain so he could speak.

Flood tubes. Ready to fire.

'You know what I really think? I think you won't talk to me, or with anyone else, because it'll be obvious what a queer you are. And do you know how I know that? Eh?'

Fieseler hated being right. This was not going to end well. He did not blink or move. His green eyes bore into the bloodshot brown of the Kapitan's and he waited for the history lesson that would inevitably follow.

'Fieseler comes from the old German word visel. And you know what that means don't you?'

Leon looked down to his glass again. He picked it up and placed it carefully on the deep window sill on his left. It was a beautiful crystal-cut glass, its intricate detail highlighted in orange by the setting sun. It would be a shame for it to get broken. Fieseler sat upright and returned his gaze to the Kapitan whose eyes were wide, crazed. Flecks of spittle were forming in both corners of his cracked and blistered lips.

'Visel means penis. You're a fucking cock. And you want to put it up little boys' arseholes.'

Torpedoes away.

By now, the café had become completely still. Fieseler saw past the Kapitan's left shoulder to the maitre-de who, having looked frantically from the officers at the bar to his staff and back again, dashed off into the main hall in a flurry of napkins and coat-tails. Trouble - real trouble - was unheard of in this part of the Casino. That was one of the reasons why Fieseler had agreed to drink there in the first place. At that precise moment, Leon knew the exact location of everyone in the palatial room, particularly the positions of the other submariners and had worked out as many scenarios as he could. They did not appear to be armed, but other military personnel present were and it would be a simple affair for some of those sailors to wrestle side-arms from pasty clerks and overweight administrators. This had to be dealt with quickly and decisively, otherwise it could escalate into something very nasty indeed.

Fieseler slowly rose to his feet, pushing his ornately carved chair backwards with a squeak of wood on polished tile to give him more space. The Kapitan took a step back in readiness, tongue flicking out to lick his broken lips in readiness for the impeccably dressed officer to take a swing at him. Instead, he was met with a puzzled expression from Fieseler who ran his hand over his close-cropped blonde hair, shook his head and beckoned to the crazed-looking man to lean closer. Wrong-footed by this reaction, the Kapitan lurched forwards, both fists balled and ready for action. Fieseler spoke slowly and calmly, leaning forwards himself, his arms hanging loose by his sides. Hands open, no sign of threat.

'I admire your knowledge of our beautiful language, Herr Kapitan. I really do. Even in your unintelligible accent, it is clear you have managed to read at least one book in your life. However, I must correct you. Visel is not old German. It is, in fact, Middle High German for penis.'

The Kapitan stared into Fieseler's eyes, processing the words. At exactly the same time he realised how insulted

he had been, Fieseler's hands moved up in a blur and clasped behind the inebriated Kapitan's head, far too fast for him to react. With a roar, Fieseler brought both hands down as hard and fast as he could. The submariner's forehead slammed into the polished wood of the table with a mighty bang that echoed around the high ceiling of the cafe. Such was the force, the Kapitan's head bounced straight up and, with a second cry of rage, Fieseler rammed his right hand down onto the back of the Kapitan's head. This time, the man's nose smashed into the wood with a sickening crack.

Grabbing a hold of his lank, greasy hair, Fieseler pulled upwards and pushed him squarely in the chest with his other hand, sending him reeling backwards into the table behind. The Bavarian's face had a gaping split where the nose cartilage had snapped on impact and with blood streaming into his open mouth from the wound, the Kapitan angled off a chair and down onto the spotlessly clean mosaic tiles.

Direct hit.

Fieseler had waited a few seconds for the Kapitan to get up, but all he heard was groans as the man rolled onto one side. Picking up a napkin from the setting next to his place, Fieseler had straightened up and wiped his hands before tossing the pristine white linen onto the table. Retrieving his cap from the chair next to him, he positioned it carefully then looked over to the Kapitan's crew. Before any of them could react, the maitre-de had re-appeared with several Feldgendarmerie who warily surrounded the men to prevent any further trouble. Fieseler had walked straight out of the café into the warm July evening, ignoring the protestations of the maitre-de and nodding to a couple of other faces he recognised. The young officer on whose insistence he had come stood with a glass of red in either hand and gaped.

Since that evening, all the jokes about Fieseler drinking alone or choosing to walk everywhere had stopped.

It did not give Fieseler any pleasure to think of the incident, nor did it cause him any regrets. He was used to looking after himself, but Leon always saw violence as a last resort. Losing control, giving in to the rage that simmered constantly within him, was something he could not afford to do. Nothing on Earth scared him, but he was nevertheless frightened of what excesses he might be capable of, given the spectacularly successful way he had dispatched anyone he considered a threat in the past.

Fieseler took in a breath, sucking in the cold October air to divert his thoughts from darkness. Looking ahead, he was relieved when Rue Carnot began to change. Instead of the quiet silhouettes of villas, hotels and shops, the buildings evidenced more life despite the whole area being a potential target for allied bombers. Some of the architecture was beautiful; the opening of the Wimille-Wimereux train station towards the end of the last century had led to a dramatic expansion of the town after its connection to the Paris-Calais line. Hundreds of wealthy Parisians had built second homes in the area (Fieseler had his eye on one in the Rue des Anglais), with some delightful examples of Belle Epoque design. This had been a very wealthy town, and Fieseler truly hoped the German navy's decision to set up a command post here did not leave it in ruins.

By the time he reached Le Grand Hotel de la Plage, Fieseler's mood had lightened. The street was bustling, and lights blazed from three or four storeys above him. Under normal circumstances he would have avoided the sudden riot of noise and light and the gaggle of figures spilling out from the hotel's doors, but he welcomed the distraction from the gloom of his isolation. As not one of the peak-capped men acknowledged him, Fieseler assumed they either could not see his KorvettenKapitän rank from across the street or were too drunk to focus. The brief

impression Fieseler got of the women accompanying the raucous men suggested they had been roundly fleeced for the best part of the evening and would likely wake up with empty wallets, mighty hangovers and a rash that would not easily go away.

Hunching his shoulders over, Fieseler continued his cold walk back to his lodgings of the last four months, the Hotel Beau Rivage, which faced the church over the Wimereux. By the time he had got half way across the wide stone bridge, the bustle had changed from Friday night revellers to more formal military traffic. Officers and ratings shuttled between the shadows from one appropriated administrative building to another, slip cases full of the enemy's strengths and weaknesses.

Fieseler had better access to the war's bigger picture than many, and while the truth was often hard to distinguish from deliberate or accidental distortion, he was intelligent enough to realise things were slipping for the glorious Third Reich. In the rare conversations he undertook with those he called friends, one or two of them had shrugged and given their situation another year at best. If the Führer wanted to sue for peace (at best) he would have to do something radical other than expand the SS's influence where it was not wanted. That was about as far as the talk went. In their line of business, expressing an opinion could be fatal.

Two armed ratings, machine pistols casually hanging at a forty five degree angle across their heavy coats, snapped their right hands up to their helmets as they passed. It was not the preposterous raised arm of Nazism but the proper Kriegsmarine salute. Fieseler smiled. He had no interest in Fascism, hence the time he had spent either in France or at sea over his last eighteen years of life. Like so many in the officer cadre of the navy, Fieseler saw it as having little bearing on his own patriotism even if the enemy might see things differently from their side. The muted noises he had heard from those close to Admiral Canaris suggested

Hitler might indeed take them to ruin, but Fieseler was damned if anyone would question his love of the Fatherland in the meantime.

Spotting the welcoming steps of his accommodation in the near distance, Fieseler pulled out his lapels, straightened his cap and smartened down his tunic. He knew the French of old, and what he had seen since 1940 was evidence of the extraordinary capacity for professional politeness hoteliers, publicans and shopkeepers could present when required – even if they despised those that subjugated them. Nevertheless, Fieseler needed to look his best at all times, to be the enemy they always expected. That was the only way he would ever hope to take them by surprise.

Indeed, looking as if he was of little threat had saved his life only recently. In late June, when the train taking him into Dieppe had derailed, he had decided to walk the remaining two kilometres to the station. Not knowing the area, he had chosen to follow the railway lines, which led him straight into two cheminots trying to set charges near an unmanned signal box. They had thought him some stuck-up German officer incapable of defending himself without a gun, but they had been wrong. Had Fieseler known his actions that night would take him from his beloved navy into the secretive world of the Abwehr-M, he might have reconsidered his actions. The situation had developed so fast, the luxury of considering the consequences had been denied him.

Yet again on his cold evening walk, Fieseler found himself neither celebrating nor regretting his actions. Because he knew the French so well, he understood the Resistance far better than most of his comrades. This had not made him any friends in Naval Intelligence, but it had not made him any enemies either. In fact his commander appreciated his distorted view, although he made it very clear it should never be shared with anyone outside the Abwehr-M. Fieseler understood the Resistance in exactly

the same way he understood the women who fell in love with German soldiers or the club owners who played German music all night instead of French. They did what they had to do, although when Germany eventually capitulated or whatever outcome might be in store, there would be a mighty reckoning amongst the people of his favourite country (after Germany) on Earth. If anyone ever asked him for his opinion - if indeed he made it to the end of the war - he would have to say a few too many French seemed a little too unconcerned about their lot during the occupation. Chances were, he would never get the opportunity to speak - which suited him fine.

'KorvettenKapitän Fieseler?'

Under the streetlights of the junction across the bridge, Fieseler could see the man was young and eager, crisply dressed with eyes wide and alert. He was not a sailor, but it looked to Leon he had the hope of being one as soon as he got from behind whichever desk he had been tied to.

'How can I help you Leutnant zur See?'

'Kommodore Arnold wishes to see you immediately sir.'

Fieseler blinked at the youth for a few seconds, looked over to the closed doors of the hotel then back again. Two things struck him as odd - first, Arnold had never summoned him before. In fact, he had only heard of the man because of his uncommon use of the Kommodore rank and, truth be known, he had no idea what he did within the Abwehr. Second, according to Fieseler's Alpina wristwatch, it was nearly 11 p.m. The feeling he had when the submarine Kapitän first opened his mouth at the Casino started to creep up the back of Fieseler's neck. He checked the temptation to scratch at it.

'Give me a minute to get my coat and gloves, would you?'

4. Pointe aux Oies

Fieseler squinted against the wind and pushed down his cap so he did not lose it. The sea rolled onto the lines of tank traps and barricades, bands of white foaming up and drifting away into the black sky. Somewhere over there was the Kent coast, safely distant thanks to the English Channel. Once, not that long ago, he had imagined seeing that country for the first time as part of an invasion fleet. The chances of it happening now seemed remote, which he regretted more for the fact he may never visit England than the hope of being a conquering hero.

He had insisted he walk up to the Command Bunker on his own. He did not need an escort and, newly shrouded in his thick coat, he enjoyed the increasing cold of the late evening. Up on the cliffs just north of Wimereux was one of his very favourite places, particularly at night, where the massive defences were not quite so obvious. Down and to his left sat the pretty French seaside town, a little bit of Parisian chic thanks to the money that had flooded in between the wars. He could clearly see the Casino looming over the promenade in the far distance, backlit partially by the soft glow of lights from Boulogne down the coast. After that, Normandy - an area of France he loved, despite the protestations of his college friends that anything west of Clermont-Ferrand 'wasn't really France'. He disagreed.

A low rumble broke Fieseler's reverie and he turned sharply to the right. The squeal of metal doors too heavy for their runners cut through the air, and a vertical chink of light began to appear in the distance. Striding inland, Fieseler's view of the sea was soon obscured behind a towering four metre high striated concrete wall. The raised platform was narrow but easy to walk on and was the main route connecting the mouth of the Wimereux to the enormous concrete bunker complex a few hundred metres

up the coast at Pointe aux Oies. Despite their massive size, it was difficult to see their angular profile in the dark which was, of course, the whole idea. They were brutal, spartan and formidable. If Hitler *did* manage to fortify the whole coast to this extraordinary level, even Fieseler had to agree an allied sea-borne invasion would be very unlikely to succeed. However, the sheer logistics of construction meant it was, like many of the Führer's ideas, fantastic rather than realistic.

Even so, Pointe aux Oies was a perfect defensive location. Napoleon had seen the advantages of this very spot nestled between Boulogne and Calais, and ordered the construction of a harbour and fortifications to defend it. Sadly the fort had long gone, but Fieseler had enjoyed visiting several surviving examples up and down this coast. They had stood the test of time, from warfare to constant attack from the sea itself and he wondered if the monstrous concrete fortress he was heading towards would fare so well.

It was likely Vizeadmiral Fleischer, Admiral Commanding the Channel Coast knew all about its tactical advantages; he had originally set up his headquarters at Lumbres but quickly moved to the Chateau de Wimille a couple of kilometres inland from the Pointe. It was not a bad place to be billeted either, with its three barracks, transmission bunker and sheltered command post. Not that accommodation had been offered to Fieseler or Kommodore Arnold. It was well known Fleischer did not approve of the shenanigans the Abwehr-M got up to, and had made it quite clear they would be occupying the coastal command station looking out to sea at a comfortable distance away from his chateau as soon as it had been completed.

Running alongside Fieseler's path to the right was a single railway line, its sleepers now picked out in sharp relief from the widening shaft of light ahead. The squealing stopped abruptly to be replaced by a rumble, accompanied

by muffled shouts from shadowy figures inside the huge barn-shaped building. Its large double doors had been pushed aside, but all interior detail suddenly disappeared as the lights were shut off. Technically they should not have allowed any light emissions. Some poor conscript would be getting his arse kicked tonight for not turning them off before the doors were opened.

The enormous muzzle of a K5 railway gun loomed metres into the sky. Within thirty seconds the entire weapon rolled into full view, its surprisingly quick progress followed by a soldier jogging along and waving a white warning flag. Its crew scurried over its gantries and platforms, working furiously to elevate the length of the massive 28cm gun to its firing position. A gunnery sergeant stood at the back of the breech, a small torch shining down on a stopwatch. With a bark he told the crew to stop and then, with a furious wave of his arm, ordered the muzzle to its resting position and the carriage back into its housing. Fieseler could not see his expression, but by the tone of his voice he was not in the least bit happy.

Fieseler walked past the muttering men and headed for the black rectangle of the armoured steel door set into the side of the towering bunker complex. Everything about it was enormous and it was likely the allies had discovered it within hours of the complex being finished if, indeed, they did not possess a full set of plans. Ironically, this intelligence might be the very reason they had not attempted to infiltrate or attack it from the land or sea.

By the time Fieseler had released his finger from the entrance buzzer, the steel shutter of the observation hatch was open, cast into deep shadow by the caged bulkhead lamp glowing weakly above the deeply set door. Fieseler could not see the eyes looking down at him, but knew they were there so he fished out his I.D. card and opened it to show both his photograph and the officially stamped details page. After a brief pause, the shutter slid shut, thick bolts were thrown and the huge riveted door swung

inwards to reveal the guard's platform and a set of steeply descending concrete stairs. Fieseler saluted the soldier and headed down, holding tightly onto the bare steel rail, wary of the increasingly precarious descent.

Coming to a second door at the bottom of the steps, he went through the same routine. After gaining entry, he found himself in a long, narrow corridor festooned with exposed cables of various thicknesses along its upper walls. The light from the line of bulkhead lights set into the ceiling was white and harsh and despite being only weeks old, a couple of the lamps were already flickering. Electrics did not fare so well in such cold, damp conditions. Fieseler strode past a series of black and green equidistant steel doors, all closed, all marked with stencilled letters and numbers that meant something to the permanent crew manning the fortification. Fieseler heard a brief echo of music from somewhere around the far corner, only for it to be cut short by a heavy slamming. This was, unmistakably, a place of war. Fieseler wondered if the forces of Napoleon had felt the same in their structures.

An adjutant appeared from the T-junction at the end of the corridor and saluted Fieseler's approach. Holding his arm out to the left, Fieseler saluted back and approached a large steel door. This one was partially open and, on the insistence of the adjutant, Fieseler opened it fully and entered the room. The first thing he saw was a metal-framed double bed tucked into the far corner of the windowless room; the second thing he saw was Kommodore Arnold peering at him from his desk positioned a metre or so in front of it. Because of the low ceiling and the wave of heat blasting out from the oversized cast iron radiator along the far wall, Fieseler found the environment immediately claustrophobic. From a practical perspective, the Kommodore was extremely well protected - one way in, one way out. However, he immediately saw the disadvantage. If someone did get in here with malicious intent, there would be no escape.

Arnold rose to his feet and gave a Nazi salute. Fieseler clipped his heels together and did the same. Arnold was much as Fieseler had expected - early sixties, balding and weather-worn, but there seemed to be an air of desperation about him Fieseler could not quite understand. Arnold was trying to appear relaxed, but there were several papers on his desk that had clearly been fingered and pored over dozens of times. Catching his eye, Arnold swept them up, tapped them into order and placed them into a drawer below the desk. There was something in the way he tried to make it look normal that worried Fieseler even more.

'Will you take a seat, KorvettenKapitän?'

Fieseler nodded, unbuttoned his coat and took off his cap while Arnold murmured something to the adjutant in the corridor then carefully closed the door. The room was no more than three metres square, so it took a little time for Fieseler to position the fold-out metal chair near to the desk without scraping against the foot of the bed.

'I'd offer you a cigarette, but we're next door to the magazine. Have to be careful around here.'

Arnold sat heavily on his high-backed office chair and swivelled to face Fieseler. On his desk, Fieseler could just make out a photograph of a woman roughly Arnold's age and two late-teen children in a silver frame. Next to it were three telephones, a small radio and a clock. Framing Arnold behind him on a large board was a map of the French coast on one side and a series of schematics for the bunker on the other. Curiously, there was not one indication Arnold was a sailor. Across the room, the radiator gurgled loudly. Arnold frowned, waited for a few seconds for the sound to disappear, then continued.

'You're probably wondering why I've asked for you so late in the evening.'

Fieseler had not quite got the measure of the man yet, so decided to go down the party line route.

'I am always on duty Herr Kommodore. It should not

matter what time of day or night it is.'

Arnold leaned back in his chair and frowned again, activating lines around his eyes and across his forehead. He certainly looked like a man who had spent a lot of time at sea. This eased Fieseler's concerns. Perhaps it was a man he could trust after all.

'HmMMMM. Maybe so.'

The Kommodore looked down past the top of the desk to Leon's feet, seemingly distracted by the smooth concrete floor. After a few seconds, he breathed in then exhaled quickly, slipping into a business-like mode. Fieseler could hear the strain of over-caution in the words. He did not like it. The radiator gurgled again, but this time Arnold did not wait for it to finish its guttural noise.

'I have been asked to provide an officer for a very special mission. This request overrides anything that may be asked of you in the Abwehr, regardless of branch.'

The feeling of alarm Fieseler had experienced at the entrance to his hotel began creeping back up his neck. Leon had been on many missions, but he did not like the sound of this at all. Arnold clearly picked up on this, but pretended as if he had not noticed.

'I have talked with your immediate superior and he has released you to my division. I am therefore assigning you to a new posting with immediate effect.'

Fieseler stared over to the photograph of the woman and the children. Their pose seemed artificial, much like the smiles on their faces.

'May I ask sir, with due respect, what this mission is and why I have been chosen for it?'

The corner of Arnold's left eye began to twitch. Just like the submarine Kapitan, Arnold's nails and fingers were bitten and sore. However, the wounds seemed fresh. Whatever pressure had been put upon him, it had happened recently. One of the nails had been picked with such force his finger was bleeding.

'I cannot tell you what the mission is. This will be

discussed with your new commander. As to why you have been chosen, there are several reasons. You are a fluent French speaker, have extensive knowledge of counter-intelligence and are very handy in a fight. You also appear to be dependable, loyal and have enough initiative to realise when you shouldn't act on your own cognisance. That's a fairly rare combination.'

Fieseler looked down at his own clean, neat nails, smoothed the material on his uniform pants then looked straight into the tired eyes of Arnold. He was not going to get much more out of this meeting. The back of his neck was on fire. What the hell did that mean – 'have enough initiative to realise when you shouldn't act on your own cognisance?' Do as you're told, regardless?

'Thank you sir. What are my orders?'

Arnold paused for a second. He looked relieved, as if a series of awkward question or challenges had not come. A swishing sound came from the radiator, as if some blockage had finally been cleared. The temperature in the squat, drab room seemed to go up by ten degrees and Fieseler started to sweat.

'You are to report to SS Oberführer Gottschalk at 09:00 hours. He will be at his quarters in Saint-Omer, the motte castrale by the cathedral. Do you know it?'

Fieseler's stomach lurched.

SS.

Scheiße.

Keeping his voice as devoid of emotion as he could, Fieseler stared directly at Arnold. He was sure his eyes were giving away his true feelings.

'Yes sir. As a matter of fact, I do.'

5. Denmark Hill

Shepherd awoke well before the dawn. Despite only having a few hours' sleep and his body aching, he nevertheless felt very pleased with himself. Outside he could hear Cold Morham was already a hive of activity, vehicles coughing into life and spluttering away, the crunch of boots on gravel, bangs and crashes from the kitchen block. Easing himself upright, he looked over to see if Garbutt, his fellow occupant of the cramped outhouse room, had stirred. The bunk was empty and still made up. People tended to disappear like that from time to time. No-one asked why.

Quickly dressing, Shepherd put on his fatigues and made a mental note to get his filthy combats from the night before over to the laundry before 08:00. If he was caught without clean and useful kit, it would be a dressing down and PT for the next week. Emerging into the crisp morning, Shepherd marched over towards the mess, saluting a couple of NCOs and a six-strong group of privates who were heading out for exercises. They must have been up early.

Shepherd entered the noisy, crowded mess. Any hopes of acknowledgement for his stealthy antics of only a few hours previous were dashed as he was met with a disinterested glance from a four-strong table on his left and a glare from Mackenzie squatting in the corner over an over-large mug of tea. His fellow sergeant looked over at Shepherd, frowned, then back down to his plate of eggs. Whatever he muttered to Mackenzie did not make him laugh whether it was intended to or not. Spotting a seat in the corner of the large wooden hut, Shepherd squeezed past a couple of RNVR technicians, one of which looked around with a grunt. Recognising Shepherd, the heavily bearded man gave him a second look and a scowl. Shepherd tossed his woollen cap onto his chair to claim

the space then joined the line behind the row of trestle tables behind which three cooks were dishing out a variety of steaming food. Within five minutes, Shepherd was tucking into his own eggs and some burned toast, looking out of the window and trying to ignore the furious glares from the sergeant diagonally behind him.

Shepherd felt disappointed the rest of the troop had nothing to say about last night. There was absolutely no way they wouldn't have known about it. But then again, why should they? Some of the men eating around him were the original Dieppe Raid boys. They had seen action a good year before the Special Intelligence Unit had been renamed to 30 RN Commando. To say they were hard to impress was an under-statement. But then, perhaps he was being hard on himself. He hadn't joined the Commandos for praise or recognition.

Luckily, if that was the right word, his previous experience within the NID had been just enough to get him transferred and he had expected a rough ride. Even with his service record, doubts had still remained about his suitability for the unit, particularly in Mackenzie. The only option left open to Shepherd had been to challenge the sergeant to a duel of wits. Ah well, he'd proved his point. Mackenzie's face was testament to that. As the sun crept above the roofline of the farmhouse opposite, Shepherd's self-satisfaction rose too.

Around him, the mess hall emptied quickly as he finished his food. Shepherd was at the bottom of his tin mug of impossibly stewed tea when Clayton, Colonel Redmayne's snooty adjutant, slinked into the hut and met Shepherd's gaze. Weaving his way through the carelessly discarded chairs, Clayton stood before Shepherd, saluted in a perfunctory fashion then leaned forwards conspiratorially.

'Good morning Lieutenant. Colonel Redmayne wishes to see you at eleven hundred hours at his office. He recommends you do not make this meeting common

knowledge.'

Shepherd did not quite know what to make of Clayton's message. Despite only having been at Cold Morham for some weeks, Shepherd recognised this as an unusual approach. His interest piqued, Shepherd confirmed his understanding, returned to his quarters to sort his combats out with the laundry then readied himself in his best dress uniform.

At two minutes to eleven, Clayton showed Shepherd into the colonel's 'office' which was, in fact, originally the living room of the farm's main living quarters. It was the first time he had been inside and was disappointed the interior was as dilapidated and run-down as all of the other buildings at Cold Morham. There had been some attempt to make it comfortable, but like the rest of what passed as furniture across the barracks and outbuildings, the battered leather Chesterton offered to Shepherd looked far more comfortable than it actually was.

As he sat, Shepherd recalled his first meeting with Redmayne on the day he had arrived for training. The colonel had made it very clear he had taken more than a little convincing to allow his transfer from NID and, casually flicking through his file, had expressed amazement an individual could be an expert on such a mundane thing as concrete. When Shepherd had tried to politely explain he was more a specialist in naval dock construction, it hadn't done a great deal to ignite the colonel's interest nor satisfy his puzzlement.

Taking his place on a creaking wooden office chair, Redmayne ignored the sheaf of papers spread across his messy desk, concentrating instead on filling his pipe. When he eventually spoke, the words that came out were surprising.

'Missile bases. What can you tell me about them?'

Shepherd knew what missiles were. Even so, he felt it best to answer with some caution.

'Missile bases sir? I really wouldn't know anything

about them. Isn't that the Air Force's bag?'

Sitting back, Redmayne glared at his pipe which, despite striking three matches and wafting them over the blackened bowl, had failed to light.

'Lieutenant, don't tell me you haven't heard about Operation Crossbow. Your clearance at NID would have given you access to a considerable amount of information. That and the flapping gums of the intelligence Johnnies down the Embankment.'

The manner of Redmayne's reply made it quite clear that while he might not be able to master his own smoking implement, anyone who tried to take him for a fool would regret it. The greying hair and slight frame might have made him look older than his years, but Shepherd knew Redmayne to be a tough, wiry man who'd fought in combat alongside many of the original Dieppe Raid boys. There were various stories connected to the five inch scar running from the left of his mouth to beneath his earlobe, all of which concluded with the man who gave it to Redmayne getting far worse than he dished out.

Missile bases. Interesting. It looked as if Shepherd's understanding of reinforced structures was now of interest and value to the Colonel. He didn't doubt Redmayne had read his dossier with the greatest of care, and knew about Shepherd's involvement in some of the most secret missions of the war to date, particularly his analysis of the U-Boat pens at La Rochelle and Bordeaux. It had been Shepherd's scrutiny of the post-mission RAF reconnaissance of Brest that had been key in cancelling any future missions to the city, such was the lack of damage their bombs could inflict on the massive submarine bunkers.

The same, sadly, couldn't be said of the outlying town which had suffered considerable harm. Shepherd had nearly got into a fight with a haughty RAF officer who had referred to the destruction as 'collateral', some legal term he had once heard to do with bricks falling on people's

heads from unsafe buildings or suchlike. Shepherd had seen the destruction and misery in Brest first-hand and would not dismiss the French's misery as some unavoidable side-effect. It had made Shepherd push all the more for the cancellation of raids, insisting the RAF turned their attention to other targets. Based on his reports and the logic of his arguments, the top brass had eventually agreed.

Redmayne had finally got his pipe to light, and was staring past the glowing embers directly at Shepherd awaiting an answer. Shepherd took the colonel's knowledge of his security clearance as permission to speak freely about what he knew, something he had not been able to do since joining 30 Commando to anybody else.

'I believe things started picking up around June this year, sir. Wasn't there a major bombing raid somewhere on the northern German coast about eight weeks ago?'

Redmayne's light grey eyes had widened in response to the smoke now drifting from his pipe. He seemed disproportionately pleased with himself.

'Peenemunde. Baltic coast. Some kind of pilotless 'plane. Flyboys flattened the place. You won't have seen any information on it. Very few people have. Absolute top secret and all that. After that pasting, Jerry is building new sites for them across the Pas de Calais. I'm led to believe there's something big brewing, and for that the Hun have gone to ground.'

Through a haze of smoke, Shepherd noted the suggestion of a smile on Redmayne's lips as he sucked at his pipe then used its chewed end to point down to his cluttered desk.

'Or should I say, underground.'

Shepherd's leg began to tingle. When he had been researching the sub pens at Brest for Naval Intelligence, he'd been privy to smuggled construction documents from the Organisation Todt. The OT did all of Hitler's big stuff, the death of their founder Fritz Todt in 1942 having done

nothing to stop their massive expansion. Albert Speer, Hitler's visionary architect, had taken charge. For all his lack of morality, Shepherd recognised Speer to be a brilliant man; the scale at which he thought and worked was breathtaking, majestic even. It was just a shame he was on their side. However, that was as far as his rose-tinted view of Speer went. Shepherd distinctly remembered having great difficulty reading one set of schematics because they had been smeared with blood.

Underground.

If the OT were developing new ways to engineer bases, particularly below the water table, Shepherd wanted to know. The colonel clearly understood Shepherd was the man to talk to about such things, which pleased Shepherd greatly. Putting down his pipe on an ash-filled metal tray rescued from some public house or other, Redmayne reached towards a pile of papers, lifting up a sheet marked 'Eyes Only'. Reading it for a few seconds, Redmayne leaned forwards in his chair, wafting away drifting smoke from the pipe which seemed more content to burn without its owner than in his hand.

'Up to now, Crossbow's been mostly air attacks and mainly British, but the feeling is the Yanks will want to do their own thing sooner or later about these new weapons. Hitler calls them... forgive my pronunciation of this bloody language... Vergeltungswaffe. Vengeance weapons. The bases are cropping up all over the place. As soon as we find them, we bomb them. Thing is, there's a limit to what you can do from the air - something I believe you're very well aware of that.'

Yes, you have read my file in detail.

Redmayne leaned back, looked down at his khaki tunic then brushed unburned tobacco from his chest. Retrieving

his pipe with a look of disappointment, he turned the tip of his pipe towards Shepherd.

'Now look here. I am attending a briefing in two days which -'

A single rap came on the door and Clayton strode in, not waiting for permission to enter. Shepherd thought he would get an absolute roasting from the colonel but was amazed Redmayne simply held out his hand, took the telegram thrust towards him then nodded in reply to the salute. By the time the door had clicked shut, Redmayne had scanned the square of paper. When his eyes flicked from the message to stare into Shepherd's, the Colonel's expression had become grave.

Fifteen minutes later, Shepherd was on his way to see his dying mother.

'There's another diversion Lieutenant. I'll try going down to Brentford and past Richmond. Sorry about this.'

The apology was unnecessary but the corporal was a good sort. He'd tried his best to coax the clapped-out Humber Super Snipe through the early morning traffic into London but the condition of the staff car and various damaged roads had transpired to slow their progress to a crawl. Shepherd could have taken the train in but Colonel Redmayne preferred Lansdale drive him there, not so much to save time but to ensure that, once his 'unfortunate business' had been seen to, he could come straight back to Cold Morham.

As the car bounced and rolled its way towards the Thames, Shepherd hunched himself into the corner of the bench seat and stared out of the rear quarter window. He'd given up pushing the damaged centre arm rest to its upright position, and leaning on it was even more uncomfortable than sitting as he was. On a good day it'd be less than a two hour journey to Denmark Hill, but Lansdale's best efforts to reach the hospital as quickly as

possible were being thwarted at every turn. Realising he had not acknowledged the corporal, Shepherd shrugged his shoulders at Lansdale's reflection in the wallowing car's rear-view mirror.

Shepherd looked back outside the Humber's dirty window. He didn't recognise the architecture of the buildings before him, but figured they were somewhere south of the Thames heading East. This was in part due to the position of the sun, but mostly down to the increasing number of cordoned off sites of rubble and forlorn gaps between houses. Thank God the air raids had stopped. In a way, if his mother had been hurt in an attack, he might have accepted her decline a little easier. To survive countless tons of bombs only to have a brain tumour slowly eat her away was too unfair to think about.

'Doesn't look too bad now sir. We should get to Kings within half an hour.'

Shepherd nodded over to Lansdale again. He felt wretched, but the fact of the matter was the arrival of the telegram during the meeting with Redmayne was absolutely the last thing Shepherd had needed. He was also angry it had acted to divert the discussion from whatever Redmayne was going to say, to his mother. The colonel had attempted to be as brusque as possible in questioning Shepherd about his mother's condition, and while he had made it clear he could not permit his personnel to be distracted in any way, shape or form from their missions, he was nevertheless a compassionate man. Besides, from what Shepherd had told him, it looked as if the situation was going to resolve itself very quickly anyway.

Shepherd had known this day was coming, but had not expected it so soon. His transfer over to 30 Commando had taken up his entire attention, but the decline of his mother had always been there at the back of his mind. He'd hoped that, once his training had finished at Cold Morham, he would be able to visit her at home before his first mission but the urgency of the telegram

indicated she wouldn't be leaving Kings College Hospital alive. The timing would never be right, and in a way if things were to come to an end, they might as well be right now. Shepherd sighed, his breath steaming up the window of the car. He didn't bother wiping it away.

Lansdale was true to his word. The car crunched up the grand entrance to the hospital just before three in the afternoon. A minute later, Shepherd was at the reception desk. After a couple of wrong turns down seemingly identical corridors, he eventually found himself at the nurse's station outside the entrance to the Guthrie wing.

'Can I help you?'

An immaculately dressed nurse regarded Shepherd coolly. He guessed she was in her mid-forties, and while she was a handsome woman he couldn't see a ring on her finger. Perhaps nurses didn't wear them on the wards. He hadn't spent enough time in the places to know.

'I'm here to see Bidy Shepherd.'

The nurse's expression changed from one of professional detachment to something warmer. Smoothing down her white smock he got a whiff of antiseptic from her scrubbed fingers, another chemical smell to add to the layers he was already contending with. She cocked her head to one side, allowing a wisp of auburn hair to escape from her high cap.

'You must be Harry.'

Shepherd blinked at the woman. His confusion spread quickly to the nurse, whose smile slipped.

'I'm Archie. Archie Shepherd. Bidy is my mother.'

The nurse looked over to her desk and reached for a clipboard. Flicking over a couple of pages, she looked up to Shepherd then back to her notes.

'I'm sorry Mister - Lieutenant Shepherd. It's just that she's been asking for Harry since she was admitted. I just assumed you... Oh dear.'

For a split second the nurse seemed to be unsure of what to do but it quickly passed. Shepherd guessed the woman had dealt with far worse situations in her time.

'It's all part of her condition. Tumours can affect the memory as well as everything else. I... Oh dear. Would you care to follow me?'

Shepherd wasn't give the opportunity to respond. The nurse turned on her heel then strode down the highly polished parquet floor, sweeping past several closed doors with high square windows set into them. Some had curtains across, some didn't. At the very end of the whitewashed corridor she turned to a door on her left and rested her hand on the worn brass handle. Releasing it slowly, she stepped back and looked directly at Shepherd.

'There should be a doctor here really, but I think it's best you see her as soon as possible.'

Despite her professionalism, Shepherd could tell in the woman's watery blue eyes she still felt desperately sorry for the dying. Shepherd had known his mother was in decline. The guilt of leaving her care to his aunt Win hit him like a wave, and he felt the damaged skin on his leg prickle.

'Please don't take too much notice of what she says. She's not... She's not the person you once knew.'

Shepherd had been given that warning over a year ago when the tumour had been first discovered. His mother had laughed off the suggestion she'd be changed by a lump in her head, but every month saw her movement become more difficult, memory less effective and moods increasingly violent. He inhaled, took off his cap, nodded to the nurse and opened the door.

As soon as Shepherd saw the state of his mother, he thanked God she wasn't on a normal ward. The indignity of it would have killed her had she realised. He barely recognised the cadaverous figure in front of him; her skin was sallow, face skeletal and breathing ragged. One arm was out of the tightly sheeted bed, fingers bony and talon-

like, and her upper body was propped up by four large white pillows partially obscuring the metal framed bedstead behind her. The walls were light grey, working effortlessly with the small open window to the right to remove all warmth and cheer from the room. The only splash of colour came from his mother's peach gown.

To the left sat a night chair with a rough brown blanket folded neatly on it. Aunt Win's large canvas bag was tucked neatly below, but no Win. Shepherd thought to go back out and ask the nurse where she was, but Win wouldn't have gone very far. There was a smell in the room he couldn't place, but it was dreadful. Taking a breath through his mouth, he gently placed his cap onto a dark wooden tallboy next to the door and approached the bed on the window side, the detail of his mother's vacant face making his stomach churn.

'Mother, it's Archie.'

Biddy didn't react at all. She continued to stare forwards from darkened eye sockets, her mouth moving slightly without any sound coming forth. Bending over to fill her vision, he rested his hand on hers as he spoke again.

'Mother. It's me.'

Biddy's hand flinched and moved slightly. Her eyes rolled to the right and left and then came alive, as if someone had reconnected her to the world. She began to scan the room around Shepherd, voiceless questions forming on her lips until her gaze connected with his.

She smiled.

Shepherd began to cry.

At that moment the door opened and Win bustled in. Shepherd straightened up and looked over to her, a younger, healthier mirror of the shell his mother had become. Win gave Archie a crushing hug, and the warm odour of tobacco and rosewater comforted him.

'Look Win. It's Harry. He's come to see me.'

His mother's voice was weak, almost a whisper, but

they heard every word. Stepping away from the embrace, Shepherd wiped his face with the back of his uniform sleeve and frowned. Win looked sharply over to Bidy and went over to re-arrange her pillows.

'Now come on Bidy. You know full well that's Archie.'

A little too roughly, Win moved the frail lady forwards and placed her back onto the plumped pillows, ignoring the surprised look from her nephew. With a practiced swish she untied her red headscarf, floated it over the back of the night chair and undid the buttons on her woollen coat.

'I don't know who Archie is. We lost Archie. That's Harry.'

Shepherd caught a look on Win's face. It wasn't what he expected.

'Shut up Bidy. This is Archie. Your son.'

Shepherd felt his leg begin to burn. Where the *hell* was this conversation going? Why was Win getting so angry?

'Win, she doesn't know what she's saying. It's the tumour. It's alright.'

Win took off her heavy coat and threw it on to the chair. She wasn't a fat woman, but she was well-built and it only added to Shepherd's misery that her sister had shrunk to the wizened figure on the bed. Win and his mother had been close for as long as he could remember; in fact, Win had played a major part in bringing him up when his father had died long before the war. He'd never understood why she'd not married because she'd always seemed such a loving person. For that reason alone he found her manner unsettling. Win reached down into her bag beneath the chair and fished out a pack of Players. The cigarette shook as she put it between her rouged lips.

'It's not alright. I've heard this every day and every night for the last two months. She's kept asking for her son and I've kept telling her you're not called Harry and

you're away at sea. I wasn't even sure you'd get the telegram. I sent it three days ago.'

Win wasn't to know it was a miracle it'd been redirected to Shepherd at all. Looking back to his mother, he was startled to see she was staring directly at him and shaking her head. Her hair was thin and wispy on the worn cotton pillows, nothing like he remembered the last time he'd seen her.

'You're not my son.'

Win stopped clicking on her exhausted lighter and snatched the cigarette from between her lips.

'Shut up Biddy. Shut up!'

Win hissed the words. She was shaking with anger. Shepherd's mind reeled. He couldn't recognise any of the people in the room anymore.

'He's NOT MY SON!'

Every ounce of energy went into Biddy's scream. Win's eyes widened and her jaw tightened. Outside, Shepherd could hear footsteps hurrying towards them.

'I'M NOT YOUR MOTHER!'

The door flew open and the nurse entered in a whirl of blue and white. Shepherd took a final look at his mother, who was staring at him in terror and confusion. Before the nurse or Win could speak he'd grabbed his cap and was out in the corridor, marching as fast as he could away from the room. Just before he got to the nurse's station, he heard a high-pitched scream and the slamming of a door.

To hell with this.

6. The motte castrale

Gottschalk stared at the faded canopy above his four-poster bed. The sun had not quite risen but there was enough light in the spacious room to see motes of dust drifting above his head. It was hardly surprising he had slept so soundly; his mattress was soft to the point of absorbent, and the short, uneventful drive to the motte castrale had allowed his adrenalin rush to subside. His staff had readied this room as a priority, and ensured the work undertaken in the rest of the complex had not disturbed their Oberführer's rest. This pleased Gottschalk, who rose and slipped on his dressing gown just as the creaking of ancient floorboards announced the approach of Bauer outside his chamber.

A sharp rap came from the heavy oak door. No one knocked like Bauer; for a heavy-set man he was surprisingly delicate in speech and manner, making him perfect as a personal aide. Bauer was not suited to active duty but then, conceded Gottschalk, neither was he.

'Sir, it is 07:30. I insisted on you being allowed to sleep until this time. Your bath is drawn and breakfast will be ready in thirty minutes. You have your first meeting at 09:00.'

Gottschalk walked over to the door and opened it enough to see Bauer nod a salute.

'I will be out presently. Has Kessering reported in yet?'

Bauer looked straight into Gottschalk's eyes. His expression was as neutral as always, even when talking about Kessering. The two did not get on, a wholly deliberate act of appointment by Gottschalk. Like most senior Nazis, Gottschalk knew that having subordinates who distrusted each other meant all their efforts would be concentrated on pleasing their master and plotting against each other instead of him. It worked for Himmler,

Goering and the Führer. Who was Gottschalk to question such an effective strategy?

'Yes sir. He called at 05:30 to say the mess had been cleared at the station and he would be dealing with the deputy manager before midday today. He will report as soon as the situation is clearer. That was his exact message.'

Gottschalk smiled. Some of his colleagues thought it problematic having someone so close to him possess a photographic memory, but they were fools. He had the great advantage of not having his diary written down for all to see.

'Very good Bauer. Ready my uniform while I bathe. That is all.'

Bauer clicked his heels, nodded curtly then strode away across the wide landing and down the large wooden staircase leading to the ground floor of the ageing guard house. Gottschalk pushed the door closed, strolled over to the mahogany bedside cabinet and retrieved his spectacles. Shuffling his feet into a pair of well-worn leather sandals, Gottschalk walked over to the ill-fitting window and peered out. Before him was an immaculate lawn and a lush green wall of trees and bushes partially obscuring the rear of Saint-Omer cathedral. An engine started up somewhere to the right and Gottschalk heard the scrunch of wheels on aggregate. The news he was up and awake had clearly spread.

Gottschalk shuddered. His dressing gown and heavy cotton underwear offered some protection from the October morning chill, but there were so many gaps in the rickety wooden window frame it was hardly surprising he was shivering. Something would have to be done about that in the near future but for now, the bedroom had a good sized fireplace so it should be bearable as the winter approached. As the day brightened, Gottschalk turned to examine his room in more detail. Paint was peeling off the walls, damp crept up one corner and the ceiling was a

broken spider web of cracks. All of this could – and would – be fixed. The motte castrale was, after all, several hundred years old. Glancing back over to the window, he smirked. You certainly could not get a better view. Bauer had done an excellent job.

Gottshalk had met Bauer very early in his rise up the SS ranks and immediately realised a person with such an unusual eye for detail and precise memory could be hugely useful in his day-to-day business. If the situation ever arose, it would be far quicker to put a bullet in Bauer's head than to gather up countless pieces of incriminating paper showing where he had been and when.

Wait. Paper.

Where is it? What have I done with it?

Striding back to the bed, he opened the cupboard door to the bedside cabinet. It was empty. Looking over to the elaborately carved wardrobe opposite the window wall, he could see it was not in there because the door had swung open in the night, revealing his uniforms hanging in neat rows. Where did that leave to check? Panic began to rise in his chest.

Falling to his knees, Gottschalk stuck his head underneath the bed and breathed a sigh of relief. The case was lying patiently on its back, the chain handcuffed around the carved foot of one post. It would be safe enough there until he found a more permanent, less comically obvious place for it. Rising to his feet, Gottschalk wiped his palms of the ancient dust from the uneven wooden floor, went over to the wardrobe to pick up his toiletry bag and headed to the bathroom.

Fieseler checked his Alpina. It was 08:49. While he usually enjoyed freshly baked croissant and coffee,

particularly on a still, crisp morning such as this, his breakfast was not sitting at all well as he strode towards Saint-Omer cathedral. Having passed through the town on several occasions before and during the war, he knew the best places to go - just off the main square. Despite the splendid view of the high-arched Mairie from the cramped café in which he had eaten, he could not say he had enjoyed it one bit. Luckily he had realised the clock mounted on the building's domed roof was slow. Being late for his appointment would have gone down about as well as his food this morning.

Fieseler was used to surly glances and murmured curses from the locals wherever he went, but the atmosphere about the place was perhaps the most oppressive he had ever felt. Much of it had to do with the subtle change in uniforms. If Fieseler noticed the change from Wehrmacht insignia to *Schutzstaffel* markings, the locals would most certainly have done too. They would be rightly nervous because the SS stood for something entirely different, a way of dealing with things Fieseler found distasteful at best and loathsome at worst. On that, it was likely he and the French agreed. Fieseler was not looking forward to his meeting at all, but he was not going into it with an empty stomach.

The town's narrow cobbled streets were already alive. Headscarved women and scowling men headed to and from the Saturday market with bags and bundles under their arms. Fieseler had instructed his driver to drop him off away from his meeting so he could walk in; they would only get snarled up in a mess of carts and spluttering tractors bringing in produce to the bustling square. On top of that, there was around a four-fold increase in military vehicles on the roads, again most of them SS. He saw little point in adding to the congestion.

The early morning sun glinted on the clerestorey windows of the cathedral's imposing tower, catching Fieseler's eye. It was such a beautiful building, and he was

glad it had not sustained the damage so many precious places had suffered across Europe. The itch on the back of his neck had spread to between his shoulder blades. It was a sure sign he was stressed. He could not remember the last time it had felt this bad, even when he had fought the two Resistance fighters on the rail tracks to the death. Fieseler rolled his shoulders, hoping the weight of his heavy coat and uniform would give him some relief. None came.

It took some minutes for Fieseler to walk around the towering gothic structure and he picked up the pace, realising he still had some way to go. With the cathedral now behind him, he followed the road towards the motte castrale. More locals passed him by, heading for or from the market with loaves tucked under their arms or vegetables spilling out of broad wicker baskets. Nearing a tree-lined avenue, Fieseler spotted a sentry point guarding a narrow track. Assuming it was a secondary entrance to the motte castrale, he approached the wary looking guards. The sergeant scrutinised Fieseler's identification card with fingerless gloves while the other regarded him coolly, his finger resting lightly over the trigger of his well-worn MP 40. Ducking into a half-finished wooden hut, the sergeant wound the handle on his field telephone and spoke briefly. With a nod he replaced the receiver, returned Fieseler's card and nodded down the tree-lined lane, deep in shadow from the low October sun.

At 08:59 and a few seconds, Fieseler passed the final set of guards and entered the motte castrale through the heavy wooden doors set into the red brick porch of the imposing building. He knew something of the history of the place; long before the cathedral, these grounds had housed a succession of fortifications for the local counts and lords. Towards the end of the 18th century the present building had been constructed in the style of a Vauban barracks - except it was never intended to house troops but to act as a prison, which it did extremely successfully

for over a hundred years. It had been in private hands for nearly fifty years until its recent acquisition by the SS. Typical of Himmler's bully boys to cherry pick the best location in town and set up shop.

Whoever the previous occupants had been, they had tried to make the interior look less like a prison and more like a home, but their efforts had achieved only partial success. The harsh light from a row of naked bulbs illuminating the entrance hall chased away the gloom, revealing the impression of several rectangles beneath the wall's plaster where doors had once led off to God knew where. From their size, Fieseler guessed this had likely once been the entrance to the jail proper. Bangs and shuffles issued from below his feet, confirming the basement level he had been told of. If local knowledge was to be trusted, the lower levels still housed several virtually intact cells. Knowing the SS as Fieseler did, they would surely come in very handy for their new tenants.

Before his thoughts could descend any further below ground, a middle-aged, well-groomed Ordonnanzoffizier appeared at the bottom of a short stairway leading to the first floor. Returning the man's perfectly executed salute with equal precision, Fieseler was ushered up the creaking stairs into a large farmhouse-style sitting room. Welcoming daylight streamed in from the East-facing window, although there was no warmth created this late in the year. Framed in the sunlight of the window, the outline of a slight figure looked out onto the well-manicured grounds across which Fieseler had just walked, seemingly lost in thought. His hands were clasped behind his back and narrow shoulders thrown back in an attempt to make himself look important. Small man syndrome, thought Fieseler, and took in the rest of the room while he awaited acknowledgement of his arrival.

To his left, Fieseler saw a second identically sized window set into the wall. Before it was a wooden desk on which sat two telephones, the cables running neatly down

and out of the partially opened window, and an ornate lamp without a bulb. There was an object on the furthest of the two chairs arranged on opposite sides of the desk, but Fieseler could not quite see what it was. Across the room, the large hearth was charred with soot and smoke, discolouring the bare brick that formed a wide chimney running up into the low beamed ceiling. Two leather armchairs faced it on either side, the perfect cosy place to talk and relax after a hard day's work. Fieseler wondered when the fire had last been lit by its previous owners, then pushed the thought away.

Realising the figure had proved his point of superiority by making Fieseler wait, the Ordonnanzoffizier stepped into the room and cleared his throat.

'Korvettenkapitän Fieseler, Oberführer Gottschalk.'

Gottschalk turned slowly and took two steps forward, peering down his spectacles as if inspecting a dinner menu. Saluting, he declared 'Heil Hitler' in a reedy voice. Now out of the silhouette, Fieseler could see the man in detail. His face was pinched and skin pallid, likely from spending most of his time indoors. With his four polished tunic buttons, gleaming dress boots and party pin perfectly centred on his black tie, Gottschalk was every centimetre an SS officer. True to form, the man regarded Fieseler with a thoroughly misplaced air of superiority.

As a naval officer and well-bred young man, Fieseler was used to good quality clothes and could see Gottschalk had no idea how a jacket should fit properly. He was clearly trying to convey a message with his choice of the original black SS uniform colour, something along the lines of 'I have been a Nazi since the beginning and am proud to display it' or such nonsense. Unfortunately, his image portrayal did not quite extend to having the right collar size. He had only said two words, but Fieseler already found him utterly despicable.

Returning the salute and customary heil, Fieseler remained at attention in the unsettlingly homely room.

Gottschalk strolled over to one of the armchairs and patted it dismissively.

'You may put your coat and cap on this chair Korvettenkapitän.'

Fieseler removed both, draping his coat carefully over the chair's back and placing his cap on the broad arm. By now Gottschalk had taken his seat behind the desk and was placing a black attaché case onto its top, the object Fieseler had not quite been able to see earlier. He noticed the case had a heavy chain terminating in a handcuff attached to its handle, adding potential paranoia to the growing list of the man's detestable character traits. Gottschalk opened the lid and pushed the case forwards, the contents hidden from Fieseler's view as he waited patiently to be given permission to sit. The SS man took a deliberately long time arranging something so Fieseler took the opportunity to look past him out of the window. Because of the motte castrale's elevated position, he could see over the haphazard rooflines of the surrounding houses and out into open fields. It would be a lovely view late evening, with the sun going down. Pity it was wasted on such a pig.

Finally Gottschalk waved Fieseler to sit, pulling himself closer to the table with a squeal of wood on wood. As Fieseler settled, Gottschalk looked up over his round glasses, the back of the case hiding whatever it was that Gottschalk was reading.

'I have to say, researching you has presented me with some challenges.'

For a couple of seconds Fieseler did not understand what the ratty man meant. He knew the SS poked and pried into everyone's business, but this sounded ominous. Then again, Fieseler recognised it as a perfect opening gambit, and one he himself had used during occasional interrogations for the Abwehr. Let the enemy know you know more about them than they do you. Fieseler wished he had undertaken his own research into Gottschalk, but

simply had not been given the time. This was also deliberate, he concluded. The best reaction was, of course, not to react, so he remained perfectly still. Relax. Give no hint of emotion. Keep the rage in its box, Leon.

'There appears to be some confusion over your birth records. The originals are nowhere to be found and while the copies are perfectly legal, I find it curious there is no reason given for their replacement. An accident perhaps?'

Fieseler raised an eyebrow and looked directly at Gottschalk, who chose not to meet his gaze. The question was completely unexpected and he had absolutely no idea where this might be going, so Fieseler answered with an immediate truth.

'I do not know of any accident Oberführer. I was not aware there was anything... unusual about my records. Nothing has ever been said during my education or military service. I have my own birth certificate but naturally assumed it was a copy from the original. I am afraid I cannot explain it any more than that.'

Gottschalk's dark beady eyes flicked up and stared into Fieseler's for some seconds. The SS man was reading him. Good. Go ahead. There is no evasion here because it is truth.

'I think you will find we are infinitely more scrupulous than anyone you have ever encountered, Fieseler.'

Fieseler's face remained calm, his eyes steady.

'Of that, sir, I have no doubt.'

It was beautifully intonated with no hint of sarcasm or surprise. He had stated a fact, and this seemed to satisfy Gottschalk who returned his attention to the documents hidden by the case.

'Your parents are both dead. Your father in June 1931 and mother in August the following year. I am assuming that is connected to you leaving University and joining the navy?'

Fieseler nodded.

'Partly, Oberführer. While at university I became friendly with several fellow students whose aim it was to join the Reichsmarine. Their decisions were based mostly on family pressures and traditions. Mine was more to do with the launch of the *Deutschland* and the rebuilding of the fleet. It impressed me, and a life at sea attracted me - particularly with no family remaining.'

Gottschalk seemed pleased at the mention of the revolutionary pocket battleship.

'Ah, the *Deutschland*. One in the eye for the French and English yes?'

Fieseler nodded again. Was Gottschalk attempting to find some common ground between them? The *Deutschland* had been built in accordance with the despised Articles 181 to 197 of the Treaty of Versailles but was a modern, cutting edge ship and more than a match for anything the allies had. He had seen it shortly after its launch in 1933 and all thoughts of returning to his mathematical studies vanished in that single moment. Good God, was that ten years ago?

'You are unmarried and are not currently in a relationship. You did have a close friend, Helena Levi, while at the University of Cologne but you have not seen her for five years.'

Ah. The inevitable Jewish question. Here we go, thought Fieseler. Gottschalk leant forwards and sorted through the contents of his case, the heavy chain scraping over the rough wooden desk with the case's movements. The motion stopped and Gottschalk lifted a piece of paper. Fieseler could just make out what appeared to be a page full of text arranged in narrow lines. Somewhat theatrically, Gottschalk ran his finger from one side to the other, nodded, and then replaced the paper into the case. Reaching down into his trouser pocket, he retrieved a handkerchief, took off his glasses and gave them a polish as he continued.

'Nor are you likely to again.'

Fieseler felt the skin between his shoulders burn. Gottschalk was trying to procure a reaction, but to what end? He had been requested - ordered - to come here. Why bait him so? How in God's name could he be expected to work with this animal? Gottschalk replaced his glasses and stuffed his handkerchief back into his pocket. For long moments he stared into the case, retrieved a cardboard folder and placed it carefully to the right of the case underneath the broken lamp. He closed the lid, snapped the clasp shut and then sat back in his chair.

'So, to business. What did Arnold tell you of your new posting?'

7. Baker Street

Redmayne broke the uncomfortable silence as they passed Regent's Park.

'Sorry to hear about your mother, Shepherd. Bad business.'

It had been an early morning start from Cold Morham to arrive at their destination by 08:30 hours, and what with the traffic on top of everything else it had taken all of Corporal Lansdale's skills to get them there on time. Thanks to his previous life as a London cabbie, he'd deftly worked around the various bottlenecks, diversions and cordoned off roads to get the creaking Humber to their destination off the Marylebone Road. Yesterday, Shepherd had called Win to learn his mother had died shortly after he had left them in the hospital. Right now, he didn't know how to feel, what to think or say.

'Thank you sir.'

The answer was as feeble as the statement. Shepherd's mind was in disarray. To see his mother in such a dreadful state was a horror he hadn't imagined, but that wasn't the worst of it for him. He knew the things she said were the result of a damaged mind, but he couldn't get the words out of his head. On top of all that was his aunt's reaction. He had never seen her so angry, and it only served to make the memory of the visit even more confusing. The car lurched to one side as Lansdale swerved to avoid a hole in the road, throwing Shepherd towards the broken arm rest on his left. Looking past the colonel and up to the tall grey terraces gliding past. Recognising where they were, a thought barged its way through the turmoil. He turned to Redmayne, who was busying himself with his pipe.

'Begging your pardon sir, but what are we doing here?'

Redmayne blew sharply through the mouthpiece and stuffed the pipe back into his tunic pocket.

'It's about time you asked that question, Lieutenant.'

Shepherd blinked at him as Lansdale brought the car to a gentle halt, their movements tracked by two Military Policemen guarding a set of formidable heavy wooden doors set back into the terrace. As Lansdale turned off the engine and got out, the colonel leaned towards him.

'Now look here Shepherd. I need your absolute attention when we go in there. This is going to be a very unusual meeting. No one knows we are here nor will they ever know. Understood?'

Colonel Redmayne was doing his job - focussing the attention of his junior officer, and Shepherd appreciated the honesty with which he spoke. There was no way he would be here unless it was important so he had to bury all the personal stuff and get back into the game. Shepherd felt the itch beginning to spread down his leg. For a change, he welcomed it.

'Understood sir. Sorry sir.'

Redmayne sat back and gave a brief nod as Lansdale opened the rear door for him. Shepherd cautiously exited onto the busy street then hurried around the curved rear of the Humber to follow Redmayne, who was returning the salute from the MPs as he strode forwards. Shepherd noticed the address stencilled into the stone beside the entrance - 64 Baker Street - as an orderly opened the doors from the inside. Shepherd was sure he knew the address. Within seconds he was following the adjutant and Redmayne up narrow flights of stairs in the high-ceilinged building, down a corridor and finally into a spacious room dominated by an elegant, highly polished eight-seater table. Shepherd was unsurprised to find it a typical Victorian dining room.

The bustling street below could be seen through the three sash windows on the right, and a second door connected to another room on the left. The ceiling had a series of intricate plaster mouldings and cornices, with an elaborate chandelier hanging down centrally over the table.

Had it not been for the enormous close-scale map of France dominating the wall to the left of the white stone fireplace, it was almost like coming to a well-off friend's house for dinner.

'Redmayne. Good of you to come.'

A tall, distinguished looking man with a neatly waxed moustache left a shorter figure in civilian dress and marched forwards, offering his hand to the colonel. Redmayne saluted smartly before shaking it. Recognising the insignia on the man's epaulettes, Shepherd immediately stood to attention and saluted too. The balding man gave him a nod of acknowledgement and turned his attention back to Redmayne, who was smiling broadly.

'Not at all sir. My pleasure.'

The immaculately dressed officer turned to the civilian he had left near the map and indicated he sit at the table.

'Take your coats off gentlemen and be seated. Coulson!'

The last word was barked more than shouted and within a couple of seconds the orderly who had shown them into 64 Baker Street entered the room by the far door with several folders under his arm. Shepherd and Redmayne took two seats facing towards the map and fireplace directly opposite the civilian. Clean-shaven with side-parted mouse-blonde hair and deep blue eyes, Shepherd put him at around his early thirties. His heavy tweed three-piece suit fitted the room far better than a khaki uniform and, for a few seconds, Shepherd felt oddly out of place.

Coulson moved swiftly around the table, carefully positioning a manilla folder in front of them all, handing the final one to the still-standing senior officer. The man waited until the orderly left, then strolled over to the window end of the table.

'For those of you who do not know me, I am Major General Colin McVean Gubbins.'

Shepherd had suspected the man was Gubbins. Excitement built inside him as the Major General continued.

'This gentleman to my right is Hugh Richards. He is one of our most experienced operatives.'

The man smiled, revealing perfectly even white teeth. From what Shepherd knew of the Special Operations Executive, he was exactly the kind of ex-public schoolboy they went for.

'No need to introduce you two as we already know who you are.'

Gubbins was almost chuckling as he said it and Redmayne seemed to enjoy the joke. It was becoming increasingly clear to Shepherd they had known each other for some time.

'While we wait for breakfast, I suppose I'd better tell you what you're doing here.'

Gubbins opened the folder laid flat before him, rested forwards on his hands and looked down at the top sheet of paper.

'As you know, Operation Crossbow has been running for some time. It's mostly been the RAF doing the heavy work along with advisors from various departments. Lieutenant Shepherd. I understand you've worked directly with the Central Interpretation Unit over at Danesfield House?'

Gubbins looked up and over to Shepherd pointedly then back down to his papers. He didn't give Shepherd the opportunity to respond.

'Up to now the SOE hasn't really been involved, but Jerry's up to something just inland from the Côte d'Opale and it's causing a bit of a stink.'

Redmayne looked over to the map on the wall and squinted.

'Are these the V-bases we've been hearing about, sir?'

Gubbins straightened up and marched over to the huge map. Richards turned in his chair to follow his

progress.

'They are missile bases, Colonel.'

Gubbins folded his arms and stared at the map.

'But not the ones you're thinking of.'

Gubbins turned to address them, the map providing a dramatic background as he clasped his hands behind him. Shepherd noticed a number of circles had been drawn in a ragged line some miles inland from the French coast. Some were in red, some in blue. His leg began to tingle.

'The Todt have been ordered to build nine special constructions in France -'

'Sonderbauten.'

Redmayne turned sharply to Shepherd, who had blurted the word out in his enthusiasm. Shepherd had come across this term dozens of times while working in Naval Intelligence. It literally translated as 'special construction', the vagueness of the term belying the dreadful truth of what these building projects often represented. Richards nodded with a smile and Gubbins raised his thick eyebrows in mild reproach. Shepherd's previous meeting with Redmayne and the reason for him being here was becoming clearer by the minute. If he could keep his mouth shut, he might actually get to learn more.

'As you say Lieutenant, Sonderbauten. Four are planned for the Cherbourg peninsula but we're not too bothered about them. It's the five across the Pas-de-Calais we're worried about, particularly Wizernes just a few miles away from Saint-Omer.'

Redmayne cleared his throat for permission to speak. Gubbins looked over to him and nodded.

'Why don't we just bomb the sites now, sir?'

Gubbins looked down to his feet as Richards let in a sharp intake of breath. A nerve had clearly been struck.

'Why don't you answer that, Richards?'

'At this moment in time, we're not entirely sure the final form these structures are going to take. The Todt are

shipping in a lot of specialist engineers from Germany - they're clearing the country out - but there's an awful lot of local workers being assembled too. There are significant amounts of new railway track being laid and if we start carpet bombing now, the civilian casualties could be enormous with no real idea of what might be gained.'

Richards spoke eloquently. He sounded and looked exactly like one of the famous Baker Street Irregulars, the disparaging name given by the RAF and, in particular, the Secret Intelligence Service to the Special Operations Executive. The 'Irregulars' were seen as rank amateurs hastily assembled on Churchill's whim and the SIS did everything they could to undermine their credibility. That said, there was no denying their effectiveness working with the French Resistance, and the SIS would never be allowed to forget – nor get over - the catastrophe in Venlo at the beginning of the war. The SOE could point to a number of significant successes; they'd bumped off Himmler's deputy, Haydrich, in 1942 and screwed up Rommel's plans in Greece the same year. Given Richards' obvious concern for unnecessary civilian casualties and the fact he had been invited to their headquarters, Shepherd felt increasingly happy to be there – although he was curious to know the details of his involvement in it all.

Redmayne looked over to Gubbins as Richards began flicking through the contents of his folder.

'I can't imagine that's a view shared by the RAF.'

Gubbins raised his eyebrows and sighed.

'You know how they feel about us. When we first started our little club it took them all their time to lend us a scabby biplane for our cross-channel hops. You'd not believe the strings I had to pull to get us our own squadron.'

Richards nodded along with Gubbins. If Redmayne knew what they were talking about he didn't show it. For his part, Shepherd had no real idea what was being referred to, even with his intelligence background. Then

again, it was supposed to be secret. Gubbins looked towards the window, then back again at Redmayne. His expression was serious, brows knitted.

'What we've been tasked with comes right from the top. And I have to say... it is not without risk.'

Gubbins let the words hang in the air. Shepherd's leg notched up one in his discomfort rating. Richards smiled again.

'We're going to try something slightly different. Unfortunately, despite Richards being absolutely right about the situation on the ground, it's not going to stop the RAF from having a few pops at the site and it's unlikely they'll grace us with notice of all their future attacks. Colonel, Lieutenant... please open your folders.'

Shepherd reached down to his folder and realised his hands were trembling. Flexing his fingers, he hoped no-one had noticed and opened the flap. The first page had 'Top Secret' stamped on top of it and a couple of warning lines in red. He immediately recognised this as being the very highest classification. Without knowing it, Shepherd's security rating had been elevated.

'Lieutenant, you will be accompanying Richards here to Helfaut, the neighbouring village to Wizernes. We will furnish you with false identification papers and work permits. You are going in as a structural engineer from Dieppe, a specialist in dock construction. The Todt's always looking for engineers and we can slip you in as a candidate at relatively short notice. Is your French up to it?'

Shepherd couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. He had, of course, expected to undertake missions behind enemy lines. That's why he'd joined the Commandos after all. But this was something else entirely. He hadn't joined up to be a bloody spy.

'I... Yes sir. I believe it is.'

Redmayne did his best to avoid Shepherd's gaze. He was likely thinking exactly the same thing as Shepherd.

Directly opposite, Richards was beaming at him as he spoke.

'Top hole.'

'You will make detailed observations of the construction site and learn as much as you possibly can of any new building techniques they may be developing. If any damage has been caused by Bomber Command, you will evaluate its effectiveness from a structural perspective. I'm not deriding the Resistance chaps –'

Gubbins nodded over to Richards, who nodded back.

' - but they're not engineers and certainly not as specialised as you.'

Shepherd turned a few pages in his folder and found himself staring at an aerial photograph of a partially constructed circular object. While there was no scale bar drawn onto it, by looking at the surrounding trees he could tell the circumference was massive – perhaps around a couple of hundred feet. Around the perimeter, Shepherd could see craters dotted around the area. The RAF had already attempted at least one mission. It had clearly failed, which was no surprise given the sheer amount of steel and concrete Shepherd calculated must be in it. Gubbins continued in his precise, clipped way as Shepherd made a few rough calculations in his head.

'Once you have gathered a suitable level of intelligence, you will liaise with the Saint-Omer Resistance cell to advise us of the best way to undermine or, ideally, totally destroy the structure if bombing will prove to be ineffective.'

Shepherd could see through the intelligence-gathering double-talk. It was obvious there was an issue with the attacks and they were short of useful information - the kind of data that couldn't be learned through aerial observation alone. The kind of data he had managed to gather before.

'Exactly how long this takes is down to you, but I'd not hang around. The longer you are there, the greater the

chances of being rumbled by OT security or the SS which, according to the reports I received yesterday, is building in force by the day.'

Shepherd could hear Gubbins but he wasn't really listening. He was reading an intercepted manifest for aggregate and cement delivered to the site some weeks previously. The amounts were mind boggling.

'It's hideously dangerous of course. If you're not captured or blown up, Richards will get you home and we'll raise a glass to giving Jerry - and the SIS - one in the eye. Do you have any questions, Lieutenant?'

His closing statement snapped Shepherd's attention back into the briefing. He had to hand it to Gubbins. From the personnel available he'd matched the exact specialism with mission requirements, and judging by their long friendship Redmayne would have told Gubbins the reason Shepherd left the NID was to get stuck in rather than stare at reconnaissance photographs through a magnifying glass for the rest of the war – even if he held no truck with this spying business. Shepherd looked up to see the Major General folding his arms with a satisfied look on his face.

'I have a question, Major General. In relation to the missile bases, you said 'not the ones you're thinking of'. Might I ask what that means?'

Gubbins clenched his jaw and darted a look over to Richards. Shepherd could see his expression had also darkened.

'Take a look at the photographs at the back of your folders, gentlemen.'

Shepherd flicked through pages of diagrams, drawings and lists until he came to a photograph of a small aircraft on what appeared to be an angled ramp. It looked like a bomb with a pipe stuck onto its tail. Directly below was the word 'Vergeltungswaffe'. Ominously, the number '1' had been added after the word. Shepherd looked up to Redmayne, who seemed to recognise it.

‘This is their flying bomb isn’t it? Needs a ramp for launch, flies in a line until the fuel runs out then drops onto its target.’

Shepherd saw Richards nod at the colonel’s précis of the weapon. Gubbins turned to the map.

‘Quite right Colonel. It’s a rather crude device but it might prove to be effective. It has a range of around 150 miles and a payload just under 1900 pounds.’

The room went silent. Shepherd saw Richards nod again, to turn the photograph to the final image. Shepherd did so to reveal a fuzzy outline of a very large shell sitting on its base. Details were indistinct, but its top and bottom had been painted in contrasting black and white blocks. On the right, a scale had been superimposed from the missile’s base to its tip. It measured 45 feet and was nearly five and a half feet wide. Shepherd shuddered. Its huge size fitted the scale of construction going on perfectly. Below, ‘A4’ had been typed, along with ‘Vergeltungswaffe’. To its side, the number 2 had been added. Gubbins cleared his throat.

‘That, gentlemen, is Hitler’s *second* vengeance weapon. It’s in very early stages of development, but if I tell you it has a far more accurate guidance system, a range of two hundred miles and we estimate could carry a payload in excess of two thousand pounds, you will understand why we want to work a way to destroy these bases before they are built.’

Shepherd gulped. Richards raised his eyebrows. Looking back to Gubbins, Shepherd saw he was tracing a line from one of the red circles drawn on the map in a straight line to central London. With his finger resting on the Thames, he turned back to face them.

‘Information is, as we say, scant, but we gather the plan is for this base to launch two missiles an hour, twenty four hours a day. And, as I said, this is one of nine that are planned. Some might be for the V-1s, but we’re confident we can deal with them from the air. As for the others...’

Shepherd's mind was racing. Just under fifty tons of high explosive a day? From a single base? No wonder it was so massive. Shepherd caught Gubbins' eye and nodded, closing his folder as he did so. Gubbins straightened and walked back to his seat at the table.

'That's settled then. You and Richards will have a full briefing over at The Thatched Barn tomorrow and additional training at The Frythe as soon as it can be arranged. I understand you have a funeral to arrange.'

Shepherd blinked dumbly at the unexpected change in direction. Richards looked concerned and Redmayne fished around for his pipe as the door opened and Coulson rattled in with a tray full of silverware and an accompanying waft of bacon. It was a perfectly straightforward question, so Shepherd gave a perfectly straightforward answer.

'Yes sir. I do.'

8. Wisques

The woman had been sitting patiently in the cafe since Fieseler disappeared out of view, staring at the pages of her tatty paperback re-reading the same few words and sipping cold coffee for over an hour. There was a possibility he might take a different route back to his car, but Louise had been following the Korvettenkapitän long enough to know he was not one for meandering diversions. She was still angry at herself for not taking the opportunity available to her the previous night; she could have shot him quite easily in the back of the head as he had left the Cafe des Arts, but that Wehrmacht car had come out of nowhere and she'd had to duck back into the shadows as Fieseler had turned to watch it. The moment had been lost and she'd felt like a bloody amateur which, of course, she was.

On their first meeting, Bleriot had told Louise not to get involved or to take matters into her own hands. Things got nasty when German officers were killed; innocents were rounded up along with freedom fighters and, for someone relatively senior or important, whole villages could be executed. Louise's anger and frustration had boiled over when the wiry farmer had told her revenge was just about the worst reason to join the Resistance. As far as she could tell, revenge was the whole point - for the life they had to lead under the Nazis, for the loss of their freedom and the indignity of everyday existence. Bleriot had rolled his eyes, accusing her of sounding like a propaganda leaflet but she wasn't ready to let the argument go. He had lost friends and relatives in various attacks and reprisals and kept on going, so why should her reason for fighting be any less valid?

At that, Bleriot had questioned whether she'd still want to be a part of the network once her little vendetta had been achieved. The rage she had felt at such a question

rushed through her stomach as she sat. She had slapped Bleriot across the face with all her might. The shock had hurt more than the blow; she was a slight girl, only nineteen and more used to books and study than working on the land like her brother once had. Still, she'd made her point and Bleriot had apologised. He was pleased to see the fire in her, as they needed everyone they could get - particularly distractingly pretty young women.

The full details of Marcel's death would likely never become clear, and it had taken several months for Bleriot to gather patches of information from a number of fairly reliable sources in the Dieppe Resistance cells. Marcel had been laying charges next to some signals with his explosives man and they'd been disturbed by the German walking down the tracks from a broken down train. Within thirty seconds they were both dead at the hands of Korvettenkapitän Leon Fieseler, a 36 year old naval officer who had recently been transferred to the Abwehr-M. It was bad enough losing her brother, but for his murderer to be rewarded for his actions with a seeming promotion to the SS was too much to bear. Fieseler had to die, and while she didn't really have the skill despite the training she'd undertaken, Louise still wanted his death to be at her hands.

The early morning rush of bodies going to and from Saint-Omer market was subsiding, making it easier to spot Fieseler as he marched past her position. He had a folder tucked under his arm and, she was curious to notice, looked angry. Things had clearly taken a turn for the unexpected - and unwanted - last night when he'd been called to the Command Bunker at the Pointe. Louise might be exhausted after her all-night vigil, but she now had so much information to give to Bleriot he would *have* to help her out. No more lone forays with an unreliable pistol and handmade silencer; this change in Fieseler's circumstances, whatever it may turn out to be, might work to her advantage.

Slipping her book into the oversized pocket of her blue woollen coat, Louise picked up the matching scarf from the back of her chair, dropped some coins onto the sticky round table top and pushed her way through the heavy door into the cobbled street. The bells from the cathedral began ringing in the background and she saw Fieseler heading for the Mairie in the distance. There was no point in following him so she instead headed for her own car, Marcel's car, on the outskirts of town and drove the battered Simca 5 as fast as she dare down the road to Wisques, slowing only for Wehrmacht convoys and ambling patrols.

Louise ground the gears down of the Simca as she turned off the main road and onto the dirt track leading to Bleriot's farmhouse. Thrown around by the tractor ruts and potholes, she hit the spongy brakes and slowed to a crawl, rolling through the wide archway into the courtyard past the makeshift goat shed forming the whole of the enclosed compound's right side. Directly ahead was the red-brick farmhouse and, to the left, Bleriot attempting to scrape the rust off a decrepit stove rusting slowly away in front of the two storey barn and open workshop.

The second she creaked open the door, Bleriot's bony golden retriever began pulling on its leash and barking furiously. Throwing down his metal brush, the overall-clad farmer marched past Louise and over to the far corner of the yard. Knowing what was coming, the mangy dog dashed into its kennel to avoid Bleriot's wrath but he continued to shout at the unseen animal, telling it he'd put a bullet in its head if it didn't stop going mental every time it heard an engine. She'd only berated him for being uncaring about the dog once. With a shrug and a draw on his hand-rolled cigarette he'd pointed out it was a farm dog, a working dog. The chain was long enough for it to run around the courtyard without escaping, and it was

hungry enough to make it vicious to strangers. There was nothing else to discuss.

Louise waited patiently by her car. Even in the October chill, a pungent smell of goat and shit wafted from the open doorway of the shed near the kennel and she could hear the animals' bleatings between Bleriot's curses and kicks to the kennel. Running out of swear words, Bleriot turned and stomped back over to Louise, darting a brief look up to one of the tiny first floor windows under the sagging orange-tiled roof of the farmhouse and nodding slightly. It was likely she'd had a rifle trained on her as she'd entered, but now the signal had been given, she was safe. He looked out back the way Louise had come through the wide archway to the open fields beyond the dirt track, then gestured to the door set in the middle of the farmhouse wall. Leaving her coat and scarf in the car, Louise picked her way over mould-covered gravel, entered the small kitchen with its oversized wood-burning oven and sat at the table between the doorway and the grimy window.

Following her in, Bleriot kicked off his heavy boots, walked past a dark wooden cabinet with rows of plates and took a right through the open-plan entrance to the living room. A couple of seconds later he re-appeared wearing a pair of battered clogs. Opening one of the cupboards framing the dusty glass doors, he retrieved a half bottle of wine, pulled out the cork and plonked it onto the table in front of Louise. Retrieving a couple of glasses, he flicked the door closed with his foot and sat heavily on the rickety chair closest to the exit back into the courtyard. Even though he was thin and couldn't have weighed much more than seventy kilos, it made cracking noises as he leaned forwards to fill both glasses. Somewhere upstairs, someone moved around.

Louise took a sip of her wine and placed it back on the table.

'I have some interesting news about Fieseler.'

Bleriot closed his eyes and sighed.

'Make it quick. I have to get the goats sorted for their afternoon milking.'

Louise looked down to her drink then took another sip. She knew Bleriot was testing her delicate sensibilities by giving her a dirty glass. Just because she'd had some schooling, took care of her appearance and dressed nicely didn't mean she'd been brought up in a palace.

'He went for a meeting with the new SS man early this morning. He left carrying a folder and looking unhappy. Given his unexpected trip to the Command Bunker last night, I'd say he's been assigned to them.'

Bleriot took a mouthful of wine, swallowed it noisily and wiped his stubbly beard with the back of his hand.

'You'd say?'

Louise stared at him with dark brown eyes. She knew Bleriot hadn't wanted her coming into his cell from Dieppe, but it had been pointed out to him no-one could afford to be choosy. Her brother and his friend had been a great loss and if she wanted to serve, they should let her do so. Fine, Bleriot had said. Let them serve *you* on the coast. His protestations hadn't made any difference. Her family had made the ultimate sacrifice. Honour had to be served.

'Come on Bleriot. It can't be coincidence.'

Bleriot stared at her and folded his arms.

'So what is this? Evidence at last of this famous brain you're supposed to have? Don't start putting two and two together, Louise. More times than not, you'll come up with five. And someone will get themselves killed.'

Louise glowered back at Bleriot. Upstairs the shuffling of heavy boots continued while out in the yard, the dog started barking again. Bleriot leaned back on his chair, opened the door a crack and bawled at it to shut up. With a whine, it stopped. Bleriot talked as he stared out at the unfortunate animal, watching it pad about uneasily on its chain.

'We know the SS are taking charge of the building

over at Wizernes. What the hell do they want with a sailor?'

Louise's nostrils flared. She'd expected a little more gratitude for this information, particularly as she'd not slept for over a day to get it. She pressed on, annoyed at his lack of attention. In the distance, she could hear the sound of a tractor approaching.

'He's an intelligence officer. He speaks fluent French. Perhaps he's going to be used to infiltrate local workers or something. Surely he's a big enough target now? We could get him and the SS man -'

The tractor was getting nearer, and the plates on the dresser began to shake. The dog ran towards the entrance to the courtyard and strained against its chain, its bark more ferocious and insistent than when Louise had arrived. With a bang of his open hand and a shout of 'putain de merde!' Bleriot jumped to his feet and stormed into the courtyard, screaming at the dog as he went. Louise spat her own curse. What with bloody tractors and whining dogs and ignorant country peasants, how was she supposed to get her point of view heard? Jumping to her feet she strode over to the low sink and tipped her wine into it. Upstairs, she heard a muffled shout and the scurry of boots. Another shout, Bleriot this time. She'd only taken a few steps towards the door when something massive and unseen smashed into her.

Louise crashed into the living room sofa, flipping it onto its back and thumping onto the wooden floor. A split second later, brick and rubble descended around her and a cloud of dust filled the room. Her ears were singing, and as she staggered to her feet she felt rather than heard the upper floor collapse down onto the kitchen before her.

Choking from the filth, she staggered her way out of the back door leading to the vegetable garden on the other side of the farmhouse. Her head spun as another tremendous explosion erupted above and behind her. Red tiles and brick showered down, one hitting her on the back

of the neck, sending her to her knees. Shaking her head, she saw the woodshed nestled between a few apple trees some metres down the garden path. Scrambling forwards, she fell towards the wooden structure, lunged up its two wide steps and threw herself against the heavy wooden door.

Pulling it shut behind her, Louise slid to the floor. She was shaking from the trauma, tears running down her cheeks. Reaching behind her head, she looked down to see her fingers were slick with blood. Another tremendous crash came from outside and the woodshed shook violently. Wiping her eyes, she tried to make sense of what was happening.

The noise from outside settled, and just below the high pitched whine filling her head she could hear shouting. Crawling to the glassless window frame on her right, she brushed her matted hair from her eyes and slowly raised her head to peep through it. There was a huge, ragged u-shaped gap where the centre of the farmhouse had been. Through it, she could see an armoured car squatting in the centre of the entrance to the courtyard.

In the middle foreground, a German army officer was waving his pistol towards the goat shed and a couple of soldiers were heading towards it, throwing back the bolts on their rifles as they did so. Her car was under a pile of rubble to the right, and there was no sign of Bleriot, the dog or whichever poor unfortunate had been upstairs. She did not speak German, but it was clear they were looking to account for everyone they thought should be there. For all her brave words and dedication to killing Fieseler, she was absolutely terrified.

The officer marched forwards while the eight-wheeled monster backed away from the archway, catching one side of it and bringing a shower of bricks down onto its steeply angled forward plating. He took a couple of steps onto the remains of the farmhouse, lost his balance

and fell heavily backwards. Looking around to see if anyone had noticed, he kicked at some loose rubble in front of him then stared intently at the smashed workshop and barn to his left. One of the guards appeared again from the goat shed. The officer turned as the guard shrugged and and shook his head. Within seconds of him appearing, two dozen goats, crazed by the explosions and the collapse of the building, sprinted out of the doorway he'd left open.

The animals ran in all directions, some towards the gap between the archway and the armoured car, some towards the decimated farmhouse and some round and round the courtyard. The officer began screaming at the soldier, who stood there unsure what to do. Pulling his pistol out, the officer began firing wildly, but the goats were too quick to hit. Holstering his weapon, he marched back towards the armoured car, hauled himself up over the second wheel in a rage and dropped into the open turret.

Louise saw the stubby machine gun mounted next to the big cannon start to depress and the soldier run towards the goat shed door. The armoured car lurched forwards, smashing into the other side of the archway and bringing a good part of the wall down with it as the furious officer ordered his gunner to open fire. Bullets ripped into the milling animals, tearing them apart and spraying gobbets of fur and meat in all directions. Hooves and legs and entrails splattered onto the rubble, then the gun began to track a group of goats which were running towards the woodshed.

Rolling backwards to the rear of the woodshed, Louise spotted a gap where the stack of roof-high logs had fallen and scrambled behind them, ripping her beautiful green cotton dress and tearing the skin from her hands and knees. Shells smashed through the flimsy outer planks of the woodshed and thundered into the logs, splitting and cracking the first couple of rows into splinters. Louise held her hands over her ears and screamed as chunks flew around her feet, cutting into her exposed legs.

The whole structure rocked with the ferocity of the salvo, shaking the logs at the front free and allowing them to roll forwards. Louise dropped down with the shifted pile and was partially buried by wood rolling back on top of her, thudding into her back and forcing the breath from her lungs. The facing side of the woodshed fell apart, bringing the roof crashing down and sliding forwards. Louise could hear logs spilling out in all directions but luckily, the rear wall held, propped up against the remaining log pile and hiding her under its buckled planks.

Louise tried moving her legs. With relief she realised there were only a couple of layers above her and she should be able to get out. However, that would have to wait until she was absolutely sure the attack had finished. Apart from the pathetic bleating of a couple of wounded goats, everything was still. A voice shouted out in the distance and another answered, far closer. Louise shut her eyes and stayed very still.

One of the soldiers had moved towards the remains of the shed, presumably having been ordered to inspect the carnage. After a short pause, he shouted something back that, from the sound of it, translated as 'nothing here' and trudged back towards the courtyard through the smashed farmhouse. Pain stabbed into Louise, but she kept still. She counted a good ten minutes before the engine of the armoured car coughed into life and fifteen before she could hear nothing more than the crows flapping about the wet red feast left for them in the smashed and broken courtyard.

9. Nunhead

Shepherd smoothed down the lapels of his great coat and straightened his tie. It wouldn't do to look untidy on such an occasion. As if to reinforce his view, aunt Win stood directly in front of him, took a step back then reached forwards and adjusted his cap. With a nod of satisfaction she gave him a smile, but the streaks of mascara around her eyes took all credibility from her expression.

Resuming her place on his right arm, she pulled Shepherd close and he could smell the same mixture of perfume and cigarettes he'd always associated with her. She'd put on her best fur, best dress and best shoes and had even managed to find a black veil for her wide-brimmed dark blue hat. Shepherd had no idea how the last few hours of his mother's life had played out, but the haunted look he'd caught on Win's face as Lansdale had opened the car door for him half an hour earlier told him everything he needed - and wanted - to know. Win could be a tough lady for all her warmth and kindness, but the way she'd talked to her sister in the hospital still played on his mind. That would wait until after the service.

The two walked up the wide avenue from the north gate of Nunhead Cemetery in perfect step. Directly in front of them was the over-sized high gothic arch of the Anglican chapel, its twin spires barely distinguishable from the slate grey sky above. Most of the trees of the huge site had shed their leaves, the low kerbs on either side of the road lined with the browns and yellows of autumn. Milling around in the entranceway were half a dozen people, all old and civilian, a mixture of black coats and dark suits as befitted the situation. Shepherd recognised a couple of them but Win, naturally, knew them all. Pleasantries were exchanged, condolences offered and then the pitifully small congregation made its way inside for the service. It

was short, cold and tearful.

As the coffin was lowered into the ground, Shepherd couldn't get over just how small the box was. The scale of the surroundings didn't help things; his mother's grave was next to his father's, right on the edge of the sprawling Victorian section of the cemetery. Mould-encrusted angels and crumbling black tombstones formed witnesses of stone, and Shepherd added them as guests to the burial. He kept his eye on the coffin as it was already unbearable to look at his aunt because she was so similar to his mother, and on more than one occasion in the chapel he'd heard Win say something or look a certain way that brought Shepherd's grief back into the late autumn light.

During the drive through South London to the cemetery he'd made a decision not to think of anything other than his mother once he'd got there. His upcoming training and mission were waiting in his very near future; destiny was set and he was happy with that. Despite their sympathies, Redmayne and, latterly, Gubbins had made it perfectly clear any distraction was a potentially fatal luxury he and they couldn't afford. It might have sounded callous to some, but he'd decided he somehow had to get the good majority of his guilt, anger and loss out of his system in the next couple of hours, because that was all the time he could spare. It made him feel wretched and ungrateful. Two hours to say goodbye to the woman who had effectively brought him up on her own after the premature death of his father. Two hours for the woman who had done everything she possibly could to ensure he had everything he needed in life, from dry socks to a positive outlook.

'Have you got time for a quick drink love?'

It could have been his mother saying the word 'love'. Shepherd squeezed his eyes closed and opened them just as the vicar approached him, hands outstretched in an attempt at comfort. He took them of course, and had the good manners to share a few murmured words with the

disbanding mourners. It was highly likely they knew far more about his life than he theirs, and within ten minutes it was over. Win and Shepherd walked out of the serenely depressing grounds the way they came in, his mother laid to rest, his life changed forever.

Lansdale might have known the area thanks to his previous life as a cabby, but aunt Win knew exactly where she wanted to go for a drink. It was, of course, not entirely acceptable to have civilians in military vehicles but the corporal wasn't going to say anything, particularly if it meant he could continue to stay close to Shepherd, as ordered. She hadn't been in the back of the Humber for five seconds before she'd pulled out her packet of Players and was ordering Lansdale down Linden Grove, right onto Nunhead Grove then straight over to Nunhead Green. Lansdale had been a good sport about it; he'd likely seen plenty of women and men trying to put a brave face on things after burying a loved one. One very short drive later and the car pulled up outside The Old Nun's Head, rebuilt on the site of the original less than a decade ago in a mock Tudor-style complete with herringbone bricks, leaded windows and angled black beams.

Unsurprisingly for the time of day and year, Shepherd and Win were the only two people inside the wood-panelled interior other than the wary-looking barman. Had it not been for the much larger funeral gearing up to take place as he and Win had left, Shepherd doubted the place would have been open at all. Win bustled over to the window wall and took to re-arranging a couple of high-backed wooden chairs around a small table while Shepherd unbuttoned his great coat, slipped off his cap and went to the brass and polished mahogany bar dominating the centre of the low-ceilinged lounge. He ordered two large gins, one bottle of tonic, and by the time they had been poured Win had her hat and fur off and was trying to repair her wrecked make-up in the feeble light through the nearby window with the help of a diamante-encrusted

compact. Shepherd was sure it had been a christmas present from before the war.

Lighting up another cigarette, Win threw a dash of tonic into her glass then took a good mouthful of the colourless liquid. Shepherd's sip was a little more measured; Win enjoyed a drink, and her frame allowed her to match most men glass for glass. He'd been lucky that his upbringing had never been one of abstinence. Because of their regular holidays to France before the war and his family's love of wine, he'd been brought up to understand responsible drinking. His first cigarette had been at the age of sixteen, naturally from his aunty, and there had been no great fuss or ceremony that he'd been curious about the habit. He'd not enjoyed it one bit and since that time had only tried two more cigarettes and three cigars. Shepherd enjoyed drinking for the sensation of it; too many friends had got into too much trouble by not understanding that bingeing, regardless of the reason, was seldom without physical, financial or legal consequence.

Despite all this, Win gave her nephew a disapproving glance.

'Come on Archie, you can do better than that.'

Win took another slug, her heavy red lipstick staining the rim of the glass. As she placed it back on the table, she deftly flicked ash into the black tin ashtray with the word 'Fuller's' embossed along its rim with her other hand.

'Sorry aunt Win, I'm still on duty. Can't be done for a lieutenant of... His majesty's armed forces to be rolling drunk by two in the afternoon.'

Win sat back and brushed the hair from her eyes. The buttons on her dark blue dress strained as she took in a deep breath and sighed. His hesitation at mentioning where he was currently serving had not been wasted on her and he felt a fool for tripping over his words.

'No. I suppose you're still not allowed to tell me where you're posted at the moment?'

Win knew the answer to the question but still wanted

to try. Somewhere behind him, Shepherd could hear the barman skulking around. He hated having his back to a room; he'd far rather be sitting in a corner where he could see every exit with no chance of anyone coming up on him from behind. For now he'd just have to put up with it because he didn't want to upset his aunty who'd arranged the table so they could face each other for the precious few moments left to them.

'No. I can tell you I won't be there for much longer though.'

Win took another drink and a drag on her cigarette, seemed to get annoyed with herself at something and angrily stubbed it out, wafting the smoke away from her face.

'How's the leg?'

Shepherd rotated the base of his glass around between his long, elegant fingers. This was a typical aunt Win tactic to change the subject or to divert attention away from something she wanted to talk about but couldn't. He let it ride, given the circumstances.

'Most of the time it's okay, some of the time it itches like hell.'

Win looked deep into his eyes. Just like his mother.

'I'm going to sell my house and move into yours. The money will be banked and kept for you when I'm gone. Is that alright?'

Shepherd looked back down to his glass. It was bad enough having to come to terms with his mother passing without his only living relative discussing their own demise in such a fashion.

'Aunt Win, you don't need to do that. I mean, of course you can move into the house. That would be lovely because I honestly don't know if I'm coming back.'

Shepherd looked up to see Win's bottom lip quivering slightly.

Shit.

'When I'm coming back. *When.*'

Shepherd turned around on his chair and waved at the barman, indicating two more drinks for the table. The gaunt man glared at him and for a second Shepherd thought he was going to get on his high horse about it not being table service. However, as the only two paying customers he clearly thought better of it, nodded, and turned to the mirrored back of the bar where the gin bottles stood. He'd also seen the lady was crying and clearly needed another drink.

'I want to ask you something about the hospital.'

Win turned her head away from him and towards the window. Shepherd could see tears rolling down her cheeks and lines of worry and pain in her face. It wasn't the greatest timing in the world, but he doubted there ever would be a better opportunity to ask the things he wanted to ask.

'What about the hospital? I'd rather not talk about how she died if you don't mind.'

Shepherd took a longer drink of his gin and it burned lightly down his throat as he swallowed. On that they were both agreed.

'No, it's not that. I just wanted to ask you about... you.'

Win wasn't a stupid woman. Both she and his mother had been known for their quick wit and intelligence, this combination reportedly being the main reason Shepherd's father had married Bidy. He could remember countless parties, both here in South London and abroad, where the sisters would entertain with stories and singing and music. He might have been young but it was clear to him even then that all the men admired the two ladies, which made it even more confusing why Win had never taken a husband. She'd had plenty of male friends, companions and admirers, but never the same for very long. As she'd got older she'd spent more time with her sister, seemingly happy with her lot. Yet again, this made her fury in the

hospital all the more puzzling.

'What about me?'

There was an edge to her voice, something approaching what he'd heard during the exchange with his mother. Almost on cue, the top of his leg began to itch.

'I've never seen you so angry as you were with my mother. I know it must have been hard, but -'

'Hard?'

All warmth had gone from Win's dark eyes. Her jaw was set and she looked just the same way he'd caught fleeting, unsettling glances of before.

'You don't know what hard is. I watched her fade away in front of my eyes. It was like watching myself disintegrate in a living mirror. It was alright for you. You could run away. But I had no choice. I *had* to stay.'

Shepherd had been stabbed once, and badly beaten a couple of times. None of them hurt as much as Win's words.

'Win, there's a war on for God's sake. I can't walk out of my job like a clerk taking the afternoon off. You told me to go and do my duty. You told me you'd look after mother and you told me not to feel guilty for what I had to do. Why are you saying this to me? Why are you so angry?'

Win slammed her hand onto the table so hard it made her empty glass bounce and smash onto the floorboards. The tears streaking black down her cheeks were no longer of a grieving woman, but of someone who had come to the absolute end of her tether.

'You have no idea Archie. No idea. You don't know the half of it. And now she's gone and she can't tell you what she should have done. It's down to me to keep things together, like it always bloody has been.'

Shepherd turned to the barman, rooted to the spot with a glass in each hand and beckoned him over as Win sobbed into her ample chest. After handing over the fresh glasses, the red-faced man conjured up a pristine white handkerchief. Shepherd nodded his thanks and took it

from him. He turned and walked back to the bar without looking. Perhaps, thought Shepherd, he wasn't such a bad sort after all. Pouring the drink, he pushed the gin into Win's bleary field of vision. Waiting for her to take a drink, he gently coiled his fingers around her wrist. She didn't want to look at him, but he gave her no choice.

'Aunt Win, I'm so sorry. It's probably got nothing to do with me. I shouldn't have asked. I am so very grateful for what you've done for me and mother. I really, really am.'

Shepherd's voice was soft and low. Win took the handkerchief as the peace offering it was intended to be and dabbed at her black, wet eyes. The large station clock behind the bar chimed once. It was nearly time for him to go.

Win sniffed and snuffled into the handkerchief, retrieved her compact and tried her best to straighten herself out. She noticed Shepherd's reaction to the clock and cleared her throat.

'Archie, I can't say any more to you today. I simply don't have it in me. I'm too tired and too upset.'

Something came over her face, a look of panic and bewilderment. Looking down at her glass, she took a final, large gulp of her gin. Shepherd didn't even want to pick his up because too much alcohol on an empty stomach made his leg hurt.

'I know you've got to go.'

Win got to her feet, slipped on her fur coat and retrieved her hat. She wasn't one for handbags; she'd always argued that's what pockets were for in her thoroughly modern way. Shepherd rose to his feet, fished about for some money and wedged a note under his second untouched gin. Pulling on his great coat and donning his cap, he nodded thanks to the barman and headed towards the exit and his waiting car. Just before they got to the door, Win stopped and put one soft hand on his face.

'You'll want to read this before we talk again.'

Shepherd felt something slip into the large pocket of his coat.

'I don't know what it says because I haven't read it. But I've got a very good idea.'

Win rose on her tiptoes and kissed Shepherd gently on the cheek. Wiping off the excess lipstick, she smiled, opened the door of the pub, and strode off towards Nunhead Green.

10. Wizernes

Kessering could not understand why Gottschalk had insisted on travelling by train from Saint-Omer to Wizernes. It had taken him hours in that shitty station office diverting the freight service to make an unscheduled stop. He had lost count of the number of people shouting down the telephone at him - until he had mentioned Gottschalk. Things calmed quickly after that, but even so it had been long, tedious and tiring. Kessering was not in the least bit interested in the fruits of his labour, this preposterously long train crawling into Saint-Omer, but Gottschalk was – and that was all that mattered.

Kessering had not considered pointing out it was quicker to drive from the motte castrale to Wizernes. He had hoped Bauer might have tried, but the greasy snake was too long in the tooth to fall for displeasing their increasingly unpredictable master. For his part, the Obersturmführer would quite happily have crawled to the back of the carriage and fallen asleep, such was the exhaustion he currently felt.

Unsurprisingly, Gottschalk had wanted him there, along with Bauer and the rest of his adjutants and officers. It was Gottschalk's first meeting with the senior engineer-officers from OT Einsatzgruppe West. Kessering was in no doubt having his full entourage roll up in a ludicrously over-sized train was a deliberate attempt to impress his seniority and importance to the Todt. Gottschalk so enjoyed a grand entrance.

With the tremendous noise and vibration caused by the two dozen steel-laden wagons directly behind the single passenger carriage, Kessering knew it would have been futile trying to sleep anyway. Casting his mind back over the last few days, he shuddered at the effort it had taken to dispose of the station manager's body. This was before the lengthy interrogation of the terrified deputy

manager, which had added to Kessering's fatigue. Despite not being on his top form, Kessering had been satisfied the man had no idea what was happening at Gottschalk's mysterious sidings, nor anywhere else for that matter. Surat had played his cards very close to his corpulent chest. Whether the deputy manager realised it or not, this fact alone had saved him from immediate execution.

Once the mess in the office had been sorted out, Kessering had then spent a good part of the following day trying to get some sense out of the train people in Berlin until he had eventually discovered Surat's replacement was on his way. As his arrival would mean the deputy's sudden and terminal departure, he thought it best to keep this from the petrified official who, for some inexplicable reason, had ordered every platform to be scrubbed clean.

Dummkopf.

The train rattled and rolled through the flat countryside, the early morning sun occasionally filtering through the skeletal branches of trackside trees and thickets. Adjusting the handcuff around his wrist, Kessering shook his head to stop his eyes from closing, attracting the attention of Bauer sitting diagonally opposite him in the fusty six-seat carriage. Gottschalk was staring out of the window, relaxed and happy. He loved his trains.

'Are you alright, Kessering?'

Bauer never missed a trick, nor an opportunity to undermine him. Kessering glared at him and raised his eyebrows. Bauer smirked. The boss ignored the exchange.

Gottschalk was lost in thought, mapping out the route the train was currently taking along that great network diagram in his head. Out the corner of his eye he could see Bauer and Kessering bickering. The younger man looked exhausted, but he had done a good job.

Gottschalk would have to think of a suitable reward to antagonise Bauer. Could things actually get any better? It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to mask his enormous excitement, which had mounted from the first strained tugs of the steel-laden train labouring its way out of Saint-Omer. A few brief kilometres later, they had passed the town of Arques. No-one in the carriage but he had noticed the massive double gates barring entrance to a single track disappearing behind fenced-in trees. Somewhere hidden, his dream was waiting to become reality.

With a jolt, the goods train decelerated. Pulling this tremendous amount of weight meant everything had to be done slowly and carefully, which was one of the greatest reasons the DRB would not have wanted to stop the train at Saint-Omer. The tops of two cranes came into view just over the tree line. Even this early in the morning they were moving, working on the project Gottschalk would soon take from the OT and make his own. The train juddered again, a chorus of squeals mounting on top of the rumbling, panting engine sounds. Gottschalk stood up, retrieved his cap from the rack above his head and strode out into the narrow corridor where his staff was waiting.

Gottschalk made his way through the gap they had carefully allowed to the carriage's exit and pulled down the window, took off his cap and leaned out. The track curved gently to the right. Good. It was not as tight a line as it looked on the network map. A number of railway workers slowly came into view, and he could see they were creating the junction that had been drawn onto Surat's map. Uncertainty gripped him and he took a breath. This was the reason he wanted to take the train this morning. The distance between this new junction and Wizernes station a little further down the line was vital.

A couple of the workers looked up and stared at Gottschalk. One stepped back and spat on the ground. Gottschalk pretended not to see it and waited for the train

to crawl past, then looked back as they picked up their picks and shovels to renew their work in the cold October air. The junction was supposed to be completed yesterday. Whether there was a shortage of manual labour or not, every one of them would be executed within the hour.

Hands gripping on the rail of the opened window, Gottschalk began to count the telephone poles as the train crept around the gentle bend. From his previous calculations, he needed at least two hundred metres distance before they arrived at Wizernes. Any less and his plan would have to be significantly altered, something he absolutely did not want to do. The transfer had to be undertaken once; anything more would draw too much attention to his actions. He had managed to get this far on his own brilliance, but even he realised there had been an element of luck on his side. Gottschalk had little time for serendipity, but he did not want to push his good fortune any further.

Down the line to the right he could make out the low sheds and squat brick station buildings of Wizernes. Gottschalk let out a breath that trailed over the wisps of steam from the engine forwards of his carriage. Yes, the distance was over two hundred metres.

Excellent.

The brakes squealed again, shoving Gottschalk off-balance. Carriages shunted into one another behind, creating a clacking sound that diminished down to the very last open wagon. Gottschalk could see uniforms milling about on the approaching station, mostly the light tan of OT soldiers and grey of the security guards, but he could not see much else in the way of protection. Leaning backwards into the carriage's corridor, he turned to Kessering who had followed him out of the compartment.

'Where the hell is the anti-aircraft cover? I can't see any artillery at all.'

Kessering steadied himself against a grab rail as the train ground to a halt, bumping into Bauer and eliciting a

tut.

'I don't know, Oberführer. On-site security is handled by the OT.'

Gottschalk's face distorted with disgust.

'I can see we're going to have our work cut out for us, Kessering.'

Kessering took a step forward, leaned out of the window and opened the door's handle. Past him, Gottschalk could see two Organisation Todt senior officers watching, casting long shadows down the wet flagstones of the platform in the early morning sun. Kessering jumped down to clear the way for Gottschalk, adjusting the case's bracelet up his wrist as he did so. Before stepping down, Gottschalk peered down the snaking length of the train. From nowhere, men swarmed around the long, open trucks like ants. Some were already on the girders and coils of steel, checking over the materials for unloading to the convoy of trucks backed up on the opposite side of the station's motley collection of buildings. It looked a picture of German military efficiency and Gottschalk grunted to himself. At least the OT could get *that* right.

The two officers moved towards Gottschalk. Both wore brown great coats and 'Org Todt' banners on their left sleeves. For some reason, Gottschalk felt the taller distinguished figure on the right seemed very pleased with himself.

'Which one of you arseholes is Walter?'

Gottschalk spoke as he stepped onto the platform. To his left, the engine panted and groaned, the strain of the short journey having taken its toll on the machine. The shorter, fatter OT officer gaped open-mouthed and looked up to the other, whose self-satisfied smile had disappeared.

'I beg your pardon?'

Gottschalk took a step closer and glowered at the shorter man - who was still taller than him.

'You heard what I said. Who's in charge of this

circus?'

As he stepped forwards to protest, Kessering immediately moved to flank Gottschalk but the taller figure grasped the shaking man firmly by his arm and pushed him back before speaking.

'It's alright, Müller. I am OT-Einsatzgruppenleiter Architekt Professor Anton Walter. I assume by your typical SS bully-boy manners that you are Gottschalk.'

Gottschalk's gloved hands tightened their grasp behind his back. He knew that Kessering and Bauer were now by his sides, and the rest of his staff had dismounted and stood directly behind. He would not be talked to like this, regardless of the man's qualifications and standing. Gottschalk looked past Walter to the end of the platform, over to the trucks and then back again while the unloading noisily continued in the background.

'Einsatzgruppenleiter, is this your first job for Todt?'

Walter stared down his long slender nose at the Oberführer and snorted. Gottschalk knew exactly who the man was, of his superior family connections, his keen intellect and renowned self-control. He also knew that Walter would regard Gottschalk as yet another SS upstart. As if to confirm it, Walter spoke in a supercilious tone, over-loud so that all assembled might hear his words.

'Why don't you ask my employer? You might have heard of him. His name is Albert Speer.'

Gottschalk did not move a centimetre. Instead, he tilted his head down slightly and looked over his glasses.

'I don't have to. My very good friend General Kammler gave me all the information I needed. I had to ask because the way you are running this so-called construction project has all the integrity of Parisian bricklayers building a brothel.'

To his credit, Walter did not show a flicker of emotion. Gottschalk knew Walter was well protected and would not easily be manipulated. That would come in time. Turning to Müller, Walter instructed him to ready the

makeshift office commandeered on the first floor of Wizernes station so the good Oberführer could inspect their security arrangements. The man clearly did not want to leave, but a quick nod from his superior had him scurrying away into the nearby building. Once he was out of earshot, Walter turned back, inhaled deeply and forced a smile.

'Let's not get off on the wrong foot, shall we? The excavation work has only just begun in earnest and there is a fully operational airfield protecting the site, despite the allies' belief they have total supremacy of the skies. If you will accompany me -'

A low wail began somewhere in the distance. Officers, SS, OT workers, everyone stopped what they were doing on the station and trucks. Kessering moved forwards past Gottschalk and looked down the length of the train. In the very far distance, something was heading towards them. Gottschalk stared, transfixed, and it began to resolve itself. Low profile, twin engines, very very fast - and something in the nose flashing on and off. Directly in front of it, the tracks were being torn apart. Chunks of wood and metal spun into the air as the Mosquito roared straight towards him.

Men scattered in all directions, some rolling under the train, others throwing themselves into the station buildings or dashing past the trucks in a desperate attempt to avoid the shells from the aircraft's cannons. Gottschalk saw two men jumping from the far carriage hit mid-air. Some parts of their exploding bodies made it onto the platform, others did not.

Kessering was shouting something to Gottschalk. Dumbly he turned, only to be roughly pushed sideways. Bauer had a hold of his arm and was herding him towards the station's open double doors some metres away. The adjutant stumbled, bringing Gottschalk crashing to the floor of the platform. Gottschalk turned to see Kessering's chest erupt in a plume of gore. His ruined body was

thrown into the side of the engine, Gottschalk's case spinning outwards on the end of the chain attached to his wrist and he crashed face-down into the concrete of the platform. A shadow passed overhead with a deafening roar and then all was silent, save for the rumbles of the engine.

Gottschalk groped for his spectacles and retrieved them from the floor nearby while Bauer staggered to his feet, attempting to regain his composure but failing. Bauer stared dumbly at the body of Kessering, unsure what to do. It took the screams of Gottschalk to shock him back to reality.

'The case! Get the case Bauer! Quickly before we're attacked again!'

Bauer looked up to the sky then back at Gottschalk, who had crawled into the open doorway of the station's darkened waiting room. Somewhere up above, the Ordonnanzoffizier could hear the pitch of engines rising and then falling. The pilot was clearly not going to let such a golden opportunity as this sitting duck of a train slip from his grasp. It should not have been here, they should not have been here. Bauer's mind reeled as he stood between Kessering's body and the crumbling brick building.

'Oberführer, he's coming around right now. I'll be killed!'

Gottschalk's eyes were wide as he fumbled with his clothing on the filthy floor. Behind him, Bauer saw figures crouching below the wooden benches and holding their arms over their heads. When his gaze flicked back to Gottschalk, he saw Gottschalk pull out his pistol and aim it straight at Bauer's head. His voice was high-pitched, strained and terrified.

'I will shoot you right now if you don't retrieve that case, you fucking coward.'

Bauer could not quite believe this was happening. It was a beautiful autumn morning. He had been riding on a train full of armed SS officers and now he was standing on

a corpse-ridden platform with the man he had served for over a decade threatening to murder him.

Up above, the engines were getting louder.

Gottschalk waved his pistol at Bauer. Looking into the sky, Bauer saw the aircraft banking in the distance. He just might have enough time. Running over to Kessering, Bauer stepped over his body so he was closer to one of the locomotive's huge black wheels and tried to get his hand into Kessering's trouser pocket, ignoring the wet hole in his back. Kessering habitually put his key to the case into his right pocket but he could not find it. The drone of engines intensified and there was the sound of small arms fire from around the station. Someone had woken up at last, but the speed that thing was coming at, it would be a miracle if they hit it.

Why the hell couldn't he find that key?

Oh Christ. Of course. Kessering is face down.

This is his left pocket.

Bauer looked up and behind him. The Mosquito was even lower than the first time, its slender wings only just clearing the spindly trees lining the route into Wizernes. Shoving his hands under Kessering's body, they immediately became slick and hot, making Bauer fumble for something to grab hold of. He felt something soft come apart in his hand and retched. Moving his fingers along he felt something sharp (bone?) then finally cloth. His wet fingers grabbed and he heaved upwards, exposing the gaping mess of the Obersturmführer's upper body to the sky.

Gottschalk was still screaming at him to get the case. Why hadn't he given him his key? This would have all been over by now. Wiping his hand on his tunic, Bauer slipped it into Kessering's trouser pocket and immediately felt something small and metallic. The chattering of cannon

started again, this time with the added chorus of shrieking metal. The attackers were going for the train's cargo and that would inevitably mean the engine would be hit at the end of the run. Bauer had picked up enough information about steam engines from Gottschalk over the years to realise a hole through the firebox would mean steam escaping where it should not - and he was right beside it. Bauer pulled the key out as explosions tore closer, and grabbed Kessering's wrist to unlock the handcuff.

Kessering's hand clamped around Bauer's forearm like a vice. It was shaking with the effort, and Bauer could feel his tendons popping under the strain of the hold. Kessering turned his head and stared with distant eyes. Bauer screamed. He could see bubbles forming in the maw of Kessering's chest cavity as he tried to speak, but the gash in his neck would not allow it. Behind them, the cannon fire was getting louder. Bauer wrenched Kessering's death grip from him, unlocked the soaking red bracelet from his wrist and pushed it away. Hurling himself over the gurgling body, Bauer staggered into the doorway and past Gottschalk as a huge explosion tore the front of the engine apart, engulfing Kessering in black and white smoke and blowing in all of the station's windows with a roar.

Walter's previous superior demeanour had gone. Even his lapdog adjutant Müller looked to the floor of the cramped station office as Gottschalk stood before them. His coat was covered in blood and he could feel a bruise forming on his right cheek from when he had hit the platform. Outside, in the cool sunlight, the sound of OT workers trying to clear up the mess was underway. The Mosquito had been seen off by a Focke-Wulfe 190 but the damage had been done. Two strafing runs had left twenty nine workers dead, most of them German and French engineers who would be extremely hard to replace - and all

for a couple of carefully placed Flak 38 AA guns. Then there was Kessering. At least Gottschalk had a replacement for him.

'With immediate effect, I will be taking charge of all aspects connected with this project. I have the orders here in this case.'

Walter's jaw bulged as he swallowed any words he might once have said in protest. Gottschalk knew that Walter had won many an argument with the SS in the past, but the extraordinarily bad timing of the allied attack removed any legitimacy he might once have had. Gottschalk was certain Walter would speak to Speer this evening, but doubted even the Minister for Armaments could do very much in the face of such obvious complacency. In fact, despite his brilliant academic mind and engineering genius, Gottschalk knew he had Walter on the ropes. It had not quite happened how he had planned, but Gottschalk did not care. If anything, this gift was yet more proof his plan was destined to succeed.

'Yes, Oberführer. You shall of course receive my full cooperation.'

Gottschalk looked over the top of his miraculously intact spectacles and rested his bloody case gently on the leather-topped table between them. He unlocked it without taking the bracelet from his wrist, took out a folded piece of paper and handed it to Walter.

'Open it, Architekt Professor.'

Walter was surprised at the tone of Gottschalk. Clearly, he had expected a Himmler-sized rage in the office, but Gottschalk had been careful to hold in his fury, clearly seeing the advantage the unexpected attack had given him. Gottschalk wanted Walter to be undermined and uncertain as to how he might act next. The paper he handed him would only reinforce this plan.

Walter opened the paper and looked down at a replica set of blueprints for his current project. That would have been of little surprise to Walter; General Kammler

had forged close links with the Todt during the building of Peenemunde and, with his ever-increasing influence, was able to procure even the very earliest conceptual drawings from OT. Gottschalk watched Walter very carefully as he stared at the diagram. Everything would be entirely familiar; the huge reinforced dome at the top, the twin launch bays directly underneath and the elaborate branching network of service tunnels were exactly as Walter had originally drawn. Walter's eyes moved down the page, and he began to frown. Gottschalk forced himself to remain impassive. Underneath the lowest level, Walter would be looking at the addition of a huge oval running the full width of the complex with two enormous cavities at either end, one of them connecting to the existing rail network on the surface.

'What... what is this? This was not in the original design.'

Gottschalk finally allowed himself a smile.

'No. It is new. And you are going to build it for me.'

11. Desvres

Louise Jandreau opened her eyes but couldn't see a thing. Panic swept through her and she tried to move but pain erupted everywhere at once, making her gasp. There was something around her mouth and eyes; she was sitting down on a hard chair, but her legs had been tied to it and her hands were behind its back. Somewhere above was the sound of a crowd, shouts, laughs and the constant drumming of feet only metres away. She tried to shout but the binding around her mouth muffled the sound. Then the cold hit her and she began to shiver violently.

'She's awake. At last.'

It was a woman's voice, not one she recognised nor of this region - Parisian, she thought. In any event there was an edge to it that made her heart race.

Oh God. The Carlingue have captured me.

'Take that bloody gag and blind off. She's not going anywhere. You could shoot a cow down here and no-one would hear it with the market in full swing.'

A man this time, definitely local. Louise heard a chair scrape backwards on a stone floor and footsteps click towards her. Heels. The woman. Sure enough the faint whiff of *Soir de Paris* came from a pair of nimble fingers untying knots at the back of her head. Louise worked her lips and jaw as the gag was removed and prepared to see the French Gestapo prison cell she'd undoubtedly been thrown into.

Her eyes adjusted to the gloom in a couple of blinks, but it took a little time for her to make sense of what she could see. It was a cellar, a very large one with a single naked bulb dangling from the heavy wooden beams supporting the ceiling directly above. A steep wooden staircase disappeared up into the roof on the opposing wall. Underneath was a small desk on which a pitcher of water, a heavily shaded lamp and a radio transmitter stood

in partial silhouette. The radio had headphones and a microphone coiled on top of it, the dial glowing gently to show it was still active. Along the walls to the left and right, several dozen crates, some of them open to reveal plates and tiles, surrounded her. A few were stamped with the words 'Faïences de Desvres'.

A tall, powerful-looking shaven-headed man regarded her coolly. He wore a heavy leather apron down to work clogs and an open cotton shirt, the sinews on his folded arms thrown into relief by the feeble light. Louise concluded where she was and, due to the market noises above her head, that it was a Tuesday. She must have been unconscious for days.

'So Louise, what can you tell us about the attack on Bleriot's farm?'

Unseen from behind, the woman spoke. It was clear to Louise the intention was to shock her. Stepping out of the shadow of the staircase, the man twirled his long black moustache with one hand and stuffed the other into his apron pocket.

Louise tried to talk but her mouth was dry. Caked blood cracked on her lips as she continued to work her jaw. Her back was screaming with pain and all of her limbs throbbed. Torture and interrogation at the hands of the Carlingue or, even worse, those bastard Vichy Milice had been discussed during her brief training in Dieppe, but she'd hoped to never experience it. She ran her tongue over her teeth. At least they seemed to be intact.

'It might be an idea to give her some water Simone. She'll only pass out again if we don't.'

The woman tutted in disgust. With a smile, the man turned back to the staircase, poured some water into a glass and walked over to Louise. He offered the glass to her lips with surprising delicacy for such a huge man and she let the first few drops run down her chin before drinking it all down without pause.

'Thank you monsieur.'

The man stood back and nodded. He looked genuinely friendly, but this had to be a ruse. Louise had been warned they nearly always worked in teams, one good, one bad, one threatening and one sounding like the voice of reason. This looked like the reasonable one.

'Call me Albert. This is Simone.'

Louise turned her head to one side and looked up. Had she been standing and not trussed up like a chicken, Simone would stand a head taller than her. Even in the gloom, Louise could see she was wearing a good quality heavy patterned floral dress and expensive shoes. Simone's hair was dark and curly, eyes wide and cold. She would have been beautiful had it not been for the thick scar running from the bottom of her left ear to her cheekbone.

'I'll ask you again. What happened at Bleriot's farm?'

Louise glanced at Simone's knuckles. Grazed and sore. Were they the hands of a torturer? Louise could see no point in lying to the question so she cleared her throat and spoke in as controlled a tone as she could.

'We were attacked by a German patrol. There was an armoured car with a big gun on it. Everyone was killed.'

Simone stared down at her, nostrils flaring.

'Everyone but *you*.'

Louise shifted in her chair, trying to get some relief from the pain. That seemed an odd thing for her to say.

'I was blown through the farmhouse and out into the garden. Did you see the state of the woodshed I hid in? I'm assuming that's where you found me. I don't remember getting out.'

Simone looked over to Albert and rubbed her knuckles. Surely she hadn't dug her out?

'We saw the state of the woodshed. It was nothing but matchsticks and you were well buried under the logs. Something of a miraculous escape, wouldn't you say?'

Albert's voice had no accusation in it. He was merely stating a fact that anyone who had seen the situation would have voiced. Despite clearly being under suspicion of

something, even Louise could appreciate that. Anger flared in Louise's chest. She was petrified, but even so she saw little point in playing games with these two collaborators.

'If you're wanting to know who told your forces to attack, why don't you just ask them, you traitors.'

Albert's thick eyebrows knitted together then raised in amusement. Simone snorted something under her breath.

'Who exactly do you think we are, Louise?'

It suddenly dawned on her they weren't wearing the uniforms of the Milice and if this cellar was the best the Carlingue could do, they were in a sorry state. Her mouth fell open then closed as it dawned on her who they were, and she felt stupid for it. Of course the Resistance would have known about the attack on the farm. Chances were they'd seen the whole terrible thing but couldn't take on a full German patrol, let alone one armed with a tank. They'd likely waited for hours until the Germans had left then skulked in to look for any survivors. She was of course glad to be alive, and while these were her compatriots she'd nevertheless have to be very careful what she said. Paling, she looked at the man and spoke through gritted teeth.

'You must know who I am, that I would never betray my brothers and sisters.'

Simone walked around to face Louise, obscuring the light with her head and framing her in a yellow halo. She didn't have to see her face to know she didn't trust her one centimetre.

'Bleriot told us you'd taken it upon yourself to carry out a vendetta against a German naval officer. He told us he had made it quite clear such an action would bring about terrible reprisals, particularly if you killed him in Wimereux, but you ignored him. He told us at least one of your attempts failed and, in his opinion, you were a danger to yourself and others. Now Bleriot and one other good man is dead.'

Louise shook her head and looked past her to Albert.

He stared back at her expectantly. Simone turned and marched to the staircase, helping herself to water. A click and glowing red dot preceded the smell of smoke as she lit a cigarette, drew in deeply and exhaled. Albert shuffled on his heavy clogs, scratching against the cold stone floor.

'What were you doing in Saint-Omer, Louise? Why did you go to the farmhouse from there? You do know it's looking very likely you either told someone of the farm, or you were followed.'

Louise strained against the chair in sudden fury, making the wood creak and crack.

'I told no-one anything! I was following Fieseler because he was sent to see the new SS man. I thought the information would be valuable and -'

'And Bleriot would reconsider him as a target?'

Simone's voice cut through the tissue layers of smoke drifting from her shadowy lair. Albert raised his eyebrows quizzically as Louise exhaled. There was absolutely no point trying to hide anything. As her mother always said, liars need good memories and she simply wasn't up to fabrication.

'Partly, yes. I honestly thought it was important. The SS man had only just got into town and here he is, ordering a Naval Intelligence officer who's a known killer of the Resistance to his quarters. Someone who can speak French without a German accent working for the SS could be very dangerous.'

Simone laughed from behind Albert and took another drag on her cigarette.

'Louise, the SS can call on dozens of their own people who like killing Resistance fighters and speak perfect French. You wanted to create some connection for your own benefit and revenge.'

Louise gritted her teeth and leaned forwards in her chair. Her fear was transmuting into anger.

'In that case, why the hell would I tell the Germans where I was going?'

Albert clapped his hands together with a booming slap. He turned to Simone and pointed a thick finger at her.

'You see Simone? What did I say? She might be daft but she isn't stupid. She's no informer.'

Simone dropped the cigarette to the floor and ground it out with her heel. She re-emerged from the shadow and looked over to Louise, head cocked to one side.

'You must have been followed then.'

Louise sat back in the chair and closed her eyes. Suddenly, she felt sick. The drive from Saint-Omer to Wisques meant taking a lot of narrow straight roads. Yes, she'd gone past German patrols and yes, there had been traffic on the road with her. But no. She would have known if someone was following her close enough to keep her in constant view. Wouldn't she?

'I don't think I was followed, madame.'

'Don't think? You don't *think*?

Simone had her hands on hips and was shouting. Albert took a few steps forwards and placed a meaty hand on her delicate arm but she shrugged it off angrily.

'Bleriot thought you were trouble and so do I. If I'd had my way you'd still be buried under those logs at the farm, with a few hundred more on top. You don't *think*? Putain de merde.'

Somewhere up above, the shuffle of feet could be heard and a loud knock came from the door at the top of the stairway. Simone and Albert exchanged glances. He clopped up the stairs as she flicked off the power to the transmitter and threw a heavy cloth over the set. Louise heard the sound of a revolver's hammer being drawn back and a safety switch flicking off. Up above, the door cracked open slightly and two voices murmured, one urgent, the other calm. The door closed again and Albert walked slowly down the stairs, his eyes not leaving Louise's.

Simone stepped out of the shadows, gently prising

the hammer back on her small silver handgun. Albert walked directly towards Louise, right hand in his smock's tool pocket. Two paces away he pulled out a clasp knife and flicked it open in a blur. Louise shrunk back into her chair, eyes wide with fear.

'Circumstances have changed, mademoiselle.'

Simone stood by impassively, dangling the pistol from a manicured finger. Albert strolled behind Louise and she strained to catch his eye.

'Please, don't kill me. I've done nothing wrong. I wasn't followed! Please!'

The knife made short work of Louise's tether and she jolted forwards as the ropes fell to the floor. Simone's expression changed to one of astonishment, her mouth agape as Albert walked back in view. Looking down at Louise, he folded the clasp on his knife then dropped it back into his apron pocket. Reaching down, he helped her to stand, shaking with fear and cold.

'She wasn't followed, Simone. The tip-off came from somewhere else and the attack had been planned for days.'

Albert strode over to a crate, pushed it aside and fished around out of sight. He reappeared with a dusty bottle of calvados and a couple of glasses, then headed off to the small table under the stairs to do the honours. Simone, however, had not finished. Walking over to Louise, she leaned over to her ear, her words spat rather than whispered.

'I don't care if Albert thinks you're okay. I don't trust you and I'm going to make that known. Have your drink, tidy yourself up then don't stop walking until you get back to Dieppe. If I see you around here again, I will kill you myself. Understood?'

Louise blinked once and nodded, just as a smiling Albert returned with a shot-glass of light amber liquid filled to the brim.

12. Arques

Fieseler could not remember the last time he had felt this angry. Ever since the meeting with that rat of a man, he had been struggling to control himself. This had led to a lapse of judgement that could have got him into considerable trouble. Ringing Kommodore Arnold the second he had finished reading his instructions from Gottschalk back at his lodgings in Wimereux was, on reflection, not one of his best ideas. Arnold was not used to repeating orders - that was made abundantly clear. What was less obvious was the reason why he was so willing to hand one of his best officers over. Fieseler got the distinct impression some unpleasant pressure was being forced upon his superior by the SS man, and was left in no doubt as to his fate if he ever questioned Arnold's command again.

The clouds gathered and darkened above Fieseler as he crunched along the rough track. His hopes the sun would continue as it had for the last few days were gone. Autumn was drawing to a close and winter would soon be here. Looking to his right, a gust of cold wind blew ripples over the Étang de Batavia. With a sigh, he ruefully concluded this modest lake was the closest he would likely get to the open water for some time. To his left the straight line of trees and overgrown bushes running parallel to the train track some metres behind rustled with the gust, springing back into place when it subsided.

He wished he could have driven up the track but he had been under precise instructions to leave his car in Arques. It was an unremarkable town that he felt sure had been chosen for just that reason. No-one went to Arques, they passed through it to either reach or leave Saint-Omer. Even so, to get to the track there was a newly constructed checkpoint purporting to be railway security. Fieseler might have despised the man, but there was no arguing the

location Gottschalk had chosen could not be faulted.

Fieseler grunted to himself. He was still having great difficulty believing what the Oberführer had ordered him to do. Clearly, it had to be a part of a much bigger plan and, during the briefing yesterday morning, Gottschalk had said as much. Fieseler would discover the parts of it he needed to know when he needed to know them, but he should be assured it was all to the good of the war effort. Fieseler could see Gottschalk was like the rest of the SS – completely besotted with Hitler and entirely convinced of German victory. It was as depressing as it was stupid. If they got to the end of 1944 without a major invasion by the allies, Fieseler would have been extremely surprised – regardless of the ‘terror weapon that will turn the war’ Gottschalk kept making cryptic reference to.

The papers Fieseler had been given – which he must divulge to no-one and guard with his life – were all he was required to know at this point, and that was that. Fieseler hated having holes in his knowledge; he had made a good name for himself with his flair for research in the Abwehr-M. He prided himself on being a creative thinker, but he could not yet work out what the next step in Gottschalk's plan might be. Moreover, did he want to know any more than he already did? Getting inside the head of an SS officer was not something he relished, particularly one whose sanity Fieseler felt to be questionable.

Fieseler had been stupid in hoping his conversation with Arnold might have brought clarity to the situation. That said, the scale of what Gottschalk had already put into place was staggering. Surely *someone* else must know what he had been doing? But then again, if Arnold's capitulation to Gottschalk was anything to go by, the rat had likely found ways to silence anyone and everyone who might have stumbled upon his actions with typically ruthless SS efficiency. It did not matter that Fieseler was a respected, decorated naval officer. He was certain Gottschalk would kill him just as soon as look at him once

his usefulness had expired. For now, while he absolutely did not like it one bit, Fieseler bit his tongue and did what he was told - until the time became right to do otherwise.

Up ahead, Fieseler could see a narrow path diverting away from the wider track into the trees just as he had been told. On the opposite side of the lake, a small armoured car slowed, its commander regarding him from the open turret through field glasses. Seemingly satisfied, he lowered them and the four-wheeled scout picked up speed. Gottschalk's security was impressive. Pulling down the peak of his cap, Fieseler followed the path as a steam whistle blew in the near distance.

Through the trees he could hear the high-pitched singing of tracks and within seconds a train rumbled by, slowing for its imminent arrival at Saint-Omer. Following the densely wooded passage, Fieseler turned a sharp corner and was confronted by a high steel gate and two armed sentries directly behind it. They both wore the black flashes of Waffen SS on their lapels and, despite Fieseler's clearly identifiable insignia, raised their MP 40s with stocks tucked under the machine pistols' body. Both wore camouflage tunics and helmet coverings. Experienced guys.

Fieseler saluted them both and they stepped closer to the rusting open mesh of the three metre-high gate. The fencing alone must have cost a fortune. Fishing out his specially prepared papers from his coat pocket, Fieseler slipped them between the gap just above the heavy-duty padlock and chain. The taller guard pushed back his helmet and languidly reached for the documents while his companion covered his movement. As soon as the man's eyes saw the signature at the bottom of the page, the pace - and attitude towards Fieseler - improved dramatically.

Within sixty seconds the gates were being hastily locked behind him and the older man, Oberscharführer Dietrich, was marching alongside Fieseler in a businesslike manner. Fieseler had made it easy on the two; of course he

understood the need for total security and fully appreciated their wariness on his approach. And no, they had done nothing to warrant any form of complaint to the Oberführer. They had served him well for nearly four years (Four years? Could the war effort spare two veterans such as these?) and were a credit to their regiment.

Despite the grey skies filtering through the trees above, Fieseler observed he was walking in shadow. Like some kind of proud tour guide, Dietrich turned another sharp bend in the path and introduced the buildings suddenly and directly in front of them with a sweep of his brown-gloved hand. The view stopped Fieseler dead. Shoe-horned into this copse between Saint-Omer main line and the lake were two enormous apex-roofed structures. Both were constructed from heavy girders and covered in camouflage-painted corrugated iron sheets.

They had to be at least fifty metres long. The one on the left seemed to be newer because the patina on its sides was not as verdant green, the single tracks leading from the chained-shut full-height double doors of the sheds rusting from disuse. Following the lines, Fieseler saw they joined around twenty metres to the right before the now single track disappeared into the trees at the exit to the compound where it logically connected to the Saint-Omer line and the rail network. Talk about hiding in plain sight.

'What are your orders sir?'

Dietrich's voice was rough, likely the result of too much cheap alcohol and constant smoking.

'You are to contact Saint-Omer station and ask for Herr Schmidt, the new manager. You are to tell him Oberführer Gottschalk requires the special transportation team to meet me at 09:00 hours in one month's time. He is also to source and deliver enough fuel for six locomotives and two diesel engines within the next week.'

Dietrich saluted and was just about to turn back to his field office near the main gate when he paused and looked at Fieseler with a glint in his eye.

'Are you going to be working with the transportation team, sir?'

Fieseler did not know how to answer that. He assumed he was, but nothing was guaranteed with Gottschalk.

'I'm not at liberty to divulge that information, Oberscharführer!'

Fieseler did not mean it to sound quite so abrupt. Dietrich stiffened to attention.

'My apologies sir. It's just that...'

The skin at the back of Fieseler's neck began to itch.

'Go on.'

Dietrich swivelled his eyes first to meet Fieseler's cautious gaze and then over to the nearest shed.

'Well, I thought you might want to take a look at what's inside.'

Fieseler could not resist smiling. Surely to God SS troopers were not that stupid?

'I'm assuming they are trains, Oberscharführer.'

It was Dietrich's turn to grin, showing black and broken teeth from years of bad diet and neglect.

'Oh they're trains sir. But one of them is... special.'

13. Welwyn

Shepherd walked along the Great North Road's unkempt pavement, and for a few seconds the world felt almost normal. Autumn had arrived with a vengeance, the trees in this part of Welwyn seemingly losing all of their leaves in the last couple of days, dumping them in a heap wherever they fell. This far north of London, the smell in the air was keen and fresh, and had it not been for the frequent cars and vans cruising between Barnet and Stevenage, the place had a distinctly rural feel to it. Of course, the world was not normal. His mother had just died, his aunt had confused the living hell out of him and he had a letter in his breast pocket he didn't dare read.

On top of all that, he was dressed in full naval uniform (on the peculiar instruction of Colonel Redmayne) and the immaculately dressed flâneur accompanying him was, despite his dapper looks and neatly parted hair, a seasoned assassin and saboteur. They might as well have been going for an early morning stroll. However, on seeing the partly overgrown sign declaring 'War Office Property - Entry forbidden without written permission' nestled between the trees to his left, the shadows of imagined normality were bleached out of existence.

Richards took one last drag on the impossibly skinny roll-up he had been sucking on since leaving the car half a mile down the road and flicked it to the concrete with a disappointed exhale. Reaching into his tweed waistcoat, he pulled out and opened a gold-cased pocket watch, snapped it shut then fumbled about with his other hand inside his matching brown-green jacket. Retrieving a folded envelope, he passed it over to Shepherd with a twinkle.

"Take a read. You'll need to know who you're working for when you get over there."

Shepherd raised his eyebrows and nodded. A week ago he might have found such a comment curious, but

he'd spent the last few days shuttling between Baker Street and Cold Morham, getting to know Richards and his bizarre organisation better. The SIS might have thought the SOE were a bunch of amateurs, but their information network was outstanding. Richards had delighted in giving 'Archie dear fellow' intelligence report after intelligence report, fleshing out the situation around Wizernes and reading as much information on the OT's Einsatzgruppenleiter Architekt Professor Anton Walter as was available. Not for the first time, Shepherd had been fascinated and disgusted in equal measure at how such a brilliant man could be practicing his craft for the glory of the Third Reich. Perhaps he had no choice in the matter. Perhaps he did.

The blur of events had been welcomed by Shepherd. He needed to focus and forget. Getting to know Richards had helped immeasurably. With Colonel Redmayne's blessing, it had been agreed Shepherd needed further specialist training on top of that gained with 30 Commando so here he was, walking towards a set of anonymous metal gates down a discrete driveway with papers that declared him to be part of NID(Q) Section of the Admiralty and, if anyone asked, an officer of Military Operations 1 (MO1).

Neither department nor section existed; they were covers for the Inter-Services Research Bureau here at The Frythe mansion house, the main centre for research, equipment development and supplies for the Special Operations Executive. Cryptically referred to as ISRB Station X by its occupants, Richards had barely been able to contain his joy at their visit. With Shepherd's engineering background, Richards had insisted he would find it 'an absolute wheeze.'

'So what happens next, Hugh? Do we say 'open sesame'?'

Richards chuckled at Shepherd's deadpan comment, flashing a dazzling smile and creating deep laughter lines.

The man's diminutive frame hid his extraordinary talents well, and Shepherd could see why the SOE would value him and the SIS despise him. Upper-class, highly educated and sophisticated in his tastes, he was just the kind of person who would be able to operate with confidence and competence in occupied France. Shepherd's language skills were pretty good thanks to a six-month stint with the French navy early in his service, but Richards' vocabulary was excellent and accent non-existent. If he fought as well as he spoke, he'd be the ideal man to go on a mission with.

'Good morning gentlemen. May I help you?'

The voice came from nowhere. Deep, calm and powerful, the casual way in which the moustachioed sergeant levelled his cocked and ready STEN gun at them from the trees was a gentle reminder they'd better give the correct answer.

'Morning sergeant. Our papers.'

The sergeant tucked the machine gun's stock under the crook of his arm and, with his free hand, took the papers from Richards and Shepherd through the gates.

'Won't be a minute, gentlemen.'

The sergeant disappeared behind a thick rhododendron bush then returned less than a minute later with gun lowered and gate key ready to hand.

'Just follow the road up to the house, gentlemen. Someone will meet you at the front entrance. Please don't stray off the drive, or you're likely to get blown up or shot.'

Richards thought this was hilarious, but stopped laughing as soon as the sergeant didn't start.

In the early morning sun, The Frythe was an imposing sight. Set in lush green grounds rolling away to a thick tree boundary, it looked the kind of place ICI or any other big company might have evacuated out to from central London. The large open arches of the entrance were both inviting and imposing and the tall windows, red-brick towers and long black chimneys quite typical of the Gothic revival fashion of the mid-1800s. Directly in front

of the impressive façade, a large car park housed a varied collection of military and civilian vehicles. If this was anything to go by, it was clear to Shepherd there were a lot of people working here. As he and Richards crunched up the snaking drive, the sound of a busy machine shop and occasional loud bangs drifted from the far side of the main house.

They were nearing one of the arches in the covered entranceway when a smartly dressed young lady with brilliant red lipstick, straining blouse buttons and a straight blonde bob made her way towards them. Inevitably, Richards took the lead and extended a friendly hand. The young lady, despite being dressed in civilian clothes, took it upon herself to salute smartly so Richards did the same. Not wanting to feel left out, Shepherd saluted too.

'Mr Richards, Lieutenant Shepherd. Welcome. I am Corporal Reilly. Please follow me.'

Turning on her low heel, the corporal wiggled away despite her very best efforts not to. Richards turned around to Shepherd and winked. Shepherd smiled.

The interior of The Frythe was no less imposing than the exterior. Walking across the black and white chequered floor of the entrance hall, the muted sound of discussion and typewriters drifted on the air. Corporal Reilly made straight for the grand mahogany staircase and climbed it without pausing for the two men. Shepherd drank in the detail of the beautifully turned spindles, curved support buttresses of the first floor and ornately plastered ceiling thirty feet above them. Richards, meanwhile, concentrated on the corporal's backside and rhythmic reveal of stocking seams above her shiny brown shoes.

Footsteps muffled by the thick red carpet, they were ushered into a large and airy painted-panel room by the corporal who, despite her best efforts so far, finally gave Richards a dazzling smile a second before she walked off. Richards saw that as nothing less than an invitation and rewarded her with an 'I'll see you later' wink.

Major General Gubbins looked out through the long window dominating the side of the elegant room, framed by the long blue drapes on either side. His arms were folded and by the movement of his shoulders he was laughing at something in the grounds behind the house, still smiling as he turned to greet Shepherd and Richards as they approached him. Both stood to attention and saluted; Gubbins' smile disappeared and he bid them both stand at ease.

'We might have a bit of a problem with your contacts at Dieppe.'

Richards raised an eyebrow and thrust his hands into his deep tweed pockets as Gubbins marched over to a huge polished mahogany table angled across the near corner of the room.

'That doesn't sound terribly promising sir. What kind of problem?'

Gubbins eased himself onto a heavily padded, high-backed dining chair and peered down at the papers laid before him. Shepherd couldn't see any detail from his position, but they all had red 'top secret' stamps on the top.

'We've had a warning from an operative in the Saint-Omer region they suspect one of the Dieppe cell to be an informer, or double agent.'

Richards took a few steps towards the table. However, as the only other chairs in the room were sitting against the wall between the windows, Shepherd concluded this was meant to be a short meeting. Richards' voice was a mixture of curiosity and wariness. His choice of words might have seemed informal, but their content revealed just how well-informed he was of the Resistance in that part of France.

'Has it been confirmed by Dieppe? Odd it's not coming from them. Why would the Saint-Omer gang get involved with the coastal boys? You know how they like to operate separately. Less chance of spilling the beans on

each other, and all that.'

Gubbins slid another piece of paper from a different pile over the one he'd just read and frowned.

'We don't have any detail, and to be frank it's all a bit contradictory. The agent who's made the accusations claims the Dieppe woman... Louise Jandreau... is implicated in the death of two of her cell.'

Shepherd was completely out of his depth, but felt he had to be included in the conversation as it had a direct bearing on the mission he'd be sharing with Richards. As soon as he opened his mouth, he wished he hadn't.

'Begging your pardon sir, but shouldn't Dieppe be informed of this?'

Gubbins sat back and stroked his moustache with his index finger. Richards turned and frowned, an uncharacteristic chastisement from his newly acquired friend.

'They have been informed and are adamant Jandreau is absolutely clean. Saint-Omer confirms she was involved in a German attack but was subsequently found to be unconnected with it. Just bad luck and timing.'

Richards looked to the deep carpet and nodded. When he wanted to, he could be as focussed and objective as anyone.

'What does Dieppe think we should do? Call it off? Go through another cell?'

Gubbins folded his arms and sat further back in his chair.

'Certainly not. You know how proud and territorial these chappies get when it comes to such things. The leader of the Dieppe cell insists this woman is reliable, but so does the Saint-Omer chief of the operative who's bringing the claims against Jandreau.'

The three fell silent. Somewhere outside, a motor spluttered into life for a few seconds and then stopped.

'Latest communication from Dieppe recommends a four week delay, just to make sure you're not walking into

a situation that's any more unstable than it already is. We've told them to make it two and sort out this ridiculous contest between them. Time is of the absolute essence with this mission. The way the Todt works, they could build a fifty foot wall in a fortnight. I don't like the idea of any delays, but we have heard the V-2 development has run into a few problems and there's little chance they will begin shipping the weapons for some time.'

Shepherd looked over to Richards. He looked troubled. Ten seconds later, Gubbins peered at them with a quizzical expression.

'Well... get on with it then.'

Shepherd and Richards walked back down the main stairs in silence. As if things weren't difficult enough, now they had a potential informer on their hands. Everyone in the intelligence community knew how fragile secrets were, particularly in the occupied countries. It'd got so bad at one point, the average life expectancy of a Resistance SOE radio operator was six weeks. Put together, the Abwehr, SS and Gestapo were a formidable information-gathering network.

The latest RAF fly-by had shown a considerable increase in rail traffic in the immediate area, and the gun cameras from a lone Mosquito that had come across an unexpected goods train at Wizernes confirmed the scale of materials being brought in. Shepherd feared the scale of the object he had seen might be even greater than his initial calculations. While there might have been a surprising lack of air cover a few days ago, given the importance of the construction, Shepherd knew that security would inevitably get tighter. The last thing they needed was half the German army waiting to greet them when they landed near Dieppe.

'Archie dear fellow, I'm going down to Signals to see if I can call on a couple of pals to make some sense out of

this bloody mess. I'll see you over at the Quartermasters at ten.'

Before Shepherd could ask where it was, Richards disappeared across the cavernous hallway floor in a blur of tweed just as three uniformed ladies appeared carrying a pile of papers at the bottom of the stairs. With half an hour to kill, Shepherd decided to find the workshops he could hear outside.

The morning air was cool, unaffected by the weak October sun. Ignoring the driveway up which he had arrived, Shepherd instead turned right and followed the path around the side of the mansion. He was immediately rewarded with a row of prefabricated felt-roofed wooden huts and what appeared to be a small aircraft hangar in the grounds behind them. Various bangs, knocks and shouts could be heard from the closest building, but its doors were closed and the hand-painted 'bloody keep out!' notice hardly an invitation to peep inside. Out of sight, the single-cylinder engine he'd heard up in Gubbins's office started up again. Due to the avenues formed by the huts, he couldn't quite locate where it was coming from. Turning back towards the house, Shepherd was just about ready to turn left when the engine sound rose in pitch directly behind him.

'Gangway!'

Shepherd threw himself onto the grass verge as a preposterously small motorcycle tore past, barely controlled by a huge man in straining brown overalls frantically pulling trying to balance on it. The tiny green machine, little more than a connection of boxes and flywheels welded between two tiny wheels and a jacked-up seat, lost power and fell on its side. Shepherd's initial anger at getting his hands and knees wet was tempered by the unmoving figure on the grass some yards away. It looked like the idiot might have killed himself.

'You bloody fool. Are you alright?'

The man, face-down and taking up a lot of lawn, groaned and let out a string of pained expletives to signify he was still alive. Shepherd stopped in his tracks.

'Good God. Is that you, Bremner?'

Hauling himself to his work-booted feet, the big man wiped mud from his beard and stared in amazement.

'Shepherd! What the hell are you doing here?'

Shepherd beamed as he offered his hand. It was gratefully and muddily accepted.

'I've been assigned here for a couple of weeks for training. Hush hush and all that.'

Bremner stared at him with cold grey eyes.

'Hush hush eh? What's your clearance level then, lad?'

Shepherd frowned. There was a hard edge to the Yorkshireman's question. Perhaps the man he'd spent two years with at Imperial College inventing impossible things between pints of flat bitter wasn't the same any more. It had been over ten years.

'My clearance level? I have no idea.'

Bremner wiped his pudgy hands on his distended stomach and nodded solemnly.

'Well, you got through the gate without being shot through the head so that's good enough for me. How's the leg?'

Shepherd raised an eyebrow and touched his hip.

'Much the same.'

The big man's face slid into a grin. He looked down to the motorcycle lying forlornly on its side then in the direction of the huts.

'Want to take a look around?'

It was nearly half-past ten when Richards appeared at the Quartermaster's hut in the grounds of The Frythe. He still looked concerned about the situation, and had muttered how he hadn't been able to find any more out

than they already knew. The Quartermaster, an ageing boffin who liked to keep things tidy despite the utter chaos of machine parts, chunks of metal and wires filling the makeshift store-room he called home, was looking red and flustered thanks to the efforts of Ted Bremner. The last hour had flown by for Shepherd; he'd not seen Teddy since he joined the navy. Despite being from completely different backgrounds and parts of the country, they'd always got on like a house on fire.

It wasn't any surprise Ted had been snapped up by the SOE; he always had been inventive to the point of lunacy, taking a leaf out of their Head of Engineering at Imperial's book. Before the war, Prof Pippard had famously said 'university years should be devoted to the study of engineering science with as little emphasis as possible on the practical interests of the work', and this in a paper to the Royal Aeronautical Society no less.

Pippard had also influenced Shepherd greatly, but in a very different way. During an all-too-brief conversation just before he'd graduated, Shepherd had admitted fascination with large-scale building projects, particularly dams. Pippard had nodded and smiled - he could see the interest, and couldn't for the life of him understand why he'd want to join the navy when he could be building things instead. By that time though, Shepherd had just wanted to see the world - encouraged in no small part by aunt Win - and he felt sure there'd always be construction work to fall back on. Then war had arrived and rather than transfer over to the Royal Engineers, his life had taken quite a different path. Funny it had meandered back to one of his best friends, who was busy annoying the short, balding Quartermaster in a white lab coat standing behind the battered wooden bench.

'Ay, Roly, show them all the toys. That's what they're here for.'

When Bremner got his eye fixed on something, he was the most dogmatic man alive. This ranged from girls

to beer to getting the finish on a piece of metal perfect; he'd never give up. On their tour around the various huts and workshops (don't tell *anyone* I let you in here), the truth of his near-death experience on the tiny motorbike had been revealed. It was the latest version of the Welbike, the previous versions having found some success with paratroopers and infantrymen around the world. He was trying to get it even lighter, but bugging around with the engine's components was causing him a few problems. He'd wanted to get it sorted and move on to building a miniature submarine, hence the potentially fatal testing regimen he was currently undertaking. Right now, he was focussed on getting the Quartermaster even more flustered.

'I'm not showing anyone anything until I've seen the relevant paperwork. And for the last time, stop calling me Roly, Mister Bremner.'

Teddy breathed in with mock alarm, extending his huge stomach even further towards the irritated - and irritating - man.

'Doctor Bremner, if you don't mind.'

Shepherd laughed at this outburst, making Richards smile despite not getting the joke.

'Good God Teddy, someone gave you a PhD? For what? Overdoing it on the inventing front? Being the heaviest engineer on two legs?'

Teddy lunged over to grab at Shepherd's head, knocking into the wooden bench and making it rock on its thick legs. Shepherd was far too fast. He'd only ever been grabbed and put into a head lock by the hulking man once. Three days and a still-throbbing neck later, he'd vowed he'd never let him do it to him again.

'Gentlemen, I repeat. Papers please. Or no equipment.'

Richards handed over the same papers he'd shown at the gate and one additional form, a requisition order. Shepherd also handed his papers over. The Quartermaster

scanned the papers, scowled, then scuttled off into the gloom between the towering racks of equipment. Minutes later, he returned.

'Here we are. Apologies for the delay.'

With a grunt, not-to-be-called-Roly presented a large black tin with a sealed lid and rested a small booklet on top of it. With no markings on the outside, Richards and Shepherd peered down at the cylinder then back to the man, who met their gaze with a look of superiority.

'This is carborundum powder. You mix it to form an abrasive grease. Put it into the axle boxes of trains, particularly freight wagons, and it seizes them up. Takes a little while to work, but perfect if you're going anywhere near a railway station - which you clearly must be.'

Shepherd threw a glance over to Teddy, who shrugged.

'Come on Roly, get to the good stuff.'

The man narrowed his eyes at Bremner, reached behind him and retrieved three metal objects - two black, one silver. Placing them carefully on the table, Richards took a step forward, immediately interested in the two identical long black cylinders. Picking one up by its shorter handle toward the rear, he looked down the crude sites set into either ends. Roly didn't like it being pointed at his head, and gently pushed the muzzle to one side.

'Excellent. I see Major Reeves has been working on his pistol. What's new?'

To Shepherd, the device looked home-made. He couldn't understand Richards' clear delight at the crude weapon. Picking up on his friend's less-than-impressed expression, Teddy butted in before not-Roly had time to explain.

'It's even quieter than the previous version and this one takes 9mm cartridges.'

Richards smiled, hefting the black tube and pulling the magazine out of the handle at the bottom with a click.

'Still six shots?'

Teddy nodded, picked the other one up and handed it over to Shepherd.

'Here you go Archie, your first Welrod silenced pistol. You'll know what all the fuss is about when you try it out down the range this afternoon.'

Shepherd looked down at the weapon. He wasn't convinced.

'What's the other tube?'

Roly brushed back the three wisps of hair he insisted was a fringe and passed it over to him.

'Have a guess.'

It was lightweight, couldn't have been longer than seven inches and just over an inch in diameter. One end had a screw-cap on it with a torch-like switch built into the top. In the other stubby end was a small hole.

'I give up.'

Teddy took it off him and slipped it up the sleeve of his shirt. Letting his arm fall to his side, the tube slipped out into his fat hand and, in a surprisingly graceful motion, he flicked back the switch on its top and something inside the tube clicked.

'It's a sleeve gun, lad. Perfect spying stuff.'

His face was alight with mischief. Of course he knew it wasn't a game. In the thirty seconds Teddy had become serious during the tour, he had declared everything they did at The Frythe might save someone's life or help shorten the war. He also guaranteed anything Shepherd might be armed with might look like a toy, but they all worked. Even so, Shepherd barked a laugh at the device.

'You have got to be joking. What the hell use is that?'

Richards chuckled as he put his Welrod back onto the wooden bench while Roly busied himself by placing several boxes of ammunition next to it.

'It fires a single thirty two calibre bullet. It's silenced as well. Stroll in somewhere, whip it out and whoosh! You're done.'

Shepherd shook his head at his oldest and newest

friends. With a sigh, Richards raised his beautifully tailored right arm and pulled the material of his perfectly starched shirt cuff gently downwards. Just out of the shadow between cotton and skin, Shepherd could see an identical muzzle peering out.

'I never leave home without one.'

14. La Coupole

Fieseler stared at the hole in the world and felt the back of his neck tingle. Within seconds the sensation had crept down between his shoulders, an infuriating itch that acted as a sure-fire warning. And yet everywhere he looked he could see OT soldiers and guards, warily overseen by several SS NCOs. Far up above, dozens of metres at the broken rim of the enormous chalk quarry, he could make out the stick-like turrets of anti-aircraft batteries unevenly spaced around the top of the excavation. One of Gottschalk's first orders had been a significant increase in AA cover since the debacle at Wizernes station, and despite the sensation creeping over him, Fieseler could see no reason why he would be filled with dread. To all intents and purposes, he was as safe as he could be, given the circumstances.

Even so, the feeling under his collar refused to go away. It was not caused by the construction site, nor any threat of attack – particularly from the air. Truth be known, he would welcome that - seeing his enemy come towards him, intentions and aggression clear to see. His gaze was drawn to the silhouettes of an Anti-Aircraft crew high up on the ridge working industriously around the base of their weapon.

Unlike all the other guns, whose stabilising legs had been deployed and muzzles pointed to the sky, this one was being fussed with, turned and elevated completely separately to the others. Even from this range, Fieseler could see large wooden sleepers being manhandled towards one of the outstretched legs. Perhaps there was a depression in the ground on that part of the crater's rim that meant they had to level it out. A reedy, hate-filled voice echoed from the chalky cliffs around him and Fieseler finally understood his reaction. This fucking briefcase manacled to his wrist and the figure striding

Führer-like directly in front of him was the problem.

Soft white and brown rock crumbled under Fieseler's boots as he walked along the makeshift path at the bottom of the vast pit. He estimated it to be at least half a kilometre long, and while the chalk would be relatively easy to excavate and clear, it was still a colossal effort. There were men everywhere; most in overalls, some in smocks and the rest in uniforms, crawling over the site like ants collecting scraps in the forest.

Open mining carts rumbled backwards and forwards on their rails, empty ones in, loaded ones out, twenty four hours a day. Spotlights had been positioned on every crane and excavator on site, and strung along the massive scaffolding that stretched around the top of the cliffs. It was a frenzy of activity, stepped up to a fever pitch by Gottschalk. Added to that his discovery of what happened to the previous man entrusted with the briefcase, Fieseler was having great difficulty in feeling anything other than foreboding.

As he crunched along, Fieseler was at least grateful for the time of year. Undertaking such work in winter would get more and more difficult, but at least the dust from the blasted, smashed and broken chalk was relatively low. As a naval man, Fieseler hated dirty air. Before him loomed the construction proper, and Fieseler pictured the plans he had accidentally seen the other day. It occurred to him that once this area had been flattened for the missile launch tracks, named incomprehensibly as Gretchen and Gustav, much of the labour would happen unseen inside the hill they were now approaching. Work was also progressing on the railway network that would connect the base to the main lines and allow missiles to be shipped directly in to the complex. Exactly what the function was of the track Gottschalk had added to the drawings, Fieseler had no idea.

The noise of generators, diesel engines and hand-tools echoed in the cool afternoon air. Half a dozen ageing

Orenstein and Koppel excavators scraped at the sides of the ever-increasing hole, rotating gracefully before dropping their enormous loads with a crash into the open mouths of the trucks. It was hard to believe there was any pattern to the chaos, but every so often an order would be barked and acknowledgment shouted. Gottschalk's opinion of the OT was, like most of his thoughts, unfair at best.

If the scale of excavation was like nothing he had ever seen, the single completed component - high up on the top of the artificial cliff directly ahead - was beyond belief. Through the criss-cross wooden beams providing access to the site, it was still easy to see the huge dome - *La Coupole* - arcing up into the sky. Over seventy metres in diameter and five metres thick, fifty five thousand tonnes of reinforced concrete had gone into making the massive bomb-proof roof. Apart from a series of buttresses yet to be finished, the next stage was to dig beneath, around and into the hill on which it crouched. It was a breathtakingly simple idea, conceived by Werner Flos, one of the Todt's most brilliant minds.

'Fieseler, my case.'

Gottschalk had reached the large prefabricated cabin near one of the ragged entrance tunnels into the bottom of the cliff and was reaching out behind him without looking, twitching his fingers demanding. Fieseler stepped up smartly, unlocking the handcuff and passing the case, handle first, to the Oberführer. Stomping up the three broad wooden steps to the raised doorway, Gottschalk opened the handle without acknowledging the grey-clad guards and disappeared inside. Fieseler paused at the bottom of the stairs, unsure what to do. Bauer stepped up behind him.

'For God's sake get up there. Stay close.'

Fieseler turned in surprise to look at Bauer. The batman had said very little to him since he had effectively replaced Kessering. Leon had heard partial reports of what

had happened at Wizernes, but whatever part Bauer had played, it had clearly traumatised him. Fieseler stared into his tired, red eyes and nodded once. Bauer's warning had been genuine, not malicious. Grabbing onto the cold steel handrail, Fieseler strode up the stairs and through the open doorway to the cabin.

Fieseler blinked as he entered. Closing the door behind him, he looked around the busy drawing office. As the windows were so small, extra light fittings had been hung from the low flat ceiling, providing necessarily harsh lighting for the dishevelled men sitting at their large white boards. All four were deep in concentration; one was measuring a part of their unseen draft with callipers while his neighbour occupied himself with a slide rule, frowning and shaking his head. One of the two in the front row was leaning forwards, making tiny adjustments with his pen. The last, a fat, piggy man, was glowering at Gottschalk across the room, his jowls shaking lightly with barely suppressed anger. Judging by the jacket hanging off the back of his chair, he was an OT officer, quite a senior one. This single occupant aside, the level of industry matched that outside.

Turning his attention to his right, Fieseler saw a couple of bare metal desks on which sat a number of telephones, piles of papers and drawings. Gottschalk was standing at one with his case open, looking for something with the lid barely open, typically unwilling to let anyone see the contents. As he walked towards the other OT officer who had been waiting patiently for him to retrieve whatever it was he had been looking for, Fieseler caught the insignia on his jacket and saluted the tall, distinguished-looking man. After looking Fieseler up and down, the haughty officer returned the salute then turned to the huge plan of the Wizernes-Helfaut site taking up the entire width of the cabin's end wall.

Out the corner of his eye, Fieseler saw the fat draftsman mutter something under his breath, his eyes

boring into the back of Gottschalk as he began talking to the tall officer. The man did not even notice Fieseler's surprised look, such was his pre-occupation with the SS man. Breaking his stare, the draughtsman blinked a couple of times at Fieseler then looked down to his drawings, murmuring something to himself as he reluctantly picked up his pen. Clearly, he and the OT man shared a similar opinion of Gottschalk.

Turning his attention back to the plan, Fieseler looked past the two men examining the precise white on blue lines. With the over-compensated light in the room, Fieseler could see they were covered in hand-drawn corrections, including Gottschalk's oval tunnel at ground level. Several passages had been crossed out or large arrows drawn from them indicating new positions in dotted lines. Although partially obscured by the figures, Fieseler identified the proposed hospital and barracks, two structures that surely took precedent over Gottschalk's unfathomable addition. The Oberführer was pointing to the hastily redrawn sections, the other man nodding occasionally as they spoke in hushed tones. No wonder the fat Todt man was so angry. His team were busy drawing – and redrawing – because their original plans had clearly been thrown to the wind.

Gottschalk turned around and pointed over to the attaché case on the tabletop, snapping his fingers and pointing at the sheaf of papers he had left on its top. Fieseler gritted his back teeth, picked up the documents and brought them over to Gottschalk. As he handed them over, the exquisite detail of the architectural drawings became clear. Fieseler wanted to know more, so only took a single step back as Gottschalk turned his back on him. When it came to this rodent, any additional knowledge would likely prove to be vital.

'So Walter, how is progress?'

The tall officer - Walter, the senior architect, Fieseler realised - folded his arms.

'Progress is slow, Oberführer Gottschalk. Your addition is taking up a good proportion of the available manpower. There is only so much material we can shift in a day.'

Gottschalk looked down to his papers, reading something. After a few seconds, Walter's words seemed to catch up with him.

'What do you mean by 'good proportion'?'

Fieseler heard more muttering from behind and the uncomfortable shuffling of a large arse on a small seat. Gottschalk turned his head ever so slightly in the direction of the sound behind him. Yes, thought Fieseler, he'd heard. Architekt Professor Walter tightened his arms on his chest, choosing his words carefully in order to draw Gottschalk's attention back to the map. Fieseler got the distinct impression this man was working under similar duress as everybody else.

'What I mean is, the men assigned to excavating your extra tunnel are working as hard as they possibly can. I do not have unlimited resources and have to distribute them as efficiently as possible. We already had five separate entrance holes to bore before... your request. We're trying to reschedule and redesign as we go along, but this is a dangerous thing to do so close to construction. There could be tunnel collapses, or other -'

Gottschalk held up his hand, stopping Walter mid-sentence. Taking off his glasses, he retrieved a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and gave them a polish. His voice was dripping with threat.

'I want every available man transferring to my tunnel Walter. I have already arranged for two thousand more workers to bolster efforts here.'

Walter turned to face Gottschalk. Fieseler could see his mouth open in surprise. He had not expected this.

'Two *thousand*? From where? There's not that many skilled labourers in the whole of the Todt.'

Gottschalk raised his spectacles up to the bank of

lights shining down on the huge drawing and inspected his cleaning efforts.

'Who said anything about them being skilled? They are workers. You will train them. The more people on-site, the quicker it will get finished. But my requirements take priority and must be completed on time.'

A loud scraping noise came from the back of the cabin and everyone turned to see the big man pushing his drawing board away in fury. Throwing on his tunic, he thumped over to Gottschalk whose hand was already unbuttoning the clasp on his holster. Fieseler could see the situation might deteriorate very quickly, so stepped in front of the rampaging man and put out a hand to stop him. The man raged past Fieseler, ignoring Gottschalk's threatening posture.

'Why do we have to listen to this animal, Professor? Who the hell does he think he is? We can't get the men to work any harder than they are now. We're already working triple shifts with six hours sleep - and all for something we shouldn't even be doing!'

Fieseler gently pushed the man back as Walter stepped forwards. Fieseler did not like having Gottschalk behind him one bit. He would not put it past the rat to shoot the man and probably hit him in the process. Walter strode forwards, putting himself between Gottschalk and his colleague.

'Calm down, Müller. I'm sure the Oberführer realises there are limits to what we can do.'

Walter had a calming hand on the sweating man's shoulder, so Fieseler stepped back to flank Gottschalk. He at least had to keep up the appearance of being on his side. Gottschalk glared at Müller, then stared past him at the three other draughtsman. His face was darkening in fury.

'You shall do as you are told. And I demand you stop referring to it as 'my' tunnel, Müller. This addition is vital to the success of this base.'

Fieseler could see Müller's own anger had boiled past

the point of self-preservation. Walter tried to hush the big man, but failed.

‘We are Organization Todt, not some SS chain gang. We answer only to Herr Speer. I am going to contact him and –’

Gottschalk’s voice rose to a hysterical pitch. Spittle flew from his mouth and, to his disgust, Fieseler saw some of it land on his own sleeve. He took a step backwards to avoid any more.

‘Now you listen to me. Decisions have been made at the highest – the *very highest* – level – for this tunnel. Manufacture of the A4 rocket has run into difficulties, and there may be a need to ship them partially built, with the final assembly occurring here. *That* is what the tunnel is for, you dolt.’

Despite the charged situation, Müller would not be cowed. Walter closed his eyes at Gottschalk’s words.

‘We have the plans for the assembly area. There is no need for any extra capacity. The plans simply do not make any design sense! It’s a waste of time and resources. Herr Professor - *please*.’

Fieseler saw Gottschalk reach for his holster, his face revealing he had heard enough. Müller looked dumbly from Gottschalk to Walter, who shook his head. Fieseler assumed the same arguments had been presented by Walter with regards to the new tunnel - and had received the same nonsense in reply. No-one would be discovering the SS’s motives today. Crestfallen, Müller took a couple of steps back and wiped his sweating brow with the back of his sleeve. Gottschalk kept his hand on his holster. Slowly, what passed for normal colour returned to Gottschalk’s face. Müller looked to the floor of the cabin, defeated. Clearing his throat, Gottschalk turned to Walter, struggling to maintain the calm he had forced upon himself.

‘Architekt Professor, would you arrange for all the workers on the site, skilled and unskilled, to assemble outside the tunnel entrance in an hour please? I wish to

address them.'

Walter blinked at Gottschalk and, after a few seconds of confusion, nodded. No real point asking why. Turning to his puce-coloured officer, Walter spoke in as soothing a manner as he could muster.

'Can you see to this please, Müller? Go out and get some air.'

Müller opened his mouth to speak but then closed it again. Throwing a filthy look over to the glowering Gottschalk, he turned on his heel and exited the cabin, making it rock slightly as he slammed the steel door shut. Gottschalk nodded over to the array of telephones on the table then back to Walter.

'I need to arrange some extra security for my address. We don't want any unwelcome guests – again - while we're all standing out there now, do we?'

Fieseler saw a cloud pass over Walter's face. He nodded in agreement as Gottschalk straightened his dress belt and walked over to the table.

'Which telephone connects to the SS unit at Wizernes station?'

The Einsatzgruppenleiter pointed at a battered black field telephone.

'Get your staff out of here while I make the arrangements. I'll also need some form of PA system. See to it, Fieseler. Get Bauer to help. Meet me back here in twenty minutes.'

Fieseler nodded. Gottschalk was planning some kind of grand speech, likely filled with threats and fury. Walter looked over to the three un-ironed men behind the drawing desks. They rose as one, slipped on their uniform jackets and trooped out of the cabin. Fieseler waited until they had left the cabin then turned to Gottschalk, who was picking up the receiver to the field telephone.

'Do you need me to go over to liaise with anybody, Oberführer?'

Gottschalk did not even look up. With a wave, he

dismissed Fieseler. As he exited the room, he heard the vile man talking in a low voice.

Twenty five minutes later, Fieseler was holding a reel of cable and a microphone ready for Bauer to connect onto the small amplifier and speaker they had found in a nearby storage container. The canyon was filling up with men, some emerging from the crude tunnel entrances blown into the sides of the excavation, others filing into the mouth of the site down the rail tracks. Overhead, clouds were scudding along on a breeze that had picked up from nowhere. The temperature was dropping, the mood uneasy. If Gottschalk was intending to give everyone an encouraging pep talk – which Fieseler doubted very much - it would be a tough crowd to convince. Looking at the craggy, weather-beaten faces of the tough workers, they would be even harder to scare. Fieseler was certain Gottschalk would give it his very best try.

Fieseler looked over to his left, where Gottschalk was talking with Walter near the gaping tunnel entrance Gottschalk had added to the plans. The SS man was stepping back, pointing up towards the concrete dome then sweeping his arm around and outwards to the tracks. Walter nodded as he listened. While he could not hear what he was saying, Gottschalk's mood seemed strangely up-beat. Given the exchange in the drawing room not half an hour ago, he found this disconcerting. As the two spoke, dozens more men filtered out and past them from deep inside the tunnel, directed to various groupings by the heavily armed OT guards and soldiers.

Unlike the OT engineers and excavation workers outside, Fieseler's stomach churned to see many of the labourers looked emaciated and weak as they shielded their eyes from the daylight. Of course he knew the OT used conscript labourers, but up until this point he had not seen them. Individually they looked wretched. As they bunched

together in their hundreds, the scale of human misery shocked him.

Impervious to the ragged line of workers passing by him, Gottschalk finished his discussion with Walter and strolled back towards the cabin, deep in thought. Movement from the ridge caught Fieseler's eye. The AA crew were still busying themselves with their gun, no doubt spurred on by the memory of what had happened at Wizernes station. Somewhere in the distance, Fieseler heard the sound of trucks approaching. As Gottschalk stalked closer, they rumbled into view and took up position at the distant entrance to the site. Gottschalk saw them and nodded, clearly satisfied his extra security had turned up exactly on time.

'Bauer, set up the microphone and speaker at the top of the cabin steps. I will speak from there.'

After a couple of minutes of frantic wiring and double-checking, Bauer scuttled back down the stairs then called Fieseler over for the cable and microphone. As the crowd gathered rows deep to face the cabin, Bauer worked feverishly to hook up the cable to the battery they had requisitioned, only just completing the circuit as Gottschalk strode up the stairs and picked up the microphone. Bauer held the horn of the speaker in his hands and elevated it as high as he could over his head towards the crowd. Fieseler caught Bauer's eye. He was gesturing for Fieseler to mount the steps, a show of force for Gottschalk as he spoke. Fieseler stepped up a couple and stopped, looking as threatening as possible. From his new vantage point, Fieseler counted the assembly to be thirty rows deep, stretching across the massive excavation. There must have been nearly a thousand men.

'I am SS-Oberführer Gottschalk. You may not be aware, but I am now in charge of this project. Despite your best efforts and hard work, it is in threat of falling behind schedule.'

Fieseler watched the crowd cough and murmur from

his new vantage point. To his left, close to the entrance of Gottschalk's tunnel, stood Walter and a surly-looking Müller. Walter's face was unreadable.

'Due to the importance of this work to the Führer and the Reich, this simply cannot be allowed to happen.'

As Gottschalk paused for effect, he looked up to the top of the excavation and nodded.

'Let us try and visualise just how far behind we are, so we can all focus our thoughts. Herr Müller, would you be so kind as to take five labourers and walk into the tunnel entrance behind you?'

Müller looked startled at the use of his name, echoing brightly off the exposed chalk walls. Walter turned to him and shrugged. Fieseler's neck burned. Within a few seconds, five skinny workers had been prodded over towards Müller, who regarded them with open disgust. Walter took a few steps back as Gottschalk turned to the six men now watching him from the hole in the rock.

'Now, the tunnel behind you needs to be three metres in diameter, which is roughly six men standing side by side. I wish to illustrate how much more work has to be done.'

Walter turned and frowned at Gottschalk. Who was trying to run a circus now? He hated such theatrics. Gottschalk chuckled and indicated to the men they should spread out in front of the tunnel mouth.

'Indulge me, gentlemen.'

Cursing darkly, the conscripts stood in a line, surly glances thrown at the OT guards who shoved them into place. The last man had rock behind him, as did Müller who kept as much distance from the workers as he could. Gottschalk clapped his hands, making everyone turn to him in surprise.

'Now, do you all see what I mean? Only four men can fit inside the tunnel as it is presently dug. It is around one third too small. We need to remedy this as a matter of urgency.'

Gottschalk clicked off the microphone then waved

up to the top of the pit.

'Achtung!'

The command floated on the air, drawing the attention of the packed crowd below. Fieseler looked up to see the AA team had finished their work. His stomach lurched. They had raised the back of the firing platform to such an extent, the muzzles of the four cannons were now facing down and into the excavation.

'Feuer!'

Fieseler turned to the tunnel entrance. The six men died within the first half second of the weapon unleashing its maelstrom of lead, but Gottschalk had his point to make so did not stop the firing until a full ten seconds had passed. Lumps of chalk spun into the nearby crowd, making them duck and cover their heads to avoid being hit by the rock - and worse. The bodies of the six men were eviscerated by the AA gun's huge shells, and by the time the echo of firing had died, the once-white chalk wall surrounding the tunnel was pitted in plate-size holes. Bloody chunks of meat slid down the craters to the slick, red ground below. In the pool of gore that was congealing in the tunnel's entrance, it was hard to tell part of a work boot from bone, such was the annihilation wreaked on their bodies. Fieseler could not believe his eyes, and fought to hide his revulsion as he turned back to Gottschalk. Taking his hands from his ears, the Oberführer flicked on the microphone with a huge smile.

'So, sleep will be reduced to four hours in order to create an extra shift.'

Up above, Fieseler watched as the AA gun tracked across the body of men with clear intent. Many of them were watching it, unable to move because of the crush. Others looked over to the four truckloads of SS guards that had dismounted, unseen, at the entrance to the site. They stood in a line, guns readied.

'The next time I visit, I will expect you to not only be on schedule, but ahead of it.'

Gottschalk flicked off the microphone, handed it down to a shaking Bauer, nodded over to an astonished Walter then re-entered the cabin. As the architect stumbled past Fieseler on the steps, he could see his complexion was as white as the chalk surrounding them. Fieseler wondered how long it would be until he spotted the lump of flesh stuck to his sleeve. Bauer tried to dismantle the radio, but his hands were shaking too much for him to unhook the cables from the battery. Slowly, groups of men drifted back towards their work in silence.

Fieseler had been in combat and was no stranger to war or death. He had killed to uphold the safety and security of his country, and had met out merciless force to those who would bring him harm. But this... This was something else. This was not what he stood for, as a German, a naval officer or a human being. The fury deep within him, the rage he battled to keep at bay, roiled inside his stomach.

This was *wrong*.

15. Dieppe

Shepherd stared up at the dark night sky and sighed. The Met boys had predicted patchy low cloud but this was as full a blanket he'd ever seen for a November evening. There was no hint of stars or, crucially, the full moon the pilot would need to navigate them successfully to Dieppe. Not that there was an aircraft to take them there, because right at this moment, RAF Tempsford, the Royal Air Force's most secret airfield, was empty.

The view from the top of the two-story control tower was unremarkable. Fields stretched out to Bedfordshire in the North West and Cambridgeshire to the North, the outline of the landing area surrounded by the darker shadows of trees in all directions. Other than the intermittent crackling of static from the radio operator on the first floor observation level somewhere below them, Shepherd stood in silence next to Richards, adrenalin and strong tea fuelling their impatience.

'It's getting jolly cold out here Archie dear fellow. I say we nip back down to the canteen and get another drink.'

Shepherd shrunk into his thick overcoat and shuffled his feet. It felt odd to be in civilian clothes again, the girls over at The Frythe having done their best to tailor his outfit to the closest approximation of what a well-to-do French engineer might wear. Gripping onto the handrail surrounding the flat observation roof, he shivered as the cold metal filled his hands.

'I don't think my bladder will take it, Hugh. From what the station commander told me, it's going to be uncomfortable enough the both of us squashed into the back of the Lysander without the need to pee all the way to France.'

Richards wheezed a laugh, retrieved a battered tobacco tin from his coat pocket and fished out a

particularly thin roll-up. He knew better than to offer Shepherd a cigarette so lit it without ceremony, the lighter's flame illuminating the bottom of his face in a yellow glow.

'This is the same station commander who told us we'd be airborne three quarters of an hour ago. If he's that accurate, we might end up flying first class.'

Shepherd looked up to the clouds and nodded. To say the C/O had been a man of few words was an understatement, but Group Captain Fielden hadn't earned his nickname 'Mouse' by making a lot of noise and fuss. As the officer in charge of Special Duties Squadron No.138 (Major General Gubbins' cryptic comment at the Baker Street briefing finally made some sense), he'd likely decided it prudent not to talk too much to the SOE Johnnies he was there to spirit into the occupied territories. Fielden had done the job so well, he'd been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in April that year. Secrecy and stealth was the name of the game, and even human compass Corporal Lansdale had encountered difficulty finding the place due to its remote location.

Below their feet, a garbled voice came over the radio. Calm, measured tones from the operator followed, and within thirty seconds the ground level door to the observation tower had opened. Several RAF personnel fanned out towards the nearby fire truck, ambulance and trolley on which four Aldis Lamps were mounted. The faint sound of an engine drifted in on the cold night breeze and two men pushed the trolley to the end of the runway, standing by the lamps as the ambulance and fire truck's engines idled in readiness.

From the light cast through the tower's windows, Shepherd saw the shadow of an arm wave left to right on the broken concrete apron. The Aldis Lamps burst into brilliant life, casting four long white fingers down the length of the black concrete strip. The pitch from the engine dropped, grew louder and two faint lights appeared

within the low cloud. A couple of seconds later, Shepherd spotted the Westland Lysander drop through the cloud cover and glide down towards the landing strip, its distinctive high wings wagging slightly to compensate for the wind blowing across the airfield.

'I think we'd better go down and get our stuff together, dear fellow. Give your legs a stretch. We're in for an unpleasant ride.'

Shepherd frowned and followed Richards through the roof access door down the rickety wooden steps to the ground floor, ignored by the radio operator, flight controller and the balance of the ground crew drinking tea in the mess as they went. Grabbing his gear, Shepherd followed Richards out towards the taxiing aircraft as other personnel heaved a trolley towards the Aldis Lamps. Group Captain Fielden waited patiently to one side, arms folded and eyes to the sky. He was clearly hoping for a break in the clouds too.

It only took a couple of minutes for the Lysander's engine to wheeze into silence and its fixed undercarriage wheels chocked for loading. Fielden hauled himself up on the port spat by the wing support strut and talked to the pilot through the open canopy. Directly underneath, shadows of crew worked around the large drop tank slung between the splayed wheel supports, stuffing the two large hold-alls from the trolley into the makeshift cargo compartment. A cheery sergeant appeared from nowhere and gestured to Shepherd and Richards to approach the matte black-painted 'plane.

'If you gentlemen will follow me, we'll do our best to stuff you into the back.'

Shepherd saw a flash of white teeth under the jauntily angled cap.

'I hope you're good friends.'

With a chuckle he led the way onto the landing strip proper, taking them past Fielden, the vigorously nodding pilot and towards a small ladder fixed to the rear cockpit

behind the reverse-tapered wings. Having finished his urgent conversation, Fielden lowered himself nimbly to the cold hard ground and turned to Richards.

'Pilot apologises for the delay, but they had to do a quick bit of adaptation on the drop pod when they realised there'd be no room for cargo in the back. We usually only take one passenger, you see.'

Richards and Shepherd nodded their understanding. Neither needed telling again it was going to be uncomfortable.

'Cloud's breaking up over the sea and there's a good moon to navigate by, so you should be there in around three quarters of an hour.'

Three loud slams came from the belly pod, followed by some dark muttering and a fourth, final clang. Shepherd saw two figures scuttle from between the wheels and give the thumbs-up to the pilot, who waved back and started the Bristol Mercury engine. Fielden, clearly knowing better than to prolong the moment, stepped back, saluted and then turned on his heel towards the control tower. As Richards was the SOE operative and had done this before, the two had decided Shepherd would squeeze in first. Hauling himself up the ladder into the opened cockpit, the backdraft from the aircraft's propeller nearly threw him off-balance as he angled down into the rear cockpit.

As he struggled in, the reality of the situation overwhelmed Shepherd. Despite the relatively high canopy, it would have been cosy for one relatively small person. With two heavy-coated and fully-suited men, this was going to be ridiculous. Someone had attempted to clear out as much of the gunner's compartment as possible but the fuel tank between the front and rear positions meant there was no leeway forwards.

Ducking down, Shepherd pushed himself back as far as he could until his head touched the side of the fuselage. He might be able to squeeze an inch or so headroom when the canopy was slid back into place but he'd not know

until Richards was in and settled. A couple of seconds later, Richards dropped down in front, immediately falling back and knocking the wind out of Shepherd. Any apology was drowned out by the roar of the engine, barely muted by the perspex cover slammed shut above their heads. Richards squirmed to get on his leather helmet as the Lysander lurched forwards and spun around for take-off, pushing Shepherd back into something very hard and uncomfortable in his lower back. As the aircraft picked up speed, he shook violently. Despite being close to its maximum load, Shepherd calculated they were airborne within twenty seconds.

Once the Lysander climbed steeply through the clouds and levelled off, the tremendous noise reduced thanks to the surprisingly streamlined aircraft. After much fumbling and squirming, Shepherd pulled the nose cone of his helmet over his mouth and clicked it into place, wagging the connector cable to improve the broken sound coming through the headphones built into the rough leather flying cap. The pilot was shouting, distorting his voice and making it difficult to understand.

'I'm not sure... ing to... I'll try my.... thing is a bit lashed together I'm afraid. Hope... it'll still be... when we land.'

Shepherd assumed he was referring to the makeshift cargo hold slung below the fuselage. There was nothing to be done or said - it either held or it didn't. Both men had their faked documents on their person; Shepherd's tools of the engineering trade, some spare radio parts for his Dieppe contact and extra clothes were packed underneath. Everything vital was with them - except weapons, which were also hanging below. Shepherd tried to relax as best he could, but the weight of Richards was making it difficult to breathe. Still, at least it stopped him from scratching at his leg.

The pain in Shepherd's back had gone from serious to intolerable. Despite continuously correcting himself, Richards had inevitably gravitated backwards and pressed him further into the exposed metal in the tail of the 'plane. Virtually all of Shepherd's body was numb. He'd tried to take his mind off the discomfort by looking up at the moon or staring at his partial reflection in the rattling canopy above, but everywhere his thoughts went he found himself having to retreat. He didn't want to think about his current location, his mother or what he'd be doing when he got to France. With the turbulence and whistling, bitter cold, there was no respite from pain either externally or internally.

Richards shouted something into the mouthpiece and bent his arm backwards over his shoulder, motioning downwards with his thumb. Shepherd didn't need to hear his voice, which was lucky because the head-set in his helmet had stopped working completely. Thank God. They were landing. The engine whined higher and Shepherd's stomach lurched, suddenly feeling heavy as the aircraft rolled to the left, flattened out and then banked violently to the right. Unfettered by the safety harness that had proved impossible to get on in the narrow cockpit, Shepherd banged into the sides of the fuselage, moonlight shadows spinning around the interior as he did so.

With an enormous kick, the Lysander hit the ground, bounced and then landed again. A metallic tearing wrenched through the thunderous din and Shepherd's head hit Richards hard. Another drop, shorter this time, and they were both thrown back into the fuselage, heads cracking in unison against the starboard side. The aircraft spun to the left and shuddered to a standstill, engine dead and the world pitched at forty five degrees.

Shepherd's head was spinning and leg burning. He was faintly aware of movement outside, hissed conversation and the briefest flash of torchlight. His vision was mainly obscured by the dead weight of Richards, who

he was pretty sure had been knocked out a few seconds ago and no amount of heaving or shoving could move. Shepherd hoped to Christ the people outside were friendly because if they weren't, he'd be shot like a fish in a barrel. A scraping came from somewhere to his left and the canopy slid back in jerky movements until both he and Richards were exposed to the freezing early morning air. More whispers followed, then a head appeared above Richards.

A young, earnest looking man glanced around the cockpit, saw Shepherd staring up at him from behind Richards and gave him the thumbs up. Reaching down, he scrabbled with the harness then grabbed two hands full of coat and pulled backwards, using the crazy angle of the Lysander to his advantage. Richards grunted as he was heaved out of the aircraft and disappeared from view, allowing Shepherd to drag himself out the best way his bloodless limbs would allow.

Shepherd's exit was aided by the young man who helped cushion his fall by grabbing onto his coat. The ground was frozen, hardly surprising as it was a field some miles inland from the French coast and covered in an early November frost. Thanks to the moon directly above, Shepherd could see trees surrounding them on all sides - very likely the reason why the Lysander was currently lying on its side, its port wingtip buried into the ground and left wheel housing missing. Following the deep furrow created by their sudden halt, he could see the outline of two men scurrying around, picking up objects strewn all the way down their landing. Richards was sitting on the floor nursing his head while the pilot was in deep conversation with a fourth Resistance fighter.

Shepherd tottered over to the two who, from the snatches of French he overheard, were trying to work out the best way to blow up the Lysander. It was well known the Germans wanted to get their hands on them so it was standard procedure to destroy what remained in the event

of a crash. Unfortunately, this also meant another one would have to be sent in order to retrieve the pilot.

'What happened?'

The pilot rubbed the back of his head and looked over to his broken aircraft as Richards was helped to his feet by his youthful rescuer.

'I clipped the trees on the way in. Hadn't been told they were quite as tall as they turned out to be. Must have dislodged the pod then it broke off on landing and took the port wheel with it. What a bloody mess.'

The Resistance leader, a short, grey-haired sixty-ish year old with a pleasant face, stroked his chin as he watched the two men run around the field, the yellow beams from their torches flicking backwards and forwards across the glistening ground. Looking over to Shepherd, he extended his hand.

'Call me Alain.'

Shepherd shook with the man. Good powerful grip, but soft skin, cultured and educated from his demeanour and appearance. Shepherd's knowledge of the French Resistance was enough that Alain would present himself as someone the Germans would not immediately suspect as a cell leader. Shepherd admired and loved the French. He had been broken-hearted when the country fell so quickly, but was heartened by the fact they were using guile, intelligence and subtlety to fight back. Shepherd felt these to be all of their very best traits as a people.

'I'm Shepherd. The fellow back there is Richards.'

Alain darted a glance over to Richards, nodded and then to the aircraft.

'We will have to tidy things up as best we can. The Germans will investigate this site very closely once they realise the kind of aircraft it is.'

Shepherd looked over to the men out in the field, who were stopping intermittently and stuffing things into their holdalls. Alain pulled his thick black sweater sleeve up, angled his wristwatch to catch the moonlight then

squinted into the gloom.

'I'm not sure your equipment will have survived the crash monsieur. I'll bet our radio parts are lost as well. *Merde.*'

Sure enough, most of the tools had been broken on impact or were scattered too far to find in the dark. Within a couple of minutes, Shepherd and Richards had been roped in to salvage as much as they could. Unfortunately, only their clothes and one Welrod silenced pistol could be found – even that had frozen mud up the barrel.

Shepherd looked over to Richards, who rubbed his forearm and tried to shake off the spinning in his head. Shepherd could see a deep cut on the temple where he'd hit the fuselage. A quick nod assured him was fine, then Shepherd moved over to the pilot and Alain who was gesturing over to the younger man. Within seconds he had disappeared from view across the field. Alain spoke first to Shepherd and then the pilot, who looked very annoyed with himself.

'We need to get away from here. Jean and Philippe will take a final look around and then set charges on the aircraft. Monsieur, they will take you north and arrange for your pick-up as soon as possible.'

The pilot nodded and, with a stream of curses, retrieved his maps and other possessions from the broken Lysander. Alain stared up into the sky then back over to Shepherd. Richards sidled up, lighting a cigarette.

'The contact from Saint-Omer is on their way to pick you two up. Please follow me, gentlemen.'

Alain headed off into the dark, the same way he had sent his younger companion. For the first time Shepherd noticed he had a pronounced limp, and wondered if it was a wound sustained during a mission or an accident before the war. It didn't really matter either way. He and Richards had survived the crash, and while the majority of their equipment was lost, the situation was salvageable. That said, it was hardly an auspicious start to his first mission as

a Commando and a secret agent.

Perhaps the sarge had been right after all.

16. La Coupole

Fieseler was a patient man, but he hated having to wait when he saw no reason for delay. He had been brought up to believe that time was not there to be wasted, and thoroughly begrudged being messed around. Sitting in Gottschalk's office in the motte castrale awaiting the vile man's arrival did not help his mood one bit. He felt little more than an errand boy at the moment, and wondered if Kessering felt the same before his demise. Probably not, being SS. Fieseler had not seen a single itinerary for Gottschalk written anywhere since he had started this hateful posting, but he had overheard Bauer mention to one of the numerous staff milling about downstairs Gottschalk was away on an 'inspection' and that Oberscharführer Dietrich would be in charge of all security for the outing.

In other words, Gottschalk had gone to look at his bloody train collection.

Again.

Despite the beautiful view out of the window of the cathedral, Fieseler's frustration mounted. Instead of his comfortable, civilised billet close to the sea in Wimereux, he was now stuck in a filthy garret in the worst part of Saint-Omer. Still, this had to be better than sharing with the rest of Gottschalk's cowering staff. Increasingly, Fieseler doubted he would ever see active service again or do something remotely approaching what he enjoyed. He had spent half of the last few nights getting chalk and stones out of his rapidly deteriorating boots and brushing dust and God knew what off his uniform. Worst still, the café he had breakfasted at before his first meeting with Gottschalk had been closed down due to potential Resistance involvement by the Milice.

To think he had made it all the way through university, the navy and was just getting somewhere in the

Abwehr-M only to end up clutching a tatty chalk-covered case waiting on the pleasure of a lunatic was not what he had mapped out for himself. But then, war had a habit of changing one's plans.

Rising to his feet, Fieseler walked behind Gottschalk's desk and looked out onto the beautiful gardens and the fields beyond. It was already getting dark, the nights drawing in rapidly as autumn faded into memory. Under normal circumstances it would be a tranquil scene, but Fieseler was far from relaxed. He had spent most of the day at La Coupole hounding Walter for updates on the tunnelling as per Gottschalk's instructions. Fearing his previous actions might attract the local Resistance in a revenge attack, the Oberführer had decided to cut his visits down to a bare minimum until his instructions had been carried out and he could occupy the complex recently specified near the centre of the oval loop, deep inside the heart of the excavated hill.

Fieseler was there when this further addition had been left for the three remaining draughtsmen to make sense of. Knowing far better than to say anything at yet more work, particularly in front of 'Gottschalk's man' (God, how Fieseler despised *that* description), they had nevertheless been forced to raise questions with Walter as to what it was they were expected to finalise the designs for. Two glances and a snort at Gottschalk's 'plans' later, Walter had identified it as some form of control room, living quarters and communications centre – curiously, separate to the ones already specified by the OT for the missile base proper.

Where Walter might once have argued the case or even attempted to go over the head of a 'person' such as Gottschalk, Architekt Professor Walter had instead shrugged and told the team to get on with it. The chances were it had something to do with SS paranoia, or a nice quiet place for them to get on with their torture. Any more questions might result in their cabin and everyone

occupying it torn to pieces by an anti-aircraft gun.

Fieseler pulled back his uniform sleeve and checked his Alpina. He had been waiting for the best part of two hours, and could see his pulse beating in his wrist to the side of the worn leather strap. Just thinking about La Coupole made him angry, but not as furious as his own impotence. What could he have done about it? Nothing.

A creaking of stairs signalled the approach of someone outside and Fieseler quickly moved back to the centre of the room. Bauer entered, nodded and went over to the fireplace in order to set some logs and get a fire started. Bauer had said very little to Fieseler since his posting, but even so he could tell the man was suffering inside. There was a hesitance to him, as if he was frightened to do anything lest it be wrong. Fieseler had seen similar effects before on traumatised sailors and soldiers. No matter how long the man lived, he would never be the same as he once was.

'The Oberführer is en-route and will be here within twenty minutes, Korvettenkapitän. He will require a full briefing immediately on his return.'

Bauer did not look up from his work in the hearth. He was not inviting discussion, and that suited Fieseler fine because he really was not in the mood to talk. Truth be told, he was in the mood to kill somebody. With his bare hands.

Forty-five minutes later, Gottschalk breezed into the room and went straight over to the brightly burning fire, ignoring Fieseler standing to attention next to the desk. After making a show of warming his hands he took off his great coat, gloves and cap, handing them dismissively to Bauer who scuttled out of the room and closed the door behind him with a clatter. It was completely dark outside now, but Fieseler had thought better of turning on the repaired desk lamp. It was just the kind of thing

Gottschalk might take offence at, invading his space or undermining his authority or some such drivel. Marching over to the desk, the SS man pushed the window down as far as it would go without severing the telephone cables, fussed around with his party pin then sat down, inviting Fieseler to join him with a wave. Fieseler briefly wondered where the briefcase was. He was not that interested to ask.

'I have the latest updates from the site, Oberführer. The new workers have been deployed as ordered. Productivity has increased by nearly seventy percent in combination with the new shifts.'

Fieseler retrieved several typed reports and drawings from his own battered brown leather case, trying his best not to contaminate the contents with the dirt smeared across the outside. Gottschalk turned on the lamp, raised the green glass cowl and peered over his glasses at the documents with a smirk.

'This is much more like it. Much more like it.'

Gottschalk flipped from one piece of paper to another, tracing his fingers over a couple of lines and then nodding in agreement to the unheard conversation in his head. Tapping them into a neat pile he placed them carefully on the desk, arose and went over to the door. Shame he could not get a shirt to fit him properly, thought Fieseler, concentrating far too much on the amount of cuff showing past Gottschalk's uniform sleeve.

'Bauer! Schnapps!'

The back of Fieseler's neck began to itch. Dear God, was he going to be expected to drink with him? Up until this point he had not even suspected Gottschalk of having anything approaching a normal man's tastes, what with his bizarre plans and fixations. Fully sober he did not feel comfortable exchanging small talk with this small man, and he would have to be very – very – careful with a drink inside him. Fieseler knew full well any refusal would not be acceptable and, quite frankly, would be poor manners to boot. It was time to batten down the hatches over his fury

and take yet another deep breath.

Bauer had anticipated Gottschalk's request and was in the room with a bottle and two shot glasses within a minute. Gottschalk undid the buttons on his tunic, loosened his tie (illustrating even more the shirt was too big) and waited for the clear liquid to be poured as he leant back in his chair. Fieseler recognised the small label on the bottle as *Echter Nordhauser*, one of the official suppliers to the Wehrmacht and fairly standard stuff. It was just about drinkable, but nowhere near the quality of spirit you could get in Wimereaux. Ah well.

Gottschalk picked up his glass and drained it in a single gulp. After Bauer had refilled it, he dismissed the *Ordonnanzoffizier* and waited for him to leave the room until he spoke.

'Do you know why the number 33,255 is significant, Fieseler?'

Fieseler looked at his drink, took a slug and then placed the glass sharply onto the desk as required by tradition. Waiting for the fire to make its way down his throat and into his stomach, he gestured for permission to refill his glass from the bottle then reached over as he replied.

'No sir. I do not.'

Gottschalk seemed even more pleased with himself. Typical weak officer, thought Fieseler as he topped his glass up. Superiority through the restriction of information. That kind of thing could get a sailor killed in the midst of battle. *Shut up. Just drink.*

'No, well there's no real reason you would do. That is my *Schutzstaffel* membership number.'

Fieseler kept his back straight and attempted to look impressed. He assumed that was the correct reaction, because Gottschalk seemed to be proud of it.

'If your number is in the low hundreds, that means you were there at the very beginning of the SS. Sadly, I was not there for the *Schutzkommando* in 1925. I had only just

joined the DRG then.'

Gottschalk looked to his own drink and took a sip of it. Fieseler noticed his gums looked red and sore. He really was a thoroughly unattractive man.

'However, any number under fifty thousand is still significant because it shows you were there prior to 1933, after which membership increased significantly. I don't know what kind of number your application might be Fieseler, but it'd be considerably higher than mine.'

God help me, is this a recruitment pitch? Fieseler swallowed his drink down and coughed a couple of times, much to the delight of Gottschalk.

'Not quite what you're used to is it, Fieseler? I believe your tastes are more refined. Well, no matter. We will make an SS officer of you yet.'

Fieseler let the heat spread out into his guts then retreat. What did Gottschalk have in mind next? A low wail began somewhere in the distance, climbing in pitch then added to and amplified several seconds later from somewhere in the grounds outside. The two undulated noisily, and the sound of rushing feet and shouts came from all around the motte castrale. Generators chugged into life and brilliant lights snapped on through the front and rear windows of the sitting room office. Gottschalk was already on his feet, papers in hand and heading towards the door.

Fieseler had never been so happy to hear an air raid siren in his life.

It turned into a very long night. In addition to the thump of bombs in the near distance and the lights going on and off in the motte castrale's cellars, Gottschalk paced like an animal, furious the allies had dared mount an attack with him in charge. He had been one of the last to get to the shelter, having gone to his room and retrieved that damned case of his. At least he had not insisted Fieseler or

Bauer attach it to their wrist; where, exactly, could it get lost in a three metre square subterranean room with a bolted door?

The raid only lasted half an hour, but the all-clear took an age to come. At one point Gottschalk decided he was going to leave the bomb shelter and drive himself over to Arques and check his precious collection was still intact. Bauer managed to calm him down with assurances the significant additional anti-aircraft emplacements the Oberführer had put in place would surely protect the sidings. Besides, it sounded as if the bombardment had occurred much further away, meaning Wizernes and Helfaut were the likely target.

Gottschalk eventually regained his composure, but would not rest until he could check on any damage for himself. Attempts at contacting La Coupole by telephone proved unsurprisingly useless, so once Gottschalk spirited away his precious briefcase, Fieseler found himself driving a staff car at breakneck speed at half past nine at night through the chaos that usually followed a bombing raid. First stop was Arques. This nearly ended in disaster, because the roaming armoured car Fieseler had seen creeping about on his first visit to the sidings opened fire on them due to his erratic driving. Luckily, the warning shot was just that; his quick thinking and handbrake turn brought the occupants into full view of the armoured car commander's searchlight.

Gottschalk's fury at 'the bastard RAF' was then turned fully onto the terrified commander. He eventually managed to explain they were on a heightened state of alert not just because of the air raid, but unusual activity had been spotted by Oberscharführer Dietrich down the railway line. He had ordered no-one approach the lakeside entrance under any circumstances - hence them opening fire. It was an easy mistake to make.

Assured not a single aircraft had flown over the train sheds, Gottschalk calmed himself and made a few pointed

threats about making sure they knew who they were shooting at in future. It would be a matter of minutes to have the commander and crew facing the business end of a firing squad.

Within twenty minutes, Fieseler was nearing the flickering orange glow lapping at the cold November night that signified the RAF's target for the night. The fires were coming from the excavation's floor, the towering walls around three sides acting as a natural container for the flames. A military ambulance screamed past the car, its shockwave making the Horch wallow on its soft suspension. The noise and commotion increased exponentially as they approached Wizernes station, where the lights from a hundred vehicles criss-crossed into the fields bordering the railway tracks.

Even with the quarry's gaping entrance, there was a natural bottleneck over the railway lines from Wizernes station that slowed everything to a crawl. Through blurs of fast-moving bodies rushing to and from the excavation site, Fieseler could see fire raging very close to the ticket hall, likely one of the outbuildings or a freight tank full of fuel that had been ignited by an incendiary bomb. The road itself was, mercifully, intact but was obstructed by vehicles and an OT guard frantically trying to wave a gap to their left for ambulances to pass. A fire truck headed for the hole he had managed to conjure, forcing the guard to jump into a large smoking bomb crater. Steadying himself on a fallen telephone pole, he staggered back out into the chaos and continued his furious directions.

'Oberführer, I think this is close as we will get. I still do not think it a good idea to enter the site. There could be unexploded bombs or even another raid on its way.'

Bauer wound up his window furiously, voice muffled by a hand over his nose. The smell was horrible, and Fieseler's eyes smarted from the acrid burning stench and flickering light. Gottschalk was having nothing of it and was already heading out of the car. Fieseler turned the

wheel violently and went onto the grassy kerb, immediately realising it would be a hell of a job to get the big saloon back onto the road again. Killing the engine, he suggested to Bauer he stay with the car in case it needed to be moved further, then headed after Gottschalk with a curse.

By the time Fieseler caught up, Gottschalk was standing at the perimeter of the excavation, hands behind his back listening head down to Walter. Seemingly impervious to the stretchers being ferried backwards and forwards, Fieseler tried to make sense of the scene behind the two men. There were a dozen or so huge craters spread across the white rocky ground and up the sides of the steep chalk walls. Enormous chunks of rock littered the site, some in small piles and some metres high.

Several lamps had been haphazardly jury-rigged to anything still above head level, with the biggest concentration of light silhouetting dozens of men bustling around one of the tunnel entrances on the wall opposite where the drawing office had been. All that remained of Walter's headquarters was a pile of matchsticks; it had been totally destroyed by a direct hit. Scorched papers flapped around in the breeze, hours of painstaking calculation little more than useless confetti. Fieseler doubted anyone would have been stupid enough to stay at their post when the sirens sounded, particularly when there were perfect ready-made shelters only metres away deep inside the hillside.

A large fresh scar had opened up on the chalk wall to the right, burying a crane tower almost completely under tonnes of rock. A couple of men were on top of the pile, looking down hopelessly at mangled steel beams sticking out at crazy angles. Of the dozen or so excavators working on the site only hours ago, Fieseler could make out three still intact. Rock continued to fall down all three sides of the quarry, scattering men down to ground level as they avoided the debris. The freight rail lines were completely buried.

Shouts came up from the rescue party and several more OT workers and soldiers ran over, heaving away rocks small and large from the collapsed tunnel with their bare hands. There was a frantic urgency to their movement and it became strangely coordinated, the focus on saving lives shared by all concerned. Another light fizzled into life and threw the men into sharp relief. Most of the ground was white from freshly broken chalk but some of it was dark brown. A few minutes later, the arms and legs of unmoving figures were revealed. More calls for stretchers echoed off the walls, but they would not be transporting anyone with a hope of recovery to the nearby hospitals.

'Fieseler! Did you hear me? Get up onto the ridge. I want an inspection of the dome right now.'

Gottschalk's voice was strained. Fieseler did not know how long he had been screaming so turned and strode out of the site entrance, hoping like hell something fell on the Oberführer and buried the rat alive. Taking a left, Fieseler lurched up the muddy track leading to the top of the chasm's side, keeping well away from the ragged cliff edge in case he ended up at the bottom in a landslide. Spotting an anti-aircraft battery, he recognised them to be the crew who had jacked up their guns to murder the men in front of the tunnel.

It gave him considerable pleasure to vent his rage on them, commandeering the dazed and bloodied men to scavenge as many torches and lights they could get their hands on. Suitably equipped, he sent them first up to the top of the hill where the massive concrete dome and its huge angular buttresses crouched in the smoke-filled air. He should not have felt happy when one of them disappeared from view with a scream as the chalk gave way on the path near the shattered scaffolding, but he did.

Reaching the mass of concrete, Fieseler ordered a number of vehicles to turn and train their headlights on the curved structure. As they turned, they picked out huge, fresh depressions in the ground. One of the trucks

swerved and fell into a crater, having spotted a five hundred pound bomb that had failed to detonate sticking out the earth at a forty five degree angle directly before them. Fieseler ordered a cordon put around it, and everyone gave it as wide a berth as possible in their attempts to clear the tangle of steel and wood that had once been scaffolding. A few minutes later, Fieseler watched the rest of the AA crew scramble onto the smooth surface of the dome via one of the buttresses that, astonishingly, had shrugged off a near-direct hit.

With fires still burning all around, the torches the frightened men wielded were virtually useless. Barking at them to report on any damage, they shouted back as several fissures and cracks were discovered, one following a crazed network of jagged lines across the dome until it became too steep to continue. Despite the sheer amount of bombs that had been dropped and their enormous size, to Fieseler's amazement it soon became clear the structure had hardly been touched. There were a few holes and chunks missing towards the perimeter, but the damage was superficial.

The explosive force of the bombs had been deflected away from the cupola and either down into the excavated valley below or surrounding softer ground, exactly as Werner Flos had intended. Other than the wrecked scaffolding and a couple of observation towers blown apart along both ridges of the excavated hole, the damage looked far worse than it actually was.

It took Fieseler the best part of half an hour to find Gottschalk and report back his findings. The closest operational building was Wizernes station's ticket office which, miraculously, still had electrical power. Fieseler entered to find Gottschalk firing out a series of communiqués and edicts to Bauer, who had clearly tired of sitting in the car or been too frightened to remain. Bauer was blinking heavily as Gottschalk spoke rapidly, clearly struggling to commit it all to memory. Walter, filthy and

exhausted from the attack, had propped himself up in a corner, watching without seeing.

On hearing Fieseler's news, Gottschalk's black mood lifted. The bombs had not damaged the entrance to his tunnel, hardly surprising due to its location tucked directly under the dome. Yes, the railway lines had been destroyed and would have to be re-laid, but that was the work of hours rather than days once new heavy machinery had been shipped in - which was the first order of business for Bauer once the telephone lines had been repaired.

Gottschalk looked over to Walter and clapped his hands. The RAF would certainly fly a reconnaissance mission tomorrow and see they had failed to destroy the site with their pathetic attempt. Walter did not share Gottschalk's enthusiasm, and Fieseler saw him bite his lip when Gottschalk laughed at the fact his tunnel had not sustained as much as a scratch. Gottschalk could not care less about the scores of engineers and slaves who had died that night.

Fieseler could predict the sequence of events. What could have been disastrous would instead present itself as an opportunity to turn the screw on the OT even more and flood the area with SS, only increasing Gottschalk's power and influence. News would, of course, reach his overseers in Berlin but sending over a fast and (reasonably) accurate appraisal down-playing the impact of the raid would likely head off an inspection or visit from someone who might want to make a name for themselves.

Despite Gottschalk's boasts about his beloved SS, Fieseler knew about the massive in-fighting they suffered; many a subordinate had usurped their commander, and many a commander had ensured young turks rising through the ranks were either diverted away from them or stopped in their tracks completely. Gottschalk's self-proclaimed brilliance would attract envy, but Fieseler was pretty sure it was a cross he was happy to bear. Fieseler's biggest problem was if Gottschalk thought his young navy

man to be a threat. With the loathing growing in Leon's breast, Gottschalk had every right to be concerned.

Gottschalk turned to Fieseler and sent him out to retrieve the staff car. He had got as far as the door when a motorcycle dispatch rider burst into the room. Goggles pushed up over his helmet, the man saluted Fieseler with one hand as he clutched his case under the other arm.

'Sir, I am looking for SS Oberführer Gottschalk.'

Fieseler returned the salute.

'I am on his staff. Do you have a message for him?'

The young-looking rider's eyes joined Fieseler's for an instant then flicked back to default straight ahead.

'Begging your pardon sir but I am to hand this message to him alone. Those are my orders sir.'

Fieseler was too cold and tired to make a song and dance about protocol regarding the chain of command. Instead, he extended his arm over towards Gottschalk, who had just finished barking at Bauer who looked absolutely exhausted. Bauer shuffled past Fieseler and the rider, who promptly marched over to Gottschalk.

'I have a message from Oberscharführer Dietrich, sir.'

Handing over his heavy duty dispatch case, the rider saluted sharply and turned to leave.

'I will await your reply outside, sir. Heil Hitler.'

Fieseler stood to one side as the rider exited the room. Gottschalk looked over to Walter, nodding for him to leave. The architect needed no second bidding, clearly relieved to be getting out of there.

'Get the car ready, Fieseler. I will be there in two minutes.'

Gottschalk waited for the door to creak closed until he unbuttoned the canvas outer flap of the case. In it was a single, sealed envelope. Tearing it open, he stared down at the handwritten note.

'Resistance agent apprehended next to shed junction.'

As per your standing orders in case of this event, woman is being held in secure location and will be brought to interrogation on your command. No other officers or personnel will be informed. Dietrich.'

It was not the news he was hoping for, but it was something he had anticipated. Slipping on his coat and gloves, he straightened himself up and placed his cap carefully on his head. He was, of course, relieved his tunnel – and it really *was* his tunnel – had not been damaged. He could not care less that fat oaf Müller and the rest of the OT scum knew it was not for missile assembly. Very soon, his beautiful treasures would be safe inside their new home and him along with them - at least, they *should* be. Gottschalk looked down at Dietrich's message again and his heart dropped. This event might pose the biggest threat yet to his plans, larger than a bombing raid or anything else.

Gottschalk folded the note carefully and put it in his trouser pocket. Picking up his case and locking the cuff around his wrist, he stalked towards the station office door, mind working furiously.

17. Ancourt

Richards looked through his wine to the flickering candelabra dangling above him, swirling the clear liquid in small circular motions and watching the line form then slowly fall down the curved interior of the dessert glass.

"This is quite possibly the best Pouilly-Fumé I've had in five years.'

Sitting opposite the grand stone fireplace in an equally comfortable armchair, Shepherd was emptying out the contents of his pockets as he watched Richards' fascination, putting his false papers and work permits in order on the ancient mahogany coffee table squatting between the two. The warm yellow light from the fire made the printing dance on the cards and papers, adding to the homeliness of the living room.

"That includes the last time I was about these parts. Can't tell you where I was exactly of course, but it had a good cellar. Not a surprise seeing as it housed a Kraut military brothel. Even so, their booze wasn't as good as this. Very interesting watching what Jerry gets up to in a bordello, particularly you naval sorts.'

Shepherd snorted in response as he flicked through the falsified documents given to him at The Frythe only days before. He wanted to ensure everything was in order for the Saint-Omer cell leader's arrival, but his companion seemed far more interested in enjoying every aspect of Alain's beautiful country house – particularly his extensive wine collection. Despite only being lit by candles, it was easy to see the room in which they sat was immaculately furnished and very comfortable, exactly what would be expected of a retired Parisian academic and writer. He and Shepherd had both been formally introduced to Alain's wife Rita who, regardless of the ridiculous hour, had insisted on giving them the best cassoulet either of them had ever eaten in their lives. The two men sated, she had

then excused herself and returned to her bed.

Both she and Alain had a complete disregard for the constant danger they were in; a knock could come at the door any moment, and that would be the end of their very comfortable lifestyle. Shepherd admired them, and was sure Richards would agree had he not been so intent on satisfying his palette at every given opportunity which, with Rita, had proved frequent.

'Have you met any of the Saint-Omer lot before, Hugh? Or are you not allowed to divulge that information?'

Shepherd looked up from his candle-lit reading to see Richards sitting back in the sumptuous red chair with eyes closed and a smile on his face.

'I've mostly worked in Paris, dear fellow. We tend not to hang around too long once we've got what we need or done our business. It's also not such a good idea to get to know the same people too well. That's a leaf you should take out of my book on this jaunt.'

Shepherd laughed, closed his work docket and tossed it onto the rectangular wooden table.

'What's that?'

There was an edge in Richards' voice despite it sounding like a perfectly reasonable question. Shepherd was taken a little by surprise and frowned as he responded.

'What's what?'

Richards sat forward in his chair, placed his glass carefully next to the half-finished wine bottle in front of him and pointed over to various sized and coloured documents laid out in front of Shepherd.

Shit.

'That envelope there. I don't recognise it as being part of our inventory.'

There was absolutely no point in trying to lie to Richards. Despite his mild manner and pseudo-bumbling

approach, Shepherd had quickly come to realise he had a razor-sharp mind and didn't miss a thing. Add to that he'd managed to get Corporal Reilly into bed within 48 hours of first meeting her back at The Frythe, and it made him a force to be reckoned with.

'It's a letter.'

Richards' smile had gone. His eyes rolled upwards to meet Shepherd's. He didn't blink once as he spoke in a low, deliberate tone.

'Do you mean to tell me you've brought a personal letter with you on a mission? Are you out of your bloody mind?'

Shepherd took a breath and leaned forward, looking down at the corner of the creased white envelope poking out from beneath his expertly forged identity card. By God. Richards had sharp eyes.

'I must have put it in my pocket by mistake. I'll get rid of it.'

Richards' hand darted out and grabbed a hold of Shepherd's wrist as he reached down to pick up the envelope.

'You don't make mistakes like that. They could get you killed and me along with it.'

Shepherd didn't move his arm, and Richards didn't loosen his grip. The SOE man's eyes flicked over to the fire and then back to meet Shepherd's gaze once again.

'I'd rather we didn't fall out over this, Hugh. I shouldn't have done it, I know. But it's something I need to have with me right now. I can't really explain.'

The latch on the adjoining kitchen door snicked upwards and Alain entered the living room with another bottle of wine. Shepherd felt Richards relax his grip and slid his hand away, tucking the letter into the inside pocket of his jacket as Alain placed the bottle carefully onto the table and picked up the half-full white.

'I've just received a communication from Saint-Omer. Their man is going to be here in the morning because of a

problem that's arisen for him.'

Alain took the bottle to an elaborate dark wood dresser standing diagonally opposite, opened a polished curved door and swapped the bottle for three clean glasses. Moving back to the coffee table he placed them next to the bottle of red, limped to the far end of the room, grabbed hold of a smaller armchair and dragged it back over towards them. Positioning himself at the end of the low table, he uncorked the wine as Shepherd sat back. Both he and Richards tried to look as if nothing had happened between them.

'I've asked one of my operatives to come over and update us on any German activity around the crash site. It might be we have to lie low for a day or two before getting you over to Wizernes, but we're so close to the landing site they'd never think to look here.'

Alain chuckled as he poured the dark red liquid. Shepherd felt mild alarm at Alain's confidence and risked appearing rude to ask his question.

'Are you sure about that, Alain?'

Alain sat back in his chair and inspected his glass with a smile.

'I've been out-thinking those German fools since before the war began. There is, of course, no counting for the unpredictable nature of war or bad luck.'

Richards nodded as he picked up his own glass of red.

'No accounting for that, dear fellow.'

His gaze returned to Shepherd's. It had a cold edge to it.

'You certainly need to do everything you can to make your luck as good as it can be. No point in encouraging things to go wrong.'

Richards glanced at where Shepherd had put the letter. Shepherd reached for his drink and took a sip.

'True enough. Even so, I lost two men on a fairly routine sabotage recently. It absolutely should not have

happened they lost their lives, but nevertheless they did.'

Alain's face became grave. Shepherd wondered exactly what 'routine' sabotage might consist of. Richards looked over to Alain then back to Shepherd and raised his glass.

'To good luck.'

Alain raised his glass, as did Shepherd. They all murmured the same. Richards closed his eyes, savoured the flavour of the wine then put his glass down again.

'I have some orders for you Alain. Would you care to read them now?'

Shepherd had not even seen Richards retrieve a sealed brown envelope from somewhere on his person. Alain stuffed it into his trouser pocket with a shake of the head.

'I will read them in the morning. For now, you are my guests. Gentlemen, this is a very serious bottle of Clos de Vougeot. Let us pay it the attention it deserves.'

Shepherd awoke to the sound of an engine running outside and voices a couple of floors below. A car door slammed, the engine died and the scrunch of boots on gravel ended in a sharp knock on the heavy front door. The muted greetings and shuffles of entry faded as those concerned disappeared into the kitchen.

Jumping out of bed, Shepherd threw on his sweater and pants, ignoring the biting cold of the attic room. It was pointless trying to look out of the small, high window to see who had arrived but he assumed it would be the Saint-Omer Resistance agent so slipped his boots on and quickly tied them up so as not to fall down two flights of stairs.

Emerging onto the tiled floor of the main hall, Shepherd followed the voices and his nose along the oak-panelled walls to the large kitchen directly opposite the back door. Entering the low-beamed room, a wave of warmth hit him. Kitchens were always the best place to be

early morning in a French home. The smell of freshly baked bread and coffee reminded him of holidays with his mother. His heart ached and stomach rumbled.

Alain and Shepherd turned from their seats at the large dining table to greet his arrival. Rita gave him a smile while tending her cream-enamelled Lacanche stove. The early morning sun filtered through the large window and double doors leading out into the huge frosty garden, but it wasn't quite as cold as the glare coming from the large shaven-headed man sitting opposite them at the far side of the table.

'Help yourself to breakfast, monsieur. There's an egg if you want one.'

Shepherd nodded thanks to Rita and moved towards the empty third chair to the right of Richards tucked in the corner of the room. Richards edged back a little to let him pass. Even this early in the morning he looked immaculate, and it appeared the unpleasantness over the letter had been forgotten for now. Richards was, of course, entirely in the right. It was a stupid thing to do and he didn't have a hope of convincing Hugh otherwise because he couldn't even persuade himself it had been a good idea.

How could he begin to explain why he'd not thrown it away or left it at home when he couldn't justify that to himself? Yes, it could get them killed, but Shepherd instinctively knew it was important he kept it, which was absolutely no excuse or justification at all.

And if that man didn't stop stroking his moustache and staring at him, he might just have to say something rude.

Rita bustled over to the table and landed a pat of butter onto a cream dish. Brushing back a wisp of long grey hair, she placed four small Laguiole knives with their distinctive bee motifs in a neat row, wiped a few crumbs from around Alain's plate as he munched a chunk of baguette and tutted. Richards reached over for the butter and a knife, the shaven-headed man looking down to his coffee. Shepherd got himself a plate from the pile and tore

a piece of still-warm bread for himself. The second Rita left the kitchen, the conversation began.

'Gentlemen, this is Albert Latourelle. He is one of the leaders of the Saint-Omer cell.'

Hugh reached over and offered his hand, which Albert shook after a moment's hesitation. When he took Shepherd's, there was a little too much pressure on the squeeze. The burly Frenchman didn't blink once, and went back to cradling his coffee cup immediately. The uncomfortable silence was broken by Alain getting up from the table and making his painful way over to the stove. Dropping the lid onto a large iron pan next to the oven, he grabbed a cloth, picked up the coffee pot that had been burbling away on the stove and brought it back over to the table. Holding his hip, he grimaced as he walked back over to the low counter and propped himself up next to the sink.

'Always hurts like hell first thing in the morning. Please excuse me if I stand for a little while.'

Out the corner of his eye, Shepherd saw Albert nod then top up his coffee without the cloth. Tough man. After a noisy slurp, Albert spoke in a gravelly voice.

'I must apologise for my delay getting here. One of my agents has gone missing.'

Richards wiped the sides of his mouth with a napkin and placed it carefully onto his empty plate. Shepherd couldn't read his expression.

'I'm very sorry to hear that, monsieur. Are we to assume he has been captured?'

Albert shifted in his chair and darted a glance over to Alain, who looked the most serious Shepherd had seen since his arrival.

'We would know if *she* had been taken by the Milice or Gestapo. It may be she has been killed, had an accident or is otherwise unable to communicate with us.'

Shepherd swallowed his chunk of bread and cleared his throat. It was stupid to assume an operative would be

male, and Richards looked embarrassed at the emphasis Albert put on the word 'she'. The Frenchman's dark eyes swivelled around the room then rested back on Richards'. Given these circumstances, it was no wonder he was cagey.

'May I ask if she was on a mission?'

Albert took another sip of his coffee and looked down at the cup.

'No. You may not.'

In the distance, another car could be heard in the still November air. Albert moved back in his seat and reached into the heavy coat hanging on the back of his chair. Alain shook his head.

'I don't recognise the engine, but I think that will likely be Louise coming to report.'

Albert withdrew his hand and turned in his chair. Shepherd heard surprise and caution in the man's voice.

'Louise? Jandreau?'

Alain nodded. Albert's eyebrows knitted together.

'I doubt she'll be too bothered about my missing agent.'

The comment was muttered but still audible. Shepherd paid it no heed. His mind was racing as he darted a glance over to Richards, who had on his very best poker face. They'd heard that name before at The Frythe. Shepherd's leg began to itch.

'Depending on what she has to say, we may have to delay moving these two gentlemen into your care, Albert. It is, as you appreciate, better to err on the side of caution.'

Albert nodded his head and reached for his coffee. Shepherd could see Alain was doing his best to keep things cordial, and he for one appreciated the effort. For whatever reason, the big man had a fairly major problem and wasn't terribly interested in giving any information away. Shepherd wished he and Richards were staying with the Dieppe cell, with Alain, Rita and the others. He had a feeling Albert's attitude might compromise their mission. However, given the belligerent demeanour of the man and

his sheer size, Shepherd felt it prudent not to give him a lecture on how one should devolve personal feelings from the job at hand. Despite his perfect French, it would more than likely result in a punch in the mouth.

A car pulled up outside the house and the front door opened. Women's voices could be heard then the clomp of heels on tile announced the arrival of a new visitor. Alain retrieved a fresh coffee cup from a curtained shelf underneath the sink, Richards shuffled his chair away from the table and Shepherd tore himself another piece of bread. The kitchen door opened and a young woman stepped in, pulling a scarf from around her neck and unbuttoning her heavy winter coat.

Shepherd's location at the end of the table meant the first person the pretty girl saw was Albert, who rose in a dust of crumbs and strode over to greet her with a smile. Alain let the big man pass and put a coffee cup on the table for the girl next to the pot. Albert kissed Louise lightly on both cheeks, one of which, Shepherd noted, had a nasty bruise on it, then lumbered back to his seat.

Shepherd saw Richards turn around, partially blocking Shepherd's view of her. He was getting a good look at what they both knew to be a potential security risk, according to the information they had received back in England. Had she seen both men staring at her, it might just give the game away – if, indeed, there was any game at all. Meanwhile, Alain busied himself by pouring coffee for the young lady and began to speak.

'Gentlemen, may I introduce Louise Jandreau. Louise, this is Hugh Richards and -'

At that exact point, Richards sat back and the woman saw Shepherd for the first time. Immediately, the polite smile fixed on her lipstick-covered mouth slipped. Her eyes grew wide and darted between Shepherd and Richards as she backed towards the now closed door.

'Louise, what's the matter?'

Alain frowned in surprise. Albert didn't move a

muscle. Richards cocked his head to one side. Shepherd felt his leg burn.

The pistol appeared from nowhere. Her first shot whistled past the table and through the glass of the French doors to Shepherd's right. The second shot smashed into the coffee pot and splattered dark brown liquid across the chequered table cloth. By the third shot, Richards was on his feet and moving towards her gun arm but he was a fraction too late. With a shaking hand she pulled the trigger at point-blank range. Richards flew back with the impact onto Shepherd, sending him crashing onto the quarry tile floor.

Shepherd could not move or see, but he could hear Louise screaming in fury, her words blurring into each other and making no sense. Chairs squealed and the table shook as she fired again. Blood showered Shepherd as the back of Richards' throat erupted, the bullet narrowly passing his own head. Shepherd heard Alain shouting and a clattering of iron from the sink, followed by the unmistakable click of a Webley service revolver being cocked.

'Louise!'

Alain's cry did nothing to stop her attack. Another bullet thudded into Richards, but unless she was stopped Shepherd knew she would hit him. With a heave, Shepherd pushed the dead-weight of Richards off him and sat up, sending the man groaning into the wall. It was a stupid thing to do. In a snapshot, Shepherd saw that Alain had his revolver inches away from Louise's head, utterly conflicted at what he might have to do. Over the ledge of the table, Shepherd recognised the muzzle of another weapon, Albert's, who was shouting at the top of his voice for her to stop. All the while, Louise Jandreau stared with hate-filled eyes at Shepherd. Aiming slowly and ignoring the pleas from both men, she pulled the trigger of her Beretta.

It jammed.

Before she could clear it, a bullet hit her in the left eye and spun her into the door. She was dead before she hit the ground.

Alain stared down at Louise's body, his mouth open and weapon still raised. To his left, Shepherd saw Richards' arm lower and slump onto his body. Scrambling to his feet, Shepherd looked down just as Richards' sleeve gun slipped out of his hand and dropped onto the tiles before him, rolling until it bumped into the upturned chair on which he had sat. Shepherd went to move forward and retrieve it, but Albert's voice was full of dark intent.

'Do not move or I will kill you.'

Behind the kitchen door, Rita's frantic shouts were met with silence. She couldn't get in because Louise's body was slumped against it. Alain had his pistol trained on Albert, who was doing exactly the same to Shepherd. Shepherd stayed where he was.

'Now Albert, let's just try and relax, shall we?'

Alain's voice was steady, as was his aim. Albert looked over to Louise's body and tightened his grip on the big Browning pistol. His eyes were as wild as hers had been, but his voice held not a hint of panic.

'We'd been told there was a double agent coming over from England. Louise obviously recognised him!'

Alain moved slowly towards the kitchen door, watching the barrel of Albert's gun pointing at Shepherd's head.

'Rita, everything's under control here. Please take Louise's car around the back of the house and wait for me to come out. No need to panic.'

Shepherd couldn't believe how cool Alain was being. For his part, he felt absolutely useless. What the hell had just happened? Albert moved closer towards the unmoving Richards, his gun still covering the glowering Frenchman. Richards' mouth moved silently, bubbles of air popping out of the blood oozing from his throat. There was also a large pool seeping from the wound in his abdomen.

Shepherd calculated he had about two minutes left to live.

Alain reached down and felt Richards' neck, then turned the Webley towards Shepherd. Alain's stare bore into Shepherd's. The warmth fled from his eyes and his voice.

'Yes, I had heard the same. What do you have to say for yourself, monsieur?'

Despite the enormous danger he knew himself to be in, Shepherd was absolutely calm. He'd never been an impetuous person and the navy had helped him develop his self-control even more, particularly under difficult situations. With two guns pointing at his head, it didn't get more challenging than this. Shepherd took a single breath before replying. He needed to get this exactly right.

'I think, gentlemen, you have been mis-informed. Before Richards and I set off, we were told there is a traitor in the Dieppe cell who has been compromising missions recently. We were given a name.'

Shepherd nodded over towards the pale, still form of the broken woman on the floor.

'Her name.'

Albert spat. Shepherd did not turn, instead looking straight into Alain's eyes. He had to know that Shepherd was telling the truth. His reply came after some thought.

'An interesting counter-claim, monsieur. Unfortunately, Louise is no longer around to argue her innocence.'

Shepherd looked down to Richards. His breathing had stopped, eyes staring lifelessly upwards. Shepherd's reply was full of bitterness.

'Neither is he.'

Alain looked down to Richards and sighed. Slowly, he lowered his revolver, but Shepherd noticed he did not take his finger off the trigger. Albert, however, continued to aim his pistol directly at Shepherd. Alain grabbed a side of the table with his free hand, leaning on it to stand upwards with a grimace. Shepherd watched his expression change,

his grip on the heavy Webley relax. Shepherd felt it was time to speak.

'There's no way this man was a traitor, and you know it. He's been with the SOE from the very beginning. Do you have any details to support your accusation? A name? We did.'

Albert frowned, stroking his moustache with his free hand.

'No monsieur, no name. If, indeed, he was innocent... that just leaves you, doesn't it?'

Shepherd stared directly into the raging coals of the man's eyes. It was obvious he'd decided no-one was to be trusted before he'd arrived at the house. While he fully understood the sentiment, particularly with him losing an agent, it was not a good way to start a relationship. Something moved in the garden to the right. Through the broken glass of the double doors, Rita was peering into the kitchen, the barrel of a shotgun clutched to her pinafore. Ignoring the sensation in his leg, Shepherd focused his thoughts, looked at all the facts in his possession. The only sound was the dripping of cold coffee onto the tiled floor as Alain and Albert watched him. And then, it all crystalised before him.

'Wait. Alain, you said you had been informed of a double-agent arriving. Yes?'

Shepherd saw Alain's mouth twitch. He could see what Shepherd was getting at already. He nodded once.

'So, how did Louise know about one of us being a traitor? Did you tell her?'

Alain shook his head. Shepherd turned to Albert. He was flexing his fingers around the Browning.

'And you monsieur. I'm assuming from your greeting you'd met Louise before. Did you tell her?'

Albert's face clouded in doubt and he stopped stroking his moustache. Shepherd knew the answer to the question before he asked it.

'No. I have not seen her for some days.'

In the garden, Shepherd saw Rita disappear from view. The tip of the shotgun remained, glinting dully in the morning sun. Shepherd looked between the men, then back to Albert.

'You have to ask yourself, then, how did she know? Perhaps her actions were motivated by something quite different – discovery of her true nature, perhaps.'

Alain's face looked ashen as he looked sharply over to his compatriot.

'I'm afraid I'm inclined to agree with monsieur Shepherd, Albert. If you will permit me, I have something to show you.'

Alain reached very slowly into his trouser pocket and produced the brown envelope Richards had given to him the previous evening. It had been opened.

'You can read this yourself Albert, but it clearly implicates Louise as a potential risk. As monsieur Shepherd has said, do you have any such detail to show us with regards to these two gentlemen? I certainly don't.'

Albert walked over to Alain, gun still pointing at Shepherd, and took the envelope. Reluctantly, he read the sheet of paper inside. Folding it up and placing it back in the envelope, he replaced the safety on his pistol and stuffed the weapon muzzle-first into the front of his pants.

'No. I do not.'

Shepherd took a deep breath and crouched besides Richards. There was no pulse, which was hardly surprising as most of his blood had spread across the kitchen floor. He closed the lids over the dead man's eyes and stood again, watched by an ashen-faced Alain. The Frenchman's voice was close to breaking as he spoke.

'I've known Louise for most of her life, Albert. I am not discounting the information we have been given with regards to one or both of these men being a traitor, but look at the facts. Of all the people accused, only one of them has acted in a way that might implicate them.'

Alain had turned and was looking down at the

woman. As he carefully placed his Webley revolver on the table, Shepherd saw the tears in his eyes. Clearing his throat, he looked at Shepherd. His words fell short of an accusation, but only just.

'That said, I cannot believe she would betray us.'

Alain's face was grim. Turning to the broken double doors, he waved over to Rita who waved back. Shepherd was relieved to see both she and the shotgun withdraw. Alain regarded Richards, his look of doubt turning to one of frustration. Shepherd started to breathe again.

'Something is not right here.'

Shepherd felt it best to keep his mouth shut. What a complete bloody mess this was turning out to be. To his right, Albert strolled over to his coat, retrieved a packet of cigarettes and tapped one out. Staring with naked hostility at Shepherd, he lit it, took a drag then exhaled slowly without looking back at Alain.

'On that, we are most certainly agreed.'

18. The motte castrale

Gottschalk stared down at the papers spread across his desk and sighed. Fieseler's daily report showed much of the air raid damage had been cleared and the work gangs were back on schedule despite having lost over five dozen in the attack. Two engineers had died, but they were only German-speaking Poles so it really did not matter. He would much rather have German-only on-site but given the massive building programme currently underway across France, he had to grudgingly agree with Walter they had to take what they could get. There were allegedly French architects and engineers being gathered by the OT which, in his opinion, were only slightly better than Poles and Czechs. As long as they had been thoroughly vetted for Jewish heritage, he would leave that to the Todt to manage.

Despite their rather shaky relationship, Walter had been good to his word since Gottschalk's attitude readjustment talk in the quarry. The white dotted lines showing the progress of his tunnel were slowly becoming solid on the plans laid before him. The tunnel was already over a third complete, and his headquarters were well underway. Gottschalk had fully realised the four week deadline he had set for completion was impossible.

Even with his rudimentary understanding of construction, he knew that working too fast in tunnelling would inevitably lead to disaster. All Gottschalk needed for now was enough length in which to fit his collection, something he had calculated to within five metres. According to what he now saw, that had nearly been achieved. With the construction of his quarters and control station, Gottschalk would be able to view his possessions at leisure and play with them when the tunnel complex was eventually complete. This was all going to happen within a

matter of months – unless something had happened to change things. Gottschalk shivered at the thought.

A gentle knock came on the door and Bauer entered the room.

'Sorry to disturb you sir, but Oberscharführer Dietrich is here.'

Gottschalk shuffled his papers into a pile, carefully folded the plans and drawings of the site and transferred them into his briefcase. There was something about Bauer that had changed since the attack on the station. He was not the man he once had been. Perhaps he should consider replacing him.

'Very well, Bauer. I will be down in two minutes.'

Under normal circumstances Gottschalk would not have tolerated the level of slovenliness exhibited by one of his command, but for Dietrich he made an exception. The man did not have to be smart to undertake his duties, and as the Oberscharführer had been directly responsible for the security of his ever-increasing treasure trove for the last four years he felt unusually benign towards the soldier. He was, of course, fully aware of Dietrich's drink problem and penchant for brutalising women, but it had never interfered with his performance and made him such an unpleasant character that virtually nobody, civilian local or Wehrmacht soldier, chose to go anywhere near him or his mysterious posting on the railway lines.

Snapping to attention at Gottschalk's approach down the damp stone steps, the click of Dietrich's heels reverberated off the unforgiving walls as he saluted his Oberführer. Gottschalk thought the sickly yellow lighting in the cellars beneath the motte castrale seemed peculiarly suited to Dietrich's unhealthy complexion. Gottschalk knew when to deny his satraps the comforts of life, and when to provide them. Fieseler, for instance, he was making as deliberately miserable as possible. It would take

Gottschalk seconds to provide him with better quarters, but he wanted the naval man angry and sharp. Dietrich, meanwhile, was provided a warm soft bed every night, a limitless supply of alcohol and arrangements to satisfy his other needs. Dietrich appreciated all of this, and the fact he was not roaming Polish forests hunting Jews or freezing to death on the Russian Front made for a content and pliable head of security.

'As ordered sir, the woman is in the cell awaiting interrogation.'

Dietrich nodded over towards a huge oak door with uneven iron bars set high into its wide panels. A large black bolt held the door firmly closed within the deep walls. It might be ancient, but the building still served its masters well.

'And no-one has seen her transported here?'

Dietrich continued to stare directly ahead.

'No sir. She has been hooded since capture and only transported at night - no driver, just me, in a Wehrmacht truck. Bauer cleared the ground floor of the building shortly before our arrival and I brought her in myself. The trooper who discovered her on the tracks has been with me for the last three years and knows to keep his mouth shut.'

Gottschalk nodded and looked over to the dungeon door. Still staring ahead, Dietrich presented the cloth bag he had been holding to Gottschalk, who looked at it quizzically.

'These are all the items she had on her person when apprehended, other than her coat which I removed. Her papers, a pistol and a notebook. I let her keep her cigarettes.'

Gottschalk took the bag. It was heavy due to the weapon inside.

'Excellent work, Dietrich. Stay with your vehicle until further notice. I may have need of you following questioning. Set an armed guard at the top of the steps.'

No-one is to come down here until I say otherwise.'

Dietrich saluted, gave his heil and disappeared back up the stairs. Gottschalk straightened his glasses, slicked back his thinning hair then replaced his cap. Throwing back the bolt, he took a deep breath then yanked open the door with a flourish.

Despite the extreme cold of the dank cell, the smell of stale cigarettes and perfume greeted his entrance. Closing the door with a theatrical creak, Gottschalk turned and regarded the woman sitting calmly behind the rough wooden table in the middle of the bare stone room. Two lamps shone harshly from either facing corner, throwing the scar on the left of her face into stark relief. Her curly hair was matted and untidy, her floral dress torn and dirty, but she was still a good looking woman. As she turned to look up at her visitor however, she revealed a large bruise on her shoulder and partially exposed neck. One of her front teeth was also missing.

'Christ Almighty Otto, couldn't you have got someone rougher to bring me in?'

Gottschalk's stomach churned. He felt fury rising in his chest as the woman fumed at him – not for her condition, but for the danger to his plans her appearance might represent.

'All this time I've managed to avoid putting this contingency into action, and when it comes down to it I nearly get killed by one of my own fucking people. I mean *come on*.'

The harsh light exaggerated the furrows in her brow, and the snarl with which she spat her final words made her look quite ugly. Gottschalk pursed his lips. The Oberscharführer had been under strict instructions not to harm any female trespasser near the sidings answering her description if at all possible.

'Who did this? Dietrich?'

The woman shook her head in annoyance.

'How the hell do I know who Dietrich is?'

His reply had more than a hint of irritation at her coyness.

'The man who brought you here.'

She nodded over to a rough brown sack on the table. It was a hood.

'If it was the same man who found me standing exactly where you had told me to on his routine patrol, then yes. He challenged me, I made up some ridiculous story about losing my way and stumbling onto the tracks, he hit me in the side of the head with the butt of his rifle and knocked my tooth out.'

Gottschalk's fists were clenched. What had Dietrich said about the trooper? He was a good man who knew when to keep his mouth shut? He'd be quiet alright. Permanently.

'I don't know what to say, Lise. We both knew it was a risky procedure to bring you in if we had to, but there was no other way to prevent suspicion - on both sides.'

Lise snorted and folded her arms. Gottschalk's sorrow was utterly fake. All he cared about was the reason for her coming in. Since being put into place by him, she had managed to sabotage, distract and generally screw up a good part of Saint-Omer's Resistance efforts for the best part of two years. As Simone Devaux, it was her job to take any opportunity to undermine Resistance plans but had carte blanche to do anything to avoid suspicion - including attacks on German targets, just so long as Gottschalk knew what was coming and such targets never, *ever*, involved his beloved collection. Clearly, with Lise sitting before him, the likelihood was his beautiful trains were at risk. If that was the case, he couldn't care less if she'd taken a beating or not.

Gottschalk dropped Lise's belongings on the table then moved over to a large wooden chest nestled in a shadowy corner of the cell, opened up its heavy lid and retrieved a coarse woollen blanket. It did not smell too good and was damp, but it would help keep the woman

warm. Placing it over her shoulders, he lowered both lamps to reduce the glare in her face and pulled up a chair. She had gone through all of this unpleasantness for a reason, and it was time to find out what it was.

'I will ensure the man is punished. Now, what is going on?'

Lise reached into the outside pocket of her dress and produced a cigarette. Her hands were shaking with the cold, and it took a couple of attempts to light it.

'That idiot Latourelle has finally realised there's something fairly major going on at the sidings. After the business with Jandreau following your navy man, he decided to look into his connection with you.'

Gottschalk wafted cigarette smoke away from his face and sighed. Lise had sent a brief message to him a few weeks ago letting him know there was a new agent come in to Saint-Omer wanting to kill Fieseler from the Dieppe cell, but as Gottschalk already knew the reason for her revenge – the same reason he had demanded Fieseler from Kommodore Arnold - it was of little consequence to his plans. It was an unnecessary distraction he had expected Lise to sort out. Gottschalk had realised very early on it would be inevitable that someone in the Resistance would stumble over his growing collection of locomotives hidden in two huge sheds near a major town. That was what Lise was for – to mitigate for the discovery, to play it down, use her powers of persuasion to insist there was no benefit in attacking them. But now she was here, and could no longer do that.

'Latourelle had Fieseler followed. We knew about La Coupole of course, but the visits he made to Arques couldn't be so easily explained - and neither could the tight security. You know I'd managed to divert all previous suspicions. Unfortunately, Jandreau's little vendetta came out of nowhere. I should have killed that bitch the second she arrived from Dieppe.'

Gottschalk frowned at Lise. In all the time he had

known here, she had only been caught out twice. Luckily he had been able to bail her out both times, putting her in his debt. Still, these things happened regardless of how meticulous one's planning might be. Lise raised her eyebrows and leaned forwards, the bags under her eyes showing a lack of sleep as the smoke from her cigarette streamed past her face.

'Add to that, one of the cleaners Kessering got in to sort out the station master's office saw the sheds on the map and fed it back to their cell, you can see the game's pretty much up now.'

Lise sat back and sucked on the cigarette awkwardly. Her missing tooth meant it did not sit right on her lips. Gottschalk could not have cared less. He needed more information.

'So, am I to assume they are planning to attack the sidings and my trains?'

Gottschalk sat back in his chair, arms folded to hide how much he was shaking. Lise blew smoke up into the air and let her head drop back down again, giving him a 'what do you think' look.

'Latourelle let Louise go when he learned she'd had nothing to do with the attack at Bleriot's farm. That was the second chance I missed. He still doesn't have any idea I ordered the attack. They didn't finish the job though. I told them Louise was the target, that they should destroy everything to ensure she was killed. The commander assumed she had been buried in the farmhouse. The fucking idiot.'

Lise angrily blew smoke out before continuing.

'I didn't get an opportunity to be alone with her after she was found. Albert was sweet on her anyway. He had far more sympathy for her vendetta than Bleriot. Anyway, as soon as I realised I'd not be able to finish her off, I contacted the British behind his back and told them Louise Jandreau was a double agent and could not be trusted after her miraculous survival.'

Lise said that with great satisfaction. Gottschalk listened, a feeling of unease growing in his gut. Yes, she was a very, very clever woman and he really should not blame her for what had happened. Even before she had joined the SS, Gottschalk had known her reputation as a great actress. Her mother had wanted her to go for a career on the stage or even a fashion model, but following the car crash that had left her disfigured, things had taken quite a different route. This had included her first encounter with Gottschalk just before the war. When he had asked her to undertake this mission for him, she had been happy to do it - although had she refused, she was well aware of the tactics he had used on others to 'persuade' them.

Gottschalk sighed. If only she had been able to maintain her mission for a few more days. Now she would expect him to fulfil his part of the agreement, her return to Germany. However, that had been on condition of the trains being safely transported to their final destination. If the timing had been right she could have just disappeared, but the business with Louise had thrown an unforeseen spanner in the works. Gottschalk got to his feet and paced around the room, watched by Lise. She was a good actress; Gottschalk got a glimpse of just how frightened she was to have let him down. And so she should be.

'I told Latourelle I'd come out on a recce and work out the best way to attack the trains. He's already got the place mapped out and is gathering forces from other cells, but I insisted I could get further information from the guards. That said, we can't stall him forever and he'll certainly be looking for me right now.'

Gottschalk strolled back over to the table and reached over for Lise's bag. Tipping out the contents, he stared at the pistol then picked it up. Weighing it in his hand, he saw Lise shrink back in her chair, fear crossing over her face. Gottschalk stared down at her identity card and then over to her notebook. Perhaps, thought

Gottschalk, the situation might not be quite as bad as it seemed. Turning the Walther in his hand, he passed it over to her grip-first. Lise exhaled the last of her cigarette in relief, dropped the butt to the floor and ground it out with her heel. Pocketing her identity card, she quickly checked over the weapon and rested it on the table. Gottschalk sat down and opened the notebook at a random page.

'What's this all about? Message from Boulogne cell - potential traitors coming in to Dieppe?'

Lise smiled nervously then put her hand over her mouth to hide the gap in her teeth.

'Oh that's just a bit of extra mischief I dreamed up. I told Latourelle I'd accidentally found out from Boulogne the next few SOE agents coming into the country would include German spies. All the sources I used were dead, so there was no way to check back. I knew a couple of operatives were supposed to be travelling into Saint-Omer within the next few weeks so thought that might leave things messy for Latourelle and perhaps even cause a bit of in-fighting between Saint-Omer and Dieppe. They don't exactly get on thanks to me putting doubts in their mind about Jandreau.'

Gottschalk nodded, his eyebrows raised in admiration. She really had been invaluable to him – and, he suddenly realised, could continue to be so. Gottschalk flicked through the pages as he talked. He tried to sound as calm as possible, but the genius of the plan forming in his head was difficult not to get excited about.

'It's very likely the SOE are coming in to take a look at the construction site. I anticipated this, of course. Security will be stepped up.'

Lise nodded in agreement. With all the reconnaissance flights and the failed bombing mission the other night, the next logical move would be for the British to send in agents on the ground. Gottschalk knew it was pointless asking for further details via Lise because very little information was given to lower ranking Resistance

fighters. Sending her back now to seek details would only draw attention to her. Ideally Lise would have been a senior cell leader by now, but that was one of the few things that had not worked out. No matter.

'So, when are they planning to attack, and in what numbers?'

Lise brushed her matted hair from her eyes and shuddered.

'It was going to be by the end of this week, around a dozen agents. However, they'll be waiting to see if they can find me first before they do anything else or at least be satisfied I haven't been tortured and given them away.'

Gottschalk inhaled and nodded. Putting the notebook down carefully, he marshalled his thoughts then continued.

'Within the next couple of weeks, my collection will be moved to its new home. I think it would be a good idea for your Resistance friends to find out exactly when they are being transported.'

Lise's eyes widened in surprise.

'You want me to go back and tell them that? How are we going to explain them not being able to find me? Especially with me looking like this.'

Gottschalk looked to the low stone ceiling and tapped his top lip lightly with his finger. A look of sly amusement slid across his face as he turned his attention to Lise's notebook on the table.

'They are not going to find you. They are going to find your notebook. By the time that oaf Latourelle is reading it, he will have got a message from you claiming you have been betrayed and have decided to disappear or something like that. I will come up with a reason. It will be fine.'

Lise nodded, this time forgetting to hide her broken smile. Gottschalk slid the notebook over to Lise.

'Here, write down the following information: Saturday pm, 27th, 22:00 hours, six train convoy to leave Arques heading to Wizernes-Helfaut. Security minimal.'

Start another sentence then make it look as if you were disturbed and dropped the notebook while escaping.'

Lise reached forward and took the Greif pen being offered from Gottschalk then opened up her notebook. Just before she started writing, something occurred to her and she looked up at him.

'How are they going to find the notebook?'

Gottschalk rose to his feet and headed towards the door.

'You leave that to me. I am going to tell Dietrich to ready himself for a long drive. You're going home tonight.'

Gottschalk breezed out of the cell, closing the door behind him but not sliding the bolt shut. Lise heard his boots clomp up the stone stairs, leaving her in silence. After living a lie for so long, it was difficult to imagine being back in Germany. She wondered if the dentist she used to visit would still be in business; she did not recall him being a Jew. Ah well, there would surely be plenty of others she could use.

Angling one of the lamps so it gave her enough light to write at the table, she opened up the notebook and flattened a couple of pages. It was not difficult to make it look as if she was urgently scribbling information. Something occurred to her, and she reached down to her shoe and rubbed a finger up the heel. There were still traces of mud from the sidings on it, so she smeared some over the book and onto the page with a smile. It was little things like that which made a difference; subtlety had put her ahead of those idiot Frenchies, her craftiness keeping her safe. He might be one of the most disgusting men she had ever met in her life, but she and Gottschalk made quite a team.

Lise finished off the information with a description of the gate she had been found at by the guard, then trailed the ink off the page with a giggle. Albert would know her

writing and had seen her notebook on more than one occasion. She had even used it in an attempt to convince him of Louise's guilt. Whatever plan Gottschalk had, it would be a good one. God, she was looking forward to a bath. If nothing else it would wash away the stink of this awful blanket around her shoulders.

The distinctive sound of Gottschalk's boots echoed outside, and the door opened to reveal the smiling man. Beckoning her forwards, she rose to her feet, threw the blanket on the table, retrieved her pistol and picked up the hood. Gottschalk shook his head.

'No need for that Lise. I have cleared the way downstairs and out into the car park. Dietrich is warming the cab up for you as we speak.'

Tossing the rough hessian sack down, she walked out of the cell and handed him the notebook at the door. Gottschalk handed over her coat and she slipped it on gratefully, slipping her Walther into its deep pocket. Gottschalk waved the notebook at her with a grin, then put it into his left breast pocket, patted it twice then marched up the stairs before her. Within thirty seconds they were out in the cold night air and heading towards the long sweep of the main entrance road to the motte castrale. In the near distance Lise could see the twin yellow headlights of a large truck.

'Dietrich's not the most cultured of fellows, but he is reliable and discrete. He will deal with that arsehole who clubbed you. I am very sorry for that.'

Lise pulled up the collar of her coat and shrunk back into it. The bruising would eventually go down, and at least her cheekbone had not been broken. Gottschalk waved at the truck and it lurched towards them.

'Do you want me to contact you once I'm redeployed and let you know where I am?'

Gottschalk stood by the side of the short curving road leading out towards the twin sentry gates as the truck approached them.

'I don't think there will be any need for that, Lise.'

Lise stopped and looked at him, the side of his face illuminated by the fast-approaching truck. There was something in his voice that had changed.

'What?'

Gottschalk grabbed a hold of Lise's coat and pulled her close to him. Her eyes were wide in shock.

'Otto, what are you -'

The Mercedes' engine roared louder as Dietrich floored the accelerator pedal. The second before it reached them, Gottschalk pushed Lise as hard as he could. Her legs snapped as the low nearside bumper hit her, spinning her into the side of the elongated bonnet and smashing her head against its cover plates. Dietrich was already slamming on the brakes but she continued her rag-doll bounce off the side of the vehicle, landing face-down on the cobblestone road.

Gottschalk ignored the curtains twitching at the motte castrale's windows. Dietrich was out of the truck and shouting at someone in the building to get back inside. Gottschalk strolled over to Lise, crouched down and rolled her smashed body onto its back. One side of her face had been caved in by the impact with the truck; luckily, the right side, so her distinctive scar could still be seen. The angle of her head showed her neck had been broken. Gottschalk smirked. That could not have worked out much better if he had tried.

Dietrich marched up the drive towards them as Gottschalk took Lise's notebook from out of his pocket and placed it deep inside hers. He then rose, smoothed his great coat out, pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose and took a step back to admire his handiwork.

'What do you think Dietrich? Does it look like she's been hit by a train?'

19. Desvres

Shepherd could not forget the look on Richards' face as he lay dying on that kitchen floor. It stubbornly refused to disappear into a compartment at the back of his mind, and remained vivid enough to prevent other thoughts to override it. If anything, most of his recent memories led right back to Richards; the death of his mother meant thinking about the letter and ended in the sharp words they'd had at Alain's house. The papers he carried, clothes he wore and knowledge he held were all gained with Richards at his side.

They'd not had enough time to know each other well, but Shepherd had been looking forward to counting the man as one of his friends. Unfortunately, the war had taught him such thoughts to be naive and dangerous. But what was the alternative? Shut yourself off from the rest of humanity and never reach out to anyone again? No. That wasn't his way.

Shepherd ignored the huddled row of houses staring at him across the deserted early morning street. Instead, the image of Richards' last few moments kept playing and playing, like one of those dusty old zoetropes he used to love watching for a penny at the seaside. He could see every detail, from the astonished look on the woman's face to the sudden appearance of her gun and her naked, disfiguring hatred as she'd fired.

The sound of her bullets hitting Richards was like nothing he'd ever heard. He'd seen men shot and, once, shot one himself – but at some distance, after a desperate, fumbling struggle for survival. Sergeant Mackenzie hadn't been exaggerating when he'd told them all that killing up close – *really* close - was a completely different matter. It was something that would change you as a man forever. There was never any preparation for seeing people you knew die before your eyes. How could there be?

Shepherd's eyes focussed onto his misty reflection in the small panes of the window out of which he stared. This was getting him nowhere. He'd tried to imagine every different reaction he could have (should have?) had, but it still came down to the reality that everything in that kitchen had been beyond his control. No-one could have foreseen the attack, although Shepherd had been curious how Alain suddenly produced his revolver from a cooking pot. The affable man had shrugged off the question with a vague claim of it being 'force of habit'. Richards had told Shepherd during their training that tensions sometimes ran high between the Resistance factions, particularly when there was any suggestion of their networks being compromised.

While it was clear Alain had not wanted to discuss it, he had nevertheless insisted he'd heard nothing about Louise being of concern until he had read Richards' instructions. Shepherd assumed it was natural for SOE operatives to know more than the Resistance, even if the logic to that procedure had an inherent danger. Nothing more was said after that point, and truth be known, Shepherd appreciated the fact Alain's Webley had been there. Without that revolver, he would very likely have been shot by Albert. Steaming the window up further with a sigh, Shepherd had to admit given the surly mood of the man towards him, that was still a distinct possibility.

Rubbing the mist off the window, Shepherd shook his head to clear it of Richards. Anger flared in his chest and he clenched his fists. All those months of training at 30 Commando. All that nonsense he'd endured with the SOE and when it came down to it, he had been pinned to the floor by a dying man while two others trained guns on him. After the mess had been cleaned up and a few visits into town made, at least Alain and Rita had attempted to comfort Shepherd and point out it wasn't his fault that Richards had died. Albert, however, did nothing of the sort.

It was entirely clear that as far as the big Frenchman was concerned, Shepherd continued to pose a potential threat until proven otherwise or, given the option, dead. Consequently, Shepherd now found himself locked inside a cramped garret looking out of a tiny rotten window onto the main street of the sleepy market town of Desvres, wishing for some distraction that would get Richards out of his head.

The last two days he'd spent at Alain's had been a combination of monotony and tension. As expected, their crash-landing had attracted quite a bit of attention from various German factions. At one particularly unpleasant point he'd found himself crushed up against Albert in a hidden part of Alain's stupendously well-stocked wine cellar while a Wehrmacht patrol searched the house. Alain had dealt with the officer in charge, clearly a well-educated man, impeccably. The Kapitan had actually ended up apologising for the inconvenience and borrowing a book he'd been dying to read before leaving. Alain had laughed. Albert had not.

The failure of the German search had been entirely down to the efficiency with which both Richards and the woman had been disposed of. Within an hour, all papers and belongings had been burned to nothing, along with their remains. Alain knew he would have to deal with many enquiries about Louise's death, but the pyramid structure the Resistance had developed meant very few individuals actually knew more than two or three fellow agents. Sometimes the group grew, but a significant number of German intelligence successes had been down to too many people knowing too many people. After prolonged torture and other forms of duress, it didn't take long for an entire region's freedom fighters to be lined up against a wall and shot – along with every man, woman and child who knew them.

And yet, huge doubts remained. Shepherd had seen the genuine confusion in Alain and, for that matter, Rita

too. Both had conceded Louise's actions certainly pointed to her being a German agent, but it simply did not fit anything they knew about her. With the death of her brother at the railway sidings and no other family, he couldn't for the life of him work out what kind of pressure the Milice or Carlingue might have used to turn her. Like Alain had said in that dreadful kitchen stalemate, something was not right. It was obvious to Alain that, as a logical and intelligent man, he was deeply concerned he could not figure it out.

Latourelle's view on the matter continued to be far more straightforward. Having spent time with her under duress, he still believed she was entirely innocent. He argued the pressure both he and Simone, the agent he had lost, put on her was significant enough for her to crack. To counter this, Alain and Shepherd had brought it back to the fact she had opened fire virtually immediately on seeing Richards and Shepherd, suggesting she'd likely been tasked to kill on sight. All Albert did was shake his shaven head and repeat 'no' over and over again. If she had been such a highly trained assassin, she would have been a far better shot than what they had witnessed. That had silenced Alain with a shrug. It deeply bothered Shepherd, because he felt Albert was right.

If the time at Alain's had been uncomfortable for Shepherd, it had proved unbearable for Albert. Despite him clamming up the second Shepherd walked into any conversation with he and Alain, Shepherd had overheard enough to realise Latourelle was climbing the wall due to a lack of information from Saint-Omer. He desperately wanted to know whether his missing agent had been found, but Alain didn't want to risk breaking radio silence. Driving over to find out wasn't seen as a viable option either because, despite them being visited and cleared, their house may still have been watched for unusual activity. So, Rita and Alain had made it look like business as usual, including the burning of a load of autumn garden waste. It

had at least disguised the pyres they'd made for Richards and Jandreau.

On the third morning following the incident, Albert had decided he could wait no longer and despite Alain's protestations, gathered his things. Shepherd didn't want to go with him at all, but orders were orders. Alain had suggested they might cancel or postpone the mission. Shepherd would have liked nothing better, but apart from his own dedication to duty, doubted that Gubbins or Redmayne would have reacted well to the mission's abandonment. By now, the building works at Wizernes-Helfaut would be significantly more developed. Shepherd kept it to himself, but this excited him. What had happened to Richards was tragic, but Shepherd wanted to prove to Latourelle he was fully capable of continuing with the mission despite the death of his partner. Personal feelings would have to be left aside; Shepherd couldn't afford the luxury of liking the people he worked with, and neither could Albert.

Craning his neck to the left, Shepherd could see the cobbled street slope gently downwards towards the open rectangle forming the market place. A motley collection of German military vehicles could just be seen, their occupants likely drinking in the small tabacs and bars dotted around the wide rectangular area. Because of its location, there was a lot of passing Wehrmacht and SS traffic but Shepherd had long-since stopped worrying when he saw a truck or Kubelwagen. They always kept on going, past the shop below him that was closed for the day. This wasn't in the least bit suspicious either; it was heading towards December, when rural communities had to prepare themselves for the worst part of the year, reducing potential custom to a trickle other than market days.

For Desvres, it was going to be another long, cold winter, made all the more bitter by the occupation. The room's tiny iron stove did little to bring comfort or

warmth, and either out of spite or negligence, Latourelle hadn't left Shepherd sufficient wood for the day. There was just about enough food for the evening, but Shepherd desperately wanted to get out. He was dressed like a Frenchman, had all the correct papers and spoke the language well. Other than Albert considering him to be a traitor who should be executed for the good of all, he couldn't think of another reason why he had to remain locked up.

A large figure came into view on the very edge of Shepherd's vision. The window was grimy and the view distorted through the cheap glass, but he could tell it was Latourelle coming back up the road to the shop. He was carrying a large canvas bag over his shoulder which, despite his size, appeared to be heavy. Two minutes later the shop door slammed shut two floors below, and heavy footsteps descended into the basement. Shortly after, the steps got closer and louder until the rattling of keys signalled Albert's appearance in Shepherd's prison.

'I need you to come with me.'

Albert turned and disappeared back down the stairs. Shepherd didn't quite know how to react, other than rub his leg which had begun to give off its warning signal. Putting on his cap, Shepherd pulled his short woollen scarf tighter around his neck and followed the heavy rhythmic thumping down the steeply angled first and ground floor stairs, then into the freezing basement. Half way down the creaking steps, Shepherd couldn't see Albert but then heard him moving about below his feet.

'I have received instructions to contact London directly. They have some information for me and have requested you be present.'

Albert's voice rumbled into the dank cellar, bouncing off the collection of boxes and crates scattered around its stone wall perimeter. Reaching the bottom step, Shepherd heard the unmistakable hum of valves warming up. Monsieur Latourelle had a radio.

'Cymbeline here. Ozymandias. F. G. H. I. J. K.'

Without invitation, Shepherd moved over to a small table situated towards the rear of the cellar and took a seat. In the shadows, he could see Albert crouching over a radio, ears obscured by headphones and face partially illuminated by a small lamp pointing downwards. Other than his breathing, the only other sound was the hum of the receiver/transmitter and pencil scratching letters down on an unseen sheet of paper. Shepherd wondered if the door was locked to the shop. What he was witnessing was very, very dangerous. The big man scribbled furiously, pausing now and again to count under his breath. Shepherd prided himself on his acute hearing and could just make out a woman's voice through the headphones.

'Received. Cymbeline out.'

Albert flicked the power off immediately. Shepherd knew that daylight communication in the occupied countries was supremely dangerous and only used in an emergency. Fahndung Funk, German radio intelligence, had an excellent track record of pinpointing transmissions and many an operative had been discovered during or shortly after broadcasts because of the F.Fu's precision. However, all sides realised the key was to transmit for as short a time as possible, giving the various listening stations less time to triangulate locations. Then there was the fact because most communications traffic happened in the evening, the F.Fu tended to concentrate their detection after dark. That didn't stop them listening all the time, and Latourelle was playing it safe as possible within the dangerous circumstances.

The big man angled the lamp onto the desk, carefully packed the microphone and headset into the transmitter's brown leather case and slipped it under the table. Pulling off the pages he had written on, he began decoding the message he'd just received. The female voice strongly suggested the transmission had come from The Frythe's transmitters, possibly one of the very same ladies Shepherd

had met and heard during his time there. He wondered if it might even have been Corporal Reilly talking, but this led him straight back to thinking about Richards and his heart sank. After a couple of minutes, Albert scraped back on his chair and stooped to avoid cracking his head on the staircase above. Despite the poor illumination in the room, Shepherd could see his grim expression.

Nothing new there, then.

'London regrets the death of Richards, and have stated there are no doubts in their mind to both of your integrity. They agree with Dieppe's interpretation of Louise's actions.'

Latourelle tossed a couple of sheets of writing paper onto the small wooden desk. Shepherd could see the words of a poem written in French and various letters underneath in a grid. Classic double transposition coding. Albert might look big and stupid, but he clearly wasn't.

'I, however, do not.'

Shepherd folded his arms and looked down into his chest. 'Monsieur Latourelle, I've just about had enough of this. I'm very sorry one of your operatives has gone missing, and that you continue to suspect me of being a traitor. While I did not know her and am glad she was stopped before killing both Richards and I, you might find it difficult to believe but I'm also very sorry the young lady died at Alain's. However, it doesn't alter the fact I am here to undertake a mission and you're supposed to be helping me. I agree something doesn't add up here, but what more can I do to assure you we are both on the same side and fighting for the same thing?'

The last few words were nearly shouted. Shepherd stared into the man's unblinking eyes. His thick arms were tense, the sinews under the hairy skin like twisted cables. Albert took in a deep breath, sighed deeply and pinched the wide bridge of his nose. He was clearly very tired. Wiping his bald head with a meaty hand, he moved back under the stairs and rummaged around. Dragging out

something heavy, he produced the bag he had been carrying up the street and lowered it carefully on the table in front of him. Opening up the drawstring, he peered inside and reached in.

'Here's your Welrod. It's been cleaned and serviced.'

Shepherd contained his surprise at the sudden change in attitude, took the gun and weighed it in his hand. Cocking one eyebrow, he waited patiently for Albert to give him the ammunition - which he did with the slightest flicker of a smile.

'Yesterday, I was informed your mission is to proceed as normal and I am to give you every assistance. However, this was on my condition that you, Richards and Louise were double-checked.'

Shepherd placed the long black pistol onto the table and raised an eyebrow.

'What did they say about Jandreau?'

Albert frowned.

'They repeated the information both myself and Alain had been given.'

Shepherd nodded. His next question was redundant, but he thought he'd ask it just the same.

'And what would have happened if the information had come back differently about me?'

Albert's face was impassive.

'You'd be dead.'

Shepherd unfolded his arms and sighed. Albert opened the neck of the canvas bag wider and tipped it slightly towards the seated man.

'I have managed to find most of the tools lost in the crash. You will have to check them and ensure they are fit for purpose. London has begun the process of getting you onto the Todt list but there will be a two week delay before you are called up and join the construction team at Wizernes.'

Shepherd nodded and looked to the bag before him. Before he could touch it, someone knocked loudly on the

shop door. Albert's eyes flicked heavenwards towards street level and he stuck his index finger up to his lips. Moving back under the stairs, he picked up his Browning from the bench and slipped it into the back of his workpants. Two minutes later he returned, looking ashen.

'I need you to go back upstairs. I have some business to attend to.'

Shepherd blinked a couple of times.

'If you please, monsieur.'

It was only slight, but Shepherd detected a shift in the big man's attitude towards him. One call from London wasn't going to dispel his distrust entirely, but if Shepherd carried out his duties and at least looked like he knew what he was doing, he might be able to win him over a little more. While he could argue the toss that Albert had effectively been ordered to trust him, there were clearly things going on outside of his mission that did not concern him. From what Richards had told him (*dammit*, back to Richards), the less he knew about Resistance operations the better for everyone concerned.

Shepherd rose to his feet, dropped the now-loaded Welrod back into the bag and heaved it over his shoulder. Within a few seconds he was walking through the neat pottery shop with its beautifully presented shelves and polished counter. A small, dark-complexioned man gave him a nod as he headed towards the stairs. His clothes were covered in mud and he looked anxious.

'Where did you find her, Francois?'

Albert finished filling the man's glass then drank his own calvados down in a single throw.

'A few hundred metres down the track from the target site. We intercepted a tip-off to the Milice that a suspected Resistance fighter had been spotted near the sidings at Arques. They obviously didn't look hard enough. We found her in some bushes.'

Albert watched Francois swallow his drink down and savour the burn. Despite his stature, Albert had learned the hard way Francois could match anyone glass for glass, and never seemed to suffer quite as badly from the effects of alcohol. That was one badge of honour; the other, for those in the know, was him being one of the best knife men in the Resistance, something he'd perfected through necessity during his brutal upbringing in a Dunkirk orphanage.

'From the looks of it, she was hit by a train. There's a lot of extra traffic going down to the quarry at Helfaut, most of it unscheduled. She probably didn't see it coming or didn't get out of the way in time.'

Albert found this very hard to believe. Simone was tough, resilient, clever and fast. He could not imagine the circumstances that might have led to such an accident. Reaching for the bottle, Albert went to pour himself another drink. To his dismay, he found it empty. Albert stared down at the glass, then looked over to the torn and ragged notebook being slid across the table by Francois' small, dirty hand. He recognised the cover immediately, and picked it up.

'I don't know how she got this information, but she died trying to get it back to us, Albert.'

Sure enough, in Simone's own handwriting, was the information Latourelle had hoped to obtain. Albert knew the local community, including *sale Boche*, regarded him as a talented but otherwise simple potter. Those that knew him better realised just how keen a mind he had. He'd balanced the illusion of a shopkeeper with a highly effective Resistance cell leader, deliberately choosing to distance the two lives as geographically far apart as possible on the very outskirts of his operational area. All that being said, he had been furious when he had realised just how unusual those sidings were at Arques after so long.

On several occasions over the last few days he'd wondered out loud that, had he shut up shop and moved

into Saint-Omer, he might have spotted it sooner. Ironic the woman who'd constantly argued against him doing that very thing in order to maintain his cover was now dead. Poor Simone. Albert stared at the last entry then looked up to Francois.

'This date... Saturday 27th. It is very close to another operation's deadline. But then I suppose that can't be helped. Is there any way we can increase our numbers for the attack?'

Francois played with his now empty glass, rolling it slowly between his delicate fingers.

'That's more bad news. I'm a man down.'

Albert folded his arms and swore. That made them two short. With the question over Louise and the attention caused by the Englishmen's crash, he had to keep things as local as possible. Simone might well have discovered the trains were going to be lightly protected, but their forces would still be outnumbered. They might have to go for a quick hit-and-run sabotage mission rather than a bigger mission. Yes, there were ways around this - even with fewer operatives available. Albert cleared his throat and dropped the notebook onto the table with a slap.

'I still say we do it. I've no idea what those trains are doing in those sheds but they've got to be connected to the building works at Helfaut. They might even be earmarked for use with the other sites they are building - the flying bomb bases. It beats me why they were there before the construction began, but I'm not going to miss an opportunity like this. I've been an idiot to leave it for this long anyway. At the very least if we can disable them on the tracks, we can block the line to and from Saint-Omer.'

Francois adjusted his black beret and rested his hands behind his head. Leaning back, he stretched while staring up at the wooden beams supporting the floor of the shop above their heads.

'I agree. We've not done a big job for a while, and it'll

remind everyone we're still alive and kicking. There will be reprisals though.'

Albert looked down at Simone's note book and stroked a finger across the cover. Sure, they'd had their differences in the past, particularly over poor Louise, but Simone had proved to be one of the most loyal and reliable people he had ever worked with. For her to be killed in such a manner was a terrible waste, but with her dying breath she'd still managed to carry out her duty. He didn't want her sacrifice to be for nothing.

'That may be so, but I can't see the Gestapo or the SS taking things too personally about some derailed trains. Continue with your arrangements. I'll try to draft in another couple of men if I can.'

Francois nodded and looked down to his empty glass. Albert grunted a laugh and gave his moustache a quick stroke.

'Good idea. I'll get another bottle.'

20. Arques

Fieseler watched impassively as Gottschalk's convoy moved towards him. Sweeping past the lake in his staff car with a full truck of SS soldiers in close support, Gottschalk looked as if he was attending the grand opening of some major event. Despite the damp and dreary conditions of the November morning, on leaving his car and marching towards him, Fieseler noted Gottschalk's usual pasty complexion looked positively rosy. Reaching Fieseler and Dietrich at the sentry station, Dietrich straightened to attention and raised his hand in salute, as did Fieseler. Gottschalk's beady eyes sparkled and he clapped his hands together. Behind him, Bauer flinched, the wrist chain of Gottschalk's case jangling with his jittery movement. It was entirely clear to Fieseler that Bauer was descending into ruin, but no-one - particularly his master - seemed to care.

Stepping forwards he leaned towards Gottschalk, deliberately maintaining his distance from Dietrich who watched his movements warily. For some reason, the SS man had been acting strangely since Leon's arrival at the crack of dawn, and Fieseler was feeling increasingly worried he had been left out of some decision-making processes. If that was not enough to contend with, there was the realisation at exactly what Gottschalk was up to. This had finally come to Fieseler yesterday afternoon, and his mind still reeled at the audacity of it.

Fieseler had been flat-out for the last two weeks, ensuring all of the engine drivers, stokers, signalmen and various locomotive engineers had been brought to Saint-Omer station from Germany for their special duties, one of them specifically requested from retirement in Hamburg. None had been told the details of their mission, with Gottschalk himself having made it very clear what would happen if any information with regards to their

duties – when they eventually discovered them – might leak out. The 'lesson' he had taught the OT workers at La Coupole a few weeks ago had been presented to them and after that, not one of the ashen-faced railway workers had to be told twice. Following the meeting, a clearly elated Gottschalk had demanded Fieseler update him about the tunnelling on a six-hourly basis, day and night.

Up until Thursday evening, it had not been certain if Walter was going to excavate enough space inside the chalk escarpment to meet Gottschalk's brutal tunnelling schedule, but the breakthrough minimum length and partial completion of the first large chamber had come yesterday, Friday, at 1pm precisely. Thirty seconds later, Fieseler put it all together. The tunnel was for Gottschalk's trains, not for some additional assembly of V-2 rockets.

'Oberführer, the coal and water are all here. A shipment of spare track is on standby at Saint-Omer station as instructed.'

Gottschalk smiled and nodded. In the distance, the truckload of SS troopers dismounted and formed up under the shouts of their commander. Fieseler counted twenty men, and frowned. It was as planned, but it worried him. He had to take a chance of upsetting Gottschalk's mood and express his concerns, whether he liked the man or not.

'Sir, it strikes me the security for the convoy is insufficient. I have attempted to discuss the situation on several occasions with Dietrich, but he is dismissive of my concerns.'

Fieseler was not in the least bit frightened of Dietrich, but he did not want to antagonise the man nor undermine him. Fieseler knew full well he himself was not SS, and that meant his opinion counted for little. Gottschalk might have insisted on Fieseler because of his ability to defend himself and organise things efficiently, but that was about as far as it would go unless he became part of the SS – which he sincerely hoped was not going to happen. There

was no escaping the logistics of what they were going to do were huge; it would take considerable time to move four trains down two tracks onto a single line (if indeed they would actually fit - it was a short distance to Wizernes station), and with the complete cancellation of all railway traffic in both directions for twelve hours, it was bound to draw some attention.

'You really don't have to worry about that. It is all in hand.'

Gottschalk's reply took Fieseler by surprise, and he dug deep to bury his anger. Fieseler had been led to believe he would have complete control of the operation, but it was increasingly clear there were things he had not been told. After he had turned up this morning, Fieseler had decided to take Dietrich up on his offer of inspecting what was inside the engine sheds and had been staggered at his reply; only Dietrich and those engineers hand-picked by Gottschalk would be allowed in until the Oberführer said otherwise. Fieseler had thought he was joking, but his expression had indicated he was not. Gottschalk stalked towards the sheds, Fieseler dropping into step as Dietrich followed, with a haunted-looking Bauer taking up the rear.

'With respect Oberführer, even though we'll have the cover of darkness, I think we should have more men. This is going to take a long time and -'

Gottschalk dismissed him with a wave, infuriating Fieseler all the more. Put it back in the box, Leon. Let the little man have his big power. Dietrich moved to the other side of Gottschalk and murmured something in his ear. Gottschalk nodded and the Oberscharführer looked over to Fieseler with a smirk. Before he could challenge the man, Gottschalk spoke.

'Fieseler, I think you deserve a little treat. And no, I don't have your transfer papers into the SS. Follow me.'

Gottschalk marched down the overgrown path, his great coat brushing past the bare trees heavy with moisture from the air. Dietrich fell back besides Bauer, who was

shivering in the cold and doing his best to keep out of the way. Emerging in front of the sheds, the scene was one of organised chaos - dozens of blue and brown boiler-suited men moved coal in barrows, skipped around snaking hoses from fat water tankers and carried enormous spanners, hammers and thick metal pins to and from a line of carts near the tree line on the left. The double doors to both sheds were wide apart, their corners cutting into the slate grey sky, towering over the descending apex roofs. Clanks, bangs and shouts filled the air. Gottschalk came to a halt, and Fieseler saw his eyes close as he listened to the symphony of preparation. Fieseler had never seen him look so happy - apart from the decimation of the workers at La Coupole.

'I take it you have not been inside the sheds?'

Fieseler saw Dietrich out the corner of his eye and thought better of bringing up his offer of four weeks ago. He might need a favour from the man sooner or later.

'No sir. Standing orders were to allow no-one inside. Dietrich made it quite clear I was not to approach the sheds, although of course it is clear to see what they contain now the doors are open.'

Gottschalk stared over to the gaping entrances to the sheds. Even though it was near the middle of the day, it was very hard to see any real detail inside due to the overhanging trees and lack of illumination inside the buildings. There was a hint of an outline in both, suggesting very large machines.

'I have concentrated on your arrangements as ordered, Oberführer. I trust they are to your satisfaction.'

Gottschalk looked to the activity, his mouth split in a thin, unconvincing smile.

'I am indeed.'

Fieseler heard a low rumble, then a wall of steam billowed out from the older shed on the right with a long hiss. Out towards the unseen exit onto the main line, several SS troopers stood around talking between the

skeletal tree branches. He counted eight. What about those that had turned up with Gottschalk? Were they not taking their places? Twenty eight men were still half of what he would have felt adequate.

'Sir, shall I deploy the squad that accompanied you?'

Gottschalk's mock serenity slid away as he turned to face Fieseler directly. Stepping up onto the rail running into the nearest shed, he attempted to reduce the height difference. Even so, Gottschalk had to look up into Fieseler's face. His words were hissed.

'Your single, solitary objective is to get my trains down the track to Wizernes and then over to La Coupole. I have no interest in what you think is adequate or not. Understood?'

Fieseler stared straight ahead. He absolutely could not look at the man. Gottschalk leaned forwards, nearly tipping off the rail as he did so.

'If you think I have left anything to chance at this late stage, you threaten to disappoint me. You don't want to do that now, do you?'

Keep looking straight ahead. Do not think about punching him in the face. Do not think about how his nose would feel breaking under your knuckles.

'Of course not, sir. My apologies.'

Gottschalk stepped back off the rail and looked towards the nearest shed.

'Good.'

With that, he began walking down the middle of the single track towards the nearest, newest shed and beckoned Fieseler to follow. Bauer took a step forward but received a shake of the hand for his troubles. Gottschalk's pace increased with excitement the closer he got to the open doorway, his hands outstretched in greeting to the massive engine squatting in the centre of the shed before him. Fieseler was overwhelmed with the size of the locomotive, and struggled to take in the detail forming with every step. The beautifully curved polished black

metal of its nose must have been three metres high. Two huge buffers thrust out below its silver-surrounded headlights at chest-height. Around half-way up its flanks, the profile angled inwards and upwards dramatically, forming a ridge that swept back down the sleek sides of the machine. And riding proud on the very front of its nose was a brightly polished silver German eagle, wings outstretched and hakenkreuz gripped between its talons.

'Isn't she beautiful?'

Gottschalk stood before the train, dwarfed by its size. Fieseler found himself in the deeply uncomfortable position of having to agree with the man. It was absolutely stunning.

'She's experimental, 19 10 class and just over a year old. Of course I'm not supposed to have her, but she was too good to risk being destroyed or put to mundane use. Seventeen hundred horsepower and maximum speed of a hundred and eighty six kilometres per hour. Beautiful.'

Fieseler wondered if the speed and power was significant to Gottschalk's plans. What use could such an engine be put to other than pulling carriages? Was it something to do with the rockets being delivered to La Coupole, or taken somewhere else? Fieseler was confused. What was Gottschalk going to do with them when they arrived? What the hell did he need *four* trains for?

'Come along, Fieseler. The tour has only just begun.'

Gottschalk strutted past the flank of the DRG Experimental and disappeared through the narrow gap between door and train. He was half-way down its twenty four metre length before Fieseler caught up with him. The SS man stared upwards as he walked, engineers and technicians swiftly dodging out of his way in the cramped interior of the shed. It occurred to Fieseler the structures had been custom-built to exacting specifications, effectively designed around the widths and lengths of the locomotives they were housing. A lot of planning had gone into this, and it was staggering Gottschalk had

managed to get away with it.

How many people had he killed to get this far?

'This is the second treasure in my collection. You won't get so good a view but take a look.'

If the first train had appeared streamlined, the next locomotive took it one step further. With only half a metre separating it from the rear of the DRG's tender, the viewing angle was difficult due to the shed wall preventing him standing back. Still, it was easy to see the nose's steep upward and backward sweep to its flattened roof. Between raised side fins, a stubby funnel could just be seen, clearly designed to stay within the train's sleek profile. Along the left side towards the driver's position, three horizontal silver lines ran forwards, terminating in an art deco circular motif with the letters PKP displayed proudly within it. The same elaborate design had been squeezed towards the top of the nose, with a single silver line bisecting downwards to a sign declaring 'Pm 36' and a '1' underneath.

Gottschalk took a step forward, bent down and touched one of the three huge traction wheels visible between the cut out section of its chassis, then run his hand along the mighty connecting rod linking all three together.

'This is not German. It's Polish. Who would have thought such a people capable of this?'

Fieseler gritted his teeth. It did not surprise him at all. Some of his best friends at University had been Polish, brilliant mathematical minds likely dying in a ghetto somewhere, or worse. Doubtless Gottschalk knew all about those friends too. Was he trying to catch him out? Fieseler did not respond. Gottschalk straightened and gazed up at his possession.

'Eighteen hundred horsepower, one hundred and fifty kilometres per hour. This very locomotive won a gold medal at the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques in Paris. I rescued it from those philistines last year, had it brought here and repaired. The Polish think it's

been scrapped. Just goes to show they don't deserve to live.'

Fieseler's initial engagement with Gottschalk's enthusiasm was fading. This was a wonderful machine, every bit as innovative and carefully engineered as the German train in front, but he seemed to think it some kind of freak accident the Poles had managed to produce it and could not be trusted to look after it. If there was one trait Fieseler confidently knew Gottschalk lacked, it was anything approaching benevolence. There was a long pause as Gottschalk looked to the damp concrete floor of the shed, picked up a rag and wiped oil from his gloved hand. Two boiler-suited engineers squeezed past and scrambled up into the cabin of the Pm 36, talking animatedly as they worked.

'But this is only half the story. Let me show you something you will not believe.'

Two minutes later, Fieseler was standing in the second shed and staring at a third locomotive. To his tastes it was far uglier, and for that more powerful-looking. Finished in a bright matte silver metal, its single high-mounted headlight stared out of the open doorway above the heads of the bustling railway workers to the thick trees surrounding the sheds. Unlike the raked frontages of the other two trains, the profile of this engine's steeply curved nose was horizontal, a wide ridge angling upwards at forty five degrees on either flank to a ledge terminating in an unobstructed view for the fireman and driver towards the back. It looked sleek and brutal at the same time, something of a theme in Gottschalk's collection.

'Now this is the DRG 61 001. It's not as powerful as the others at under fifteen hundred horsepower, but this engine reached one hundred and eighty six kilometres per hour before the war.'

Without warning, steam escaped from somewhere under the wheels, squealing as it rushed into the air. Gottschalk did not move a muscle, letting it swirl around

him. Once it had dissipated, he took off his glasses, produced a handkerchief then wiped them clean of condensation.

'This too is a prototype. It looks mighty and elegant at the same time, don't you think?'

Fieseler nodded. It did indeed. Was that the key - they were all prototypes? Was he going to start designing and constructing his own trains? That would explain the suite of rooms being built next to his underground track. But where would he get the materials and the manpower? Every one of those drafted in from Germany at huge effort and expense were returning to their homes and jobs immediately after the convoy terminated at La Coupole. What the hell was he planning?

Gottschalk moved to the right of the huge machine and walked down the narrow gap between the corrugated shed sides and the nineteen metres of locomotive power. As soon as Fieseler entered behind him, Fieseler could see a high barrier at the back of the train. Constructed from a heavy wooden frame, the panels of canvas nailed to it flapped gently in the air currents generated by the open doorway. Fieseler heard the chink of a chain being moved and dropped to the floor, then saw Gottschalk step through a narrow doorway in the temporary wall.

Fieseler followed Gottschalk through the rough wooden frame and blinked. For several seconds, he could not quite work out what he was looking at. A bulbous nose protruded forwards on the gleaming silver bullet, but there were no buffers or heavily riveted plates. Two discrete lights were built into the backward sweeping curve on the left and right, the line completely unbroken by any surface fixings. It was exactly the same profile as an aircraft, right up to the small, steeply angled cockpit windows sitting atop the rounded nose. Fieseler could see no funnel and, to his astonishment, no visible drive wheels at the front or side. The whole thing seemed to be floating above the tracks, somehow suspended in mid-air because of the

illusion created by its narrow profile, great length and the half-metre gap between its lowest point and the floor. A line of windows ran along the centre of the bare metal body, reflecting spots of light created by holes in the shed wall and ceiling.

'What do you think, Fieseler?'

Gottschalk seemed close to tears. His voice was almost a whisper, such was the rapture he seemed to be experiencing. Dietrich had not been kidding when he had said one of the trains was special.

'I don't know what to say sir... other than what is it?'

This seemed to be the exact response Gottschalk was after. Clapping his hands in glee, he walked forward, checked his palm then ran a hand over its smooth side panels.

'This is a true one of a kind. I first saw it in 1931 when it set the world speed record between Karstadt and Dergenthin. Two hundred and thirty point two kilometres per hour. It's still not been broken.'

Fieseler did not want to appear stupid, but he could not see how the thing moved at all. There was no tender, nowhere for the steam to escape, no drive wheels for God's sake. Two hundred kilometres per hour? How?

'You seem puzzled, Fieseler. That's quite delightful. Follow me.'

Gottschalk almost skipped to the rear of the gleaming train. Reaching the back of the shed, he turned and waited expectantly for Fieseler to join him. As he came level with a series of louvers set behind the window line, the bottom section curved dramatically downwards away from the upper part following the curve of the roof. Fieseler's mouth fell open.

'Yes, Fieseler. I give you the world's only Schienenzeppelin.'

Fieseler stared at the twin-bladed wooden propeller at the back. Its nose cone was pointed and sleek, exactly the same as a pre-war aircraft's.

'What you see is the original configuration, not the dreadful hack job the DRG undertook in 1933. She has the original axles and wheel arrangement, BMW V-12 water-cooled aircraft engine and interior finish. She was down to be dismantled in 1939 for the war effort. What the Army got was a load of scrap aluminium from some freight I stole.'

Gottschalk wiped the corner of his eye behind his glasses.

'If you're wondering how I got away with it, everyone connected with my errand of mercy either work for me or are dead.'

Fieseler did not respond. He just stood and stared.

Gottschalk owned a flying train.

21. Desvres

Shepherd reached down to feel if his bleeding had slowed. His hand became immediately slick and warm, so there was no need to look. Shaking his head violently, the view through the windscreen swam out of focus and he pulled on the steering wheel with his dry hand. The van jerked back onto the road, its feeble lights only just picking out the difference between the low rolling fields on either side and the macadam. If he didn't get to the shop within the next five minutes, he'd never get there. He had to concentrate, stay awake to stay alive.

He'd not anticipated it being this dark. Then again, he could hardly think straight so that wasn't a surprise. Somewhere up ahead he could see a faint glow. Wiping his bloody hand across his mud-encrusted coat, he gripped the wheel and tried to steer a straight line. His body was shaking, and the partially collapsed driver's seat couldn't keep him upright. What was wrong? Something was wrong. The glow grew brighter, splitting into two circles. They went off and then on again. Why were they flashing? Closer, larger. Again they flashed and he could hear a horn sounding. What the hell? They were dazzling now, bearing down on him. The horn was on constantly. Why was the car heading straight at him?

Jesus Archie. You're on the wrong side of the road!

Shepherd threw the van to the right just as the car made its own move towards the verge on his left. It passed him with a roar from the engine and very loud swearing. Shepherd's van walled from side to side on its creaking, ancient springs, and he had to use his still-wet hand to steer it back on course. He could feel adrenaline pumping into his body at the near miss, and for a few seconds things became a little clearer. His mind swam back into

focus and he managed to concentrate. The car was coming from somewhere. Thank God it wasn't a German military vehicle. Could it be Desvres? He hoped so. That meant it had to be around here somewhere. He was going in the right direction after all.

Shepherd shifted again in the narrow seat. The shaking had gone down to his legs, and he stiffened them to try and take control. Nothing from the waist up really hurt, which he found strange because he'd always assumed being stabbed meant being in agony. He distinctly remembered feeling the blade enter his body, an extreme burning sensation deep inside his flank. He had no recollection of it being withdrawn, but the amount of blood and lack of a handle sticking out of his body suggested this had taken place.

He still found it curious he didn't feel anything. Going into shock had been discussed at training, but the exact sensation had not been described. Perhaps it varied from person to person. His attacker had intended to kill him; only Shepherd's reactions, developed first with 30 Commando then honed with Richards as a sparring partner, had prevented the long, thin blade penetrating a vital organ. Well, at least he hoped that was the case. Perhaps it was because he was so used to continual discomfort from his leg. Or perhaps it was him slipping into terminal decline due to blood loss. He was feeling sleepy.

No. Come on. Concentrate. Wake up.

He wished he had someone to talk to. That would keep him awake. Who did he know he could talk to? Not Richards. He was dead. Albert? No. He was dead too. Dammit. He should have listened to the big Frenchman. Albert hadn't wanted him on the sortie, end of story. What was it he'd said? He could not and would not jeopardise the Englishman's life when he had his own far more

important mission to undertake. Ha. Fat chance of that happening now.

You should have kept your mouth shut, Archie.

But no. He'd accused Albert of using his upcoming infiltration of the rocket base as a smokescreen. It had nothing to do with him being too precious to risk, but far more about not being trusted. Shepherd coughed and wiped the bottom of his mouth with his hand. He hoped to God that wasn't blood from his throat he could feel on his chin.

You had to prove your point, didn't you? You had to show you were useful, that you could be counted on.

He couldn't really blame Albert for not changing his mind after a single radio transmission. In fact, had Francois not interjected in their argument at that point and brought the news he'd failed to recruit extra men and actually lost another, Shepherd would likely be sitting in the shop right now, impatiently waiting for them to return.

Shepherd barked a laugh at the thought of Francois arguing his side. After a second bottle of calvados, both Resistance men had come very close to cancelling the attack, but then Albert had brought up Simone's sacrifice so the decision had been taken to press on, albeit with a modified plan. Instead of an all-out attack on the trains they had discovered were being moved, they would attempt to derail the convoy as soon as it had fully transferred onto the main line.

There were two parallel tracks at that point, but if they did it right they could block both with a derailed engine. Shepherd had used this reduction in scale to further support his argument. Hit-and-run sabotage was what he was trained for. Albert had again refused, but when Shepherd pointed out he was a graduate engineer

and knew exactly how to cause maximum disruption, Latourelle's stubbornness had eventually given out to reason.

I wish you hadn't done that, Albert. I wish you'd stuck to your guns. If you had, I might not be bleeding to death all over the cabin of your Citroen.

Another set of lights appeared in the distance.

Keep them on the left. That's it. Keep it steady. Wait for them to pass. There's a lot of Kraut traffic around here.

I am so tired.

Dammit, concentrate. It can't be long now. Think about how you got here. Take it one step at a time. Don't miss a detail.

Shepherd wiped his face and peered at a small white road sign in the distance. What did it say? Longfosse. Shit. He'd missed a turning somewhere. No, no. He could go through Longfosse and come in from the south. That'd work. He shifted his weight in the battered seat and pushed the soaked padding back over the wound. A part of it wouldn't move because it had stuck to his skin. Did that mean the hole was clotting? Or was it just getting worse? He felt pain then, a sharpness that made him shout. What on earth he was going to do when he arrived at the shop was beyond him. He'd had rudimentary first aid training early on in 30 Commando but hadn't paid as much attention as he should to stitching wounds. It was usually assumed such an action would be done on a third party, not yourself. Could he do it? Was there a first aid kit in the shop?

Do you have any idea where you're going and what you're doing?

Shepherd squeezed his eyes closed and forced himself calm. Think, man. Think back. No, not to your mother. Think about the mission. Remember. You were crammed in the back of this van with five other men, armed to the teeth with rifles, pistols and explosives. That was how you'd got from Desvres (*it can only be a few kilometres away now*) to Saint-Omer and then over to Arques. What were they called, those five resistance fighters? You'd not asked, and they'd not volunteered. What had been clear was they all shared Albert's view that you simply should not have been on the mission. You'd kept your mouth shut and held that Welrod to your leg and allowed the metal of the long black tube to cool the burning sensation on your damaged skin.

Bloody hell. Do you still have the gun?

Concentrate. What happened next?

They'd all got out of the van somewhere outside of Saint-Omer and discussed the latest reconnaissance from early that afternoon. Francois reported significant activity in Arques around the lake entrance to the sidings from very early in the morning. There'd been supplies brought by road and rail for the last couple of weeks, the nature of them clearly linked to trains – steam and diesel - being readied for deployment. A few extra guards had appeared but it had all seemed to tally with Simone's final message of relatively light security. However, when an SS staff car and a whole truckload of troopers had appeared just after lunchtime, Francois had thought the mission would have to be cancelled. They simply would not have been able to cope with such numbers.

Oddly, they had quickly returned to their transport after taking position near the sentry hut on the outskirts of the sidings. Just under an hour later, a weedy-looking SS officer had reappeared with his aide from the hidden

sheds, all smiles and laughter. They'd got back into the car and the truck full of soldiers had followed him out and away. Albert had spat at the mention of the man and breathed something.

What was the name? Gottsdamn? Gottcharn?

You're drifting. Focus.

As they had checked and loaded their weapons, Shepherd had brought up the issue of innocent people potentially getting killed. He'd received universal contempt for the sentiment. No one was bothered about the railway workers getting caught up in the crossfire; it'd serve them right for collaborating with the Germans, Vichy bastards. An operative had heard they had all been holed up in a nearby stronghold, not venturing into the town. Word was, unlike the workers who had been hired in from Toulouse, these were not even French. As far as Albert and Francois were concerned, all the better. The only good German was a dead German.

Shepherd saw another sign for Longfosse with a '3' next to it. He was nearing the village.

Just keep on going through it then a little further. Yes.

He could manage that. He hoped his driving wasn't too erratic and drawing attention to him.

Lots of German vehicles always parked up in Desvres. Remember? Lots of them. They drink in the market square. You've seen them.

Don't think about that.

I feel sleepy.

Concentrate. Where was I? Yes. Discussing the situation on a freezing, deserted road with seven armed men. Why don't I feel cold? It's the middle of the night. What time is it?

COME ON. What had Albert said to Francois? Something about Simone. Yes.

Everything that had transpired suggested the dead woman's final message had been accurate, and with this being the case all agreed the approach would remain unchanged. She herself had insisted attacking from the town side was not an option. An armoured car constantly patrolled the road, there was a lake running along one border and they'd have to get through or over a very high fence before they even got to the sheds, let alone the railway. She had been right.

I wonder what she was like?

Travelling down the tracks from either direction was also out. The last few days had seen security ramp up towards Wizernes, and Saint-Omer station was equally heavily guarded since the arrival of the SS officer all those weeks ago. The best - and, to be frank, only option was to cut across the open fields on the other side of the tracks that stretched before them. Around a kilometre away, a long bank of trees ran from left to right, hiding the railway line from view. And that's exactly what they'd done.

As they had crouched low and used the darkness as cover, the pulsing white-yellow glow from behind the trees had actually helped them with more shadow. The light had lit up the sky, indicating great activity around the sheds. Bizarre shadows danced through the densely packed trees and huge plumes of steam rolled high into the freezing winter air. The unmistakable chugging of locomotives drifted to them on the breeze, synchronised with flickering fingers of light stretching towards them. Despite the

distractions, they were nevertheless extremely careful in their approach.

Fast and low over exposed ground wasn't the best tactical approach, but they figured on the trees masking their progress. They skirted around a couple of thick copses, using their cover to skulk closer and closer to their objective. Once in the trees, the plan had been to wait for as many trains as practical to be assembled and hit the front and rear tracks just before they headed out towards Wizernes. They'd certainly brought enough explosives to make a very large hole.

Shepherd was thrown violently upwards out of his seat. He'd gone onto the verge again. Cursing, he pulled back on to the road and continued past a ragged line of cottages and houses to his left and right. There were a few people around, lights, sounds. He must be in Longfosse. He could feel something warm running down his right leg. It had to be blood. *Come on man. Just a little further now.*

Trees. You were in the trees. It had got much brighter and you'd stayed very low in case anyone from the sidings glimpsed movement.

Despite a couple of hundred metres of track being lit up like Oxford Street at Christmas by a string of high-level floodlights, everyone had been too pre-occupied with what they were doing to look over towards their position. By agreement, Shepherd had stayed close to Albert all the way. If he had to come along, it was on the condition he would follow the burly Frenchman's orders to the letter. That had seemed a good trade-off to finally get into the fighting and hopefully avenge the death of Richards. The other men had split into two groups of three and fanned out to the left and right. Albert crouched directly behind Shepherd a couple of tree rows behind the opening into the frantic activity of the railway line. It had been up to Shepherd to work out the best way to set the charges for

maximum effect, then come in and help once the way had been clear. However, it immediately occurred to Shepherd they'd under-estimated just how many additional people to the handful of guards might be present with the trains.

Boiler-suited men were waving flags, arms and anything they could get their hands on to attract attention down the line. A couple of them had their hands tucked into their armpits and were trying to stamp away the bitter cold, seemingly oblivious to the two enormous locomotives already squatting on the furthest of the double tracks. The one on the far right had been a snub-nosed metallic grey engine, the other a sleek, steeply-curved black machine around fifty metres back on the left.

The metallic grey's high single light cut into the darkness towards Wizernes, picking out the curve of the track disappearing into the near distance and the silhouettes of more engineers and soldiers. A third train had just started to peep through the branch-obscured exit from the unseen sheds directly opposite Shepherd's position, but this one hadn't been rumbling and hissing with the power of pressurised water. It had glided into view like an aeroplane, and Shepherd had been quite mesmerised by its beautiful shape.

Wait a minute. Had they accidentally discovered some wonder-weapon destined for delivery to La Coupole? Did its extraordinary profile have something to do with the V-2 rockets being developed? The delicacy with which the crew were nudging it out onto the sharply curved junction to join the other two locomotives certainly suggested it was of great value, one German officer in particular shouting reminders to be careful. Even though he'd had his back to Shepherd, there was something odd about him; he wasn't dressed in SS or Waffen SS uniform, not like the bruiser facing into the trees, machine gun at the ready. His looked like a naval –

Desvres. A sign to Desvres. Thank God.

Something hit Shepherd on the arm. Looking sharply to the left, he saw Albert pointing down to his watch then putting up a couple of fingers. They would attack in exactly two minutes. The Frenchman hadn't enough STEN guns and rifles to go around, so Shepherd would have to put his Welrod to good use. It was fully loaded with eight rounds of 9mm ammunition, perfect for close-quarters stuff like this. Of course once the others started up with their machine guns it wouldn't matter a jot his weapon was silenced, but he'd got a real feel for it during target practice at The Frythe and, with all the people lit up in sharp relief as they were, it'd be like shooting fish in a barrel. Once they had been dealt with, he'd advise Francois on the best places to set the charges, detonate them then get back to the van over the field.

Simple, eh? What could possibly go wrong?

Watch for the turn-off. Watch for Germans. Watch.

Shepherd heard a high-pitched squealing noise far off to his left. The man in the naval coat turned too, took a couple of steps onto the empty track and looked straight up it towards Saint-Omer. Shielding his eyes with a hand, his face was thrown into shadow, but it was obvious the man had been taken by surprise. He spun back to the emerging silver bullet then between the patiently chugging engines to either side of his position. The SS man with the machine gun sauntered over the tracks, talked into his ear and then stepped back.

The naval man was shouting something but Shepherd couldn't make it out over the noise of the steam engines panting. Turning back, the naval man put both arms out in a 'stop' signal and several engineers ran to the front of the bullet's nose in an effort to slow it. As he did this the SS man, an Oberscharführer by the look of it, pulled out a whistle and gave three sharp blows.

All the workers stopped what they were doing and looked over to the scruffy man, who was beckoning for everyone to clear the area. The smattering of SS soldiers immediately readied then trained their weapons on the railwaymen, who raised their arms in surprise and protest. Some were roughly shoved away from what they were doing, others ran around and behind the nearest engines. Bodies began to stream back into the concealed exit from the sheds, the Oberscharführer taking another hail of abuse from the navy man who was himself helping to push the gleaming train back the way it had come. All the while, the rumble from down the tracks got louder and the ground began to shake.

Is that the market place? It must be. I'm going uphill and the road is cobbled. Yes. The shop is up on the right. I need to pull in and get to the loading yard. There's an eight-foot somewhere. Come on. You're nearly there.

Albert had his STEN raised. He ducked behind his tree and looked wildly from left to right, trying to see where Francois and the other men were. Brilliant lights appeared in the distance and the vibration increased. Something very large and very heavy was thundering down the line. But how could that be? All railway traffic had been suspended for twelve hours. Was this coming to shunt the trains over to Wizernes? There had been no information on that. Albert was crouching low and signalling - fall back.

Try not to hit that low wall. Noise might alert the Krauts.

Dammit.

Shepherd saw the heavy branch crash onto the track closest to him a split second before he heard the report of a cannon. It boomed and echoed into the cold night sky,

making the jury-rigged lights along the fencing behind the locomotives shake. The tracks lit up as the new train approached, and through the trees he glimpsed angled steel covered in camouflage paint.

I'll have to leave it here. It's off the main road. The back of the shop is just over there.

The neighbours have their lights on. Quiet.

The second explosion lit up the trees to his left. Huge chunks of bark hurtled through the gaps between them, snapping and breaking branches as they spun along. He could hear voices shouting to each other in French all around him. The rumbling was now thunder. Albert was bawling at the top of his voice.

'It's an armoured train for Christ's sake. Get out of here!'

Albert staggered and fell as he turned. Another massive explosion detonated a few metres away and Shepherd heard screaming. As he turned, he saw a muzzle flash out of the corner of his eye and dropped to the ground. Everything above him went yellow. Chunks of wood rained down onto his shoulders and back, but the great majority of debris had been deflected away. Latourelle wasn't so lucky; slipping as he tried to get to his feet, a thick branch fell vertically and pile-drove its way into the top of his skull. His head was rammed into the soft ground like a bolt from a rivet gun and he lie face-down, huge boots twitching as the rest of his body died.

Then the machine gun started up.

Oh hell. I don't have a key.

I'll have to break my way in. I don't think I have the strength. I'll shoot the lock. Yes. That'll work.

Shepherd scrambled his way through the dirt elbows-first, holding the Welrod as best he could. Everything around and above him was disintegrating into splinters. He heard a couple of lighter machine guns report off to his right and then a grenade detonate. Two of the Resistance were trying to make a fight of it. There was another loud boom and the guns stopped. Bullets spanged and pinged, but Shepherd kept on crawling. Soil hit him in a filthy sheet from another explosion. He spat it out. There were more shouts now, German this time.

At last Shepherd emerged into the open field from where they'd come. The machine-gun kept on chattering and the cannon kept on firing in an attempt to systematically destroy the trees they had occupied. Glancing back, Shepherd saw the low shape of the massive armoured beast. Twin muzzles threw tracer into what was left of the copse while the forward turret fired point-blank with impunity.

Something moved to his right, the flash of a shape picked out by the yellow-white explosions through the rapidly thinning trees behind him. Had the Germans out-flanked them? Had they been lying in wait from both sides?

Where's the Welrod? Is it in the back of the van? Christ I can barely walk.

'Who's there? Is that you Albert?'

It was Francois. He'd managed to get out of the chaos.

'It's me. Shepherd. Has anybody else -'

The Frenchman threw himself at Shepherd with a roar. Despite his small size, Shepherd was knocked to the frozen ground more out of surprise than anything else, his pistol spiralling out of his grip. Small hands fumbled and then clasped around his throat and the two men rolled around for a couple of metres while the ground exploded

behind them.

'You fucking English traitor. I'll kill you.'

Francois was raging as he squeezed his thumbs into Shepherd's windpipe. He was pushing his entire weight down onto him, but it wasn't enough. The drill Shepherd had carried out a hundred times with Sergeant Mackenzie during his training at Cold Morham took over. Rolling flat onto his back, he brought his arms inside the Frenchman's and threw them outwards with all of his strength. Francois's lack of physical power betrayed him, and he lost his grip immediately. Another explosion erupted behind them, much closer this time.

Found it. Thank God. My hand won't grip. Come on man.

Shepherd pushed upwards and outwards with both hands into the Frenchman's throat while twisting his body to the left at the same time. His leg hurt like hell, but he'd no time to worry about that. Francois was already getting to his feet, and as a third explosion blasted the field apart Shepherd saw the look of feral hatred on his face. He also saw the brilliant glint of a stiletto in his hand.

'Jesus Francois, what are you doing? How the hell is this my fault?'

German voices were drifting closer now, the sporadic burst of a machine gun clattering into the night air. It'd only be a matter of time until they were spotted. The little man didn't care. He lunged towards Shepherd with a grunt, knife first. Shepherd dodged out of the way and brought the side of his hand down onto the top of the Frenchman's right bicep as hard as he could, but his thick overcoat cushioned the blow. Francois wheeled and attacked again, swiping viciously with the knife and slashing through Shepherd's sleeve. Soil showered them both from a handful of metres away. Shouts went up. They had been seen.

Francois ducked low and barged Shepherd with his

left shoulder, knocking him back. Determined not to fall over again, Shepherd found his footing and moved forwards. Gunfire started zipping into the air and he ducked. When the searing pain above his right hip erupted, he thought he'd been shot. But he hadn't. Francois had stabbed him.

Just need to aim at the centre of the handle. One shot should do it.

Shepherd staggered back and fell to the ground. Francois was panting like an animal and moved forwards to finish his man off. A bullet thumped into his shoulder and he wheeled, the knife flying into the air. With a scream he ran towards the approaching Germans, silhouetted in a ragged line through the trees. Directly behind, the armoured train's cannon fired again. There was the briefest of whistles and Francois disappeared in a ball of flame and dirt.

Where's the light switch? Oh Christ there's no electricity in the back is there?

Shepherd staggered into the back room of Albert's home, threw the door closed behind him and dragged the heavy stone potter's wheel with what strength he had left to wedge it shut. Even though he was inside, it was still freezing cold and he was shaking uncontrollably. Lumbering towards the door to the shop, he threw it open and emerged into the stillness of the sales room, gently illuminated by faint street lights outside.

Leaning against the counter, he shook his head and tried to think where a first-aid kit might be. Nausea swept through him and he retched, falling to one knee and making his flank burst into painful fire. Pulling himself up, he slid towards the cellar door and flicked on the switch. Most of Albert's equipment was hidden down here, so it

was likely he'd have some emergency medical supplies with his other material.

The steep wooden steps swam in and out of focus. Shepherd gripped onto the doorframe. His hand slipped because of the blood.

You are in a very bad way. You cannot treat yourself. You need help.

The biggest risk of the entire evening presented itself to Shepherd. Forget about nearly being blown up or machine-gunned by the Germans, who had clearly known the Resistance attack was going to happen. Forget about being stabbed by someone you thought you'd come to fight with and for. Forget about crashing the car.

You've got to get down these fucking stairs.

The only way he could guarantee not adding a broken neck to the evening's collection of disasters was to bump down one step at a time on his backside. He used to do this when he was very young at his aunty Win's. Once, he'd got gently chastised for pulling a couple of stair rods out of their brackets, and he'd never done it again. His boots were covered in mud so he'd have to be careful not to slip all the way down on his back, so very carefully he shuffled himself forwards and dropped onto the step below.

He screamed with the pain from his wound. Everything misted red, but he had just about enough awareness left to realise it wasn't the light but him. Taking a breath he dropped down again, then again, then again. He stopped to gulp in more air and wiped the tears streaming from his eyes. Eight more to go.

Drop again. *Jesus.*

Drop again. *Christ.*

Drop again. *Almighty.*

Shepherd panted with exhaustion, the cold seeping through the damp stone floor of the cellar into his soaking wet undergarments. His pain convinced him there was only one option left, even if it was a bad one. By now he was too weak to stand, so he crawled over the filthy floor to the bench under the stairs. Grabbing the brown leather case, he dragged it forwards and flipped open the lid. Rummaging around in the near-dark, he grabbed the makeshift extension cable running from the shop above and plugged in the transmitter. Flicking it on, he waited for the tubes to warm up, clumsily hooked the headphones over his ears and picked up the microphone.

'ISRB Station X, come in. ISRB Station X, come in. This is Cymbeline.'

Shepherd began to drift away, then a woman's voice, sharp and direct, crackled into his ears. There was something there, something he couldn't quite put his finger on...

Concentrate.

He pressed the transmit button and interrupted her indignant questions.

'Help me.'

22. La Coupole

Fieseler's exhausted eyes watered as he stared at the bare chalk walls of the quarry, lit up by the early morning winter sun. He was so tired he could not see straight. Every time he blinked, flecks of colour sparked brightly in his peripheral vision. He was cold down to the marrow of his bones, stank of coal dust and oil and grime, and did not dare open up his great coat for fear of the stench from his own body.

He had been awake now for the best part of three days, pushing and shoving and clambering around those four machines until he had finally got them all nestled into their new tunnel home. His feet and hands were numb, his back ached and the tingle from his neck was now a permanent burning fixture. Even with his strength and resolve, he needed somewhere to lie down but the raging fury and indignation roiling around his stomach would not let him rest.

Walking down the near-completed tracks towards the middle entrance to the missile complex, Fieseler looked down at his Alpina and wiped the dirt from its scratched face. Gottschalk had said he would be there for 09:00 to inspect his precious treasure, and despite the events of last night, everything else had proceeded exactly according to Fieseler's meticulous plan. Bile welled up into his throat, an acid wave made up of too much coffee and too little food. That fucking rat bastard had not told him of the planned Resistance attack. He had not told him of the fully armed and operational armoured train waiting patiently for its signal at Saint-Omer station. He had not told him the real reason there were so few guards on show.

He had, however, told Dietrich.

Fieseler took his cap off and wiped his grimy face with the back of his coat sleeve. Dietrich. That son of a bitch. Even though the man was SS through and through,

over the last few weeks Fieseler thought they had actually got some form of good working relationship going. Dietrich had done exactly what Fieseler had asked of him on time if not earlier. Any report or information or update requested had come back with supreme efficiency, belying the man's scruffy appearance and laconic manner. They had gone through the plans to move the trains time and time again, even as late as yesterday afternoon following Gottschalk's departure.

The Oberscharführer had not said a word, *not one word*, about the attack or the countermeasures in place. The first thing Fieseler had known about it was when that massive stack of angled plates and turrets came rumbling towards them on the clear track not being used to assemble Gottschalk's trains. By the looks of the workers' reactions, none of them had any idea of the plan either. But then what? Three blasts of a whistle, thirty seconds of running and shouting then all hell had been let loose. Fieseler had never seen a forest reduced to nothing like that, and fancied absolutely no-one had survived even if the mop-up crews had suggested one or two might have fled the scene.

Fieseler crunched towards the hole in the cliff forming the entrance to Gottschalk's tunnel. He shook his head, but it only made the blobs in his vision dance around all the more. God almighty. Why had Gottschalk not told him of the attack? Fieseler thought he had been chosen for this bloody job because of his fight with the Resistance in the first place. What did the lunatic think he was going to do - tip them off? Refuse to open fire on them?

He may have admired their spirit and felt genuine remorse at having to kill the two men on the tracks all those months ago, but he was still a serving German naval officer, fighting for his country no matter how utterly deluded its leader may now be. Like so many of his comrades, protection of the Fatherland came first, politics second - even if an increasing number of his colleagues

secretly did not agree with what was going on.

Fieseler stumbled over a length of rail and cursed as he regained his balance. If any of the wretchedly thin workers disassembling the remaining quarry cranes or pushing large open carts of rock out onto the rails from the tunnels to his left and right saw him lose his footing, they did not react. They were too busy straining against the battered and rusting buckets or averting their gaze from the ever-watchful Todt guards. Fieseler felt a fresh wave of anger prickle up his back then down again. Look at this misery. Look at this suffering. Building a base to house weapons that might swing the tide of war back in their favour was one thing, but using slavery to do it was not civilised. But then, he doubted the Todt, and Gottschalk in particular, even knew the meaning of the word.

With a surge of revulsion, he passed by the brown smudges that had once been human beings on the outer walls of the train tunnel. Those anti-aircraft guns had done to men what the armoured train had visited on those woods last night; reduced them to nothing. Whatever the connection might be between those fucking trains and the operation of this base, it had better be a good one. He entered the tunnel mouth where the locomotives were being kept, and the temperature dropped even more.

Out of the morning glare, his eyes slowly adjusted to the artificial lights running along the top of the huge curved structure. The structure was much like the tunnels being constructed for the genuine final rocket assembly and launch areas, infirmary and barracks somewhere deep in the rock to his left and right. Perfectly aligned bricks formed a barrier between the soft chalk and the passages, making it look disturbingly ordinary.

This tunnel was, of course, larger than the others due to the size of the trains, and while only a few hundred metres had been completed, Fieseler still could not believe how Einsatzgruppenleiter Architekt Walter had managed to get this much done. The area outside was still a

construction site, but much of the work had now moved inside the chalk hills, not least to avoid the ineffectual bombing raids from the enemy over the last couple of weeks. Wizernes station had taken quite a hit in the last attack, but the tracks had been re-laid and trains up and running within a day. More men had been drafted in by the hundred, the throb of diesel engines and constant clack and rumble of burrowing into the chalk booming from the heavily guarded entrances twenty four hours a day.

Many of the craters around the huge dome and those in the entrance quarry away from the tracks had been left unfilled. Some holes had excavated waste dropped directly into them, but most of that material had been used for emergency track repair. Walter may have been at odds with Gottschalk, but in his own way he was as merciless and practical as the SS. The job had to be done by any means necessary, and looking around, it certainly appeared to be on schedule.

Up ahead, Fieseler saw a huge black shape filling much of the tunnel. It seemed to suck in the light from all around, and he had to squint to make out the best side to walk along. It did not really make any difference because the tracks had been laid dead centre, and the extra height above the four locomotives' smoke-stacks and chimneys was clearly designed for the trains to run underground.

This in itself was puzzling - had they been intended to shunt or carry the V-2 rockets, why didn't this huge, still unfinished oval connect with the reception areas for the missiles' sectional parts, or between final assembly and launch sites? They had their own tunnels. This was a self-contained track that, when finished, would make a perfect loop if the trains were not diverted out into the open space of the quarry. Walter and the other draftsmen had quickly realised Gottschalk's story about it being used to house and construct missile parts was a lie but they, like Fieseler, had the good sense not to ask Gottschalk exactly what purpose the finished circuit would actually fulfil.

Fieseler started to cough. Wiping his nose, he was alarmed to see what came out was black. It had been less than three hours since he had brought the final train, the Polish Pm36 he was now passing, to a halt. While the extraordinary Schienenzeppelin had been kept second in line behind the lead DRG 61 in the convoy from the sidings to here for maximum protection, it had been the first to be rolled in to the complex – a colossal pain in the arse to coordinate.

While Fieseler had been directing the remaining three locomotives behind it, Dietrich had skulked off somewhere into the dark, probably to update Gottschalk back at Saint-Omer or to find some filthy hole to get drunk in. As the dust had settled over the Resistance attack back at the sheds, Dietrich had been stoic to the point of ignorance as Fieseler laid into him about what he had known. For much of his tirade, Dietrich had stared forwards until the mention of Gottschalk's name, when his flinty gaze had flicked directly towards Fieseler. Under the harsh lights of the sidings, he had seen the slightest of twitches around his right eye. It reminded Fieseler of Kommodore Arnold's expression in his bunker back at Wimereux. Dietrich owed Gottschalk something, or was being threatened by him.

The only thing Dietrich would say, repeatedly, was he had carried out his orders as relayed to him by his *senior* commander and that nothing else mattered. There was no attempt at an apology. Realising he was taking his frustration out on the wrong person (and one he would never trust again), Fieseler had ordered Dietrich to ride on the last train, as far away from him on the first as possible. To this he had nodded, thrown the strap of his machine pistol around the arm of his filthy coat and strolled off, the occasional shout and single pistol shot echoing from what was left of the trees on the other side of the tracks. Once its business had been completed, the armoured train had squealed and rumbled its way back up to Saint-Omer

station, not one member of its crew leaving the safety of its massive bulk. That had infuriated Fieseler as well.

And now he was angry again. Angry and exhausted, physically worn out, cold, damp, and stinking. Somewhere up ahead, unseen past the trains and the gentle curve over to the right, he could hear drilling and hammering. The workers were continuing to expand the tunnel to its specified length, and for a second he wondered exactly how they would get the waste past the locomotives now they were occupying the track. Pulling back his glove and sleeves, he saw it was two minutes to nine. He would arrive at Gottschalk's underground complex, with its uninterrupted view of the Schienenzeppelin, exactly on time. In fact, he could see the rat of a man right now.

Gottschalk stared down at the cabin and nose of his favourite train through the two-metre wide unglazed window frame set into the bare brick wall before him. Even stationary it looked fast, its sleek silver curves standing out in stark contrast to the darkened walls of the tunnel. To think he had finally got it here, safe and sound after all these years. Pride swelled in his chest and he rode the emotion, breathing in to fend off tears of joy. All this planning, all this hard work and sacrifice. Being brilliant certainly took it out of you. The train looked beautiful... but not quite perfect.

'Bauer. My case.'

Bauer got up from the leather operator's chair in which he sat in the corner of the narrow rectangular bunker. He had to squeeze past a couple of electricians puzzling over a bundle of wires issuing from a brown circular bakelite junction box, but did not acknowledge them. Unlocking the bracelet, he handed the case over to Gottschalk, averting his eyes as he did so. Gottschalk sniffed and placed it on the narrow bench running the whole five metre length of the room. Opening the case, he

shuffled through the top papers until he pulled out a creased blueprint and spread it open, craned his head through the window frame then back again. Yes, more lights were needed to be set into the outer wall of this control room and an extra bank on the tunnel's ceiling. Walter would have to run extra cables perhaps, but that would be his problem. The additional illumination would *really* make it look stunning.

Gottschalk noticed Bauer seemed unsure whether he was needed or not. He appeared to be shaking, his face as white as a sheet. It looked as if his usefulness was, indeed, coming to an end. Motioning him back to his chair, Bauer turned and moved away. Gottschalk saw his breath before him as he snorted in derision. The control room was like a refrigerator, only a few degrees above freezing, but holes had already been drilled for the pipes that would connect to the weighty iron radiators bolted to the wall under the shelf on his right.

Through the open doorway on his left he could hear a number of men discussing the final room of the complex. It would double as his living quarters and personal office. Some, like Bauer staring off into space, might find it strange he would want to spend time here. Gottschalk smirked. So few people shared his vision, or his passion. If they did, they would understand.

The room was plunged into darkness. Gottschalk heard the electricians curse, while Bauer let out a whimper. A few seconds later the bulkhead lights bolted to the low grey ceiling flickered back into life, revealing Fieseler standing in the doorway to the side of the open window frame.

'Hmph. Good of you to join us.'

Fieseler squinted under the harsh light, reflections from the black glass board being wired opposite the open window frame setting off the sparks in his vision. What the hell was that exactly? Some kind of indicator system? In the corner, he saw Bauer's hands clutching the chair arms

in which he sat, his eyes wild. Jesus. Clearing his throat, Fieseler felt as if he was speaking from the bottom of a well, such was his fatigue.

'Sir, would it be possible for us to talk alone?'

Fieseler kept his voice as even and businesslike as possible, but the strain of over-control rang in his ears. Gottschalk's smile dropped slightly, and he took a step back away from the bench, dropping the lid of his ever-present case as he did so. Raising his eyebrows in agreement, Fieseler looked over to the engineers and Bauer. They left immediately.

Gottschalk turned and unbuttoned his great-coat, revealing a black silk scarf wrapped around his neck. On some people it would look elegant. Some people.

'I assume you wish to report on the success of your mission, Fieseler. I must say I am very pleased all of my collection has been transferred unscathed.'

The voice at the back of Fieseler's mind was shouting.

Keep your mouth shut. Check the set of your jaw. Watch your body language. This man can and will have you executed if you make the wrong move.

Fuck off.

'Oberführer, may I ask why, taking into consideration you tasked me with organising this transfer, why you chose -'

Watch it, Leon.

' - Why I was not informed of the attack by the Resistance and the measures that had been put in place to protect your convoy?'

Gottschalk stared at Fieseler, the smile sliding off his ratty face. Taking his glasses off, he pulled the end of his scarf out and cleaned the lenses in small circular motions,

looking down as he talked.

'A fair question. There are three reasons. First, and I believe I am repeating myself here, your primary goal was the transportation of the trains. I did not want you distracted from that for any reason.'

Gottschalk huffed on his glasses, the warm air forming steam in the damp, cold underground room.

'Secondly, as you very well know, you are not SS – not yet, anyway. When it comes to security, regardless of rank, you will always come second to someone from my brotherhood.'

Fieseler felt he was being out-manoeuvred, that the piece of information withheld from him to make sense of a situation was about to be revealed.

'Third and last, it was none of your business. You are here to serve me, regardless of who or what you think you are. You will do as you are told and continue to do as you are told until I kill you or you die. Do you understand?'

The back of Fieseler's head was aflame and the fingers on his right hand twitched involuntarily. He desperately wanted to reach over to his holster, unflip the top, pull out his Walther and put several bullets into Gottschalk's face. Replacing his glasses, he threw Fieseler a look of indifference mixed with superiority.

'Now we have that sorted, I have a new task for you. I am led to believe British agents are expected or already in Saint-Omer. They will attempt to infiltrate this facility.'

Gottschalk looked over to the silver bullet sitting outside.

'That cannot be allowed to happen.'

Fieseler leaned against the cold wall of the bunker to try and shock himself into clarity.

'Now, because you have brought my trains to me completely unscathed and clearly possess qualities that are still of use, I will put your insubordination down to fatigue. But let me make this very clear.'

Gottschalk took a couple of steps forward,

attempting to look menacing but instead coming off as an angry rodent. Fieseler almost laughed in his face.

'You will find who these agents are. I don't want them in the hands of the Carlingue or Milice. I want them taken to motte castral. They may even have been with the Resistance scum who attacked last night, at least one of which Dietrich believes fled the scene.'

Fieseler blinked in disbelief. He was surely not going to be blamed for an action he had had no part in planning? If he had been informed what was going to happen, Fieseler would have ensured no-one had survived.

'Fahndung Funk picked up a transmission early this morning. It was a brief request for help then cut off. They didn't have time to pinpoint it exactly, but it was somewhere within a hundred square kilometres of here. They are moving units in to narrow down the search. As soon as they transmit again, they will be revealed and you will go and get them.'

Gottschalk's voice was almost an echo. The rage inside Fieseler was losing its battle to keep him awake. He really needed to get out of this... whatever the hell room it was before he shot the man or fell over.

'The transmission was in English, which is unusual. A liaison officer from F.Fu will be arriving at Saint-Omer station ahead of his units later this afternoon. I suggest you get some sleep and meet him off the train.'

Fieseler snapped back into consciousness. 'Train. He said train. He'd had enough of them for a lifetime.'

'Yes, Oberführer.'

Gottschalk turned and headed towards the far door, waving his gloved hand dismissively. Normally it would have been such an easy job to shoot him in the back from this range, but Fieseler did not honestly trust his aim. Turning, Fieseler grabbed a hold of the condensation-wet rail leading down the four roughly cast concrete steps to the floor of the tunnel and stepped down them as carefully as he could. He hoped he would be able to find a staff car

or someone to give him a lift back to his dismal billet in Saint-Omer. He desperately needed to bathe, shave and sleep.

The gunshot echoed down the tunnel with a crack and despite his total exhaustion, Fieseler crouched instinctively. The sound of raised voices followed from around the corner, furious shouting and pitying cries for help. There was a wet cracking sound, silence, then the excavation began again, somehow more urgent and focussed. Looking to his right down the four parked locomotives, Fieseler saw the cold grey of winter at the end of the tunnel, and while he knew he needed to get out he simply could not leave without investigating the commotion lest it endangered the trains.

Following the temporary work lights dangling from thick black power cables in the ceiling, Fieseler walked deeper into the tunnel. Within twenty metres, the smooth brick finish gave way to raw stone where the bricklayers had not yet moved in to complete the tunnel's lining. Passing a large mobile generator, Fieseler picked his way through the snaking cables laid between the railway tracks then came to an abrupt stop. The scene before him was little more than an image of hell.

A dozen bare-chested men were working at the chalkface, its striated brown-white surface picked out by their powerful helmet lamps. Cables ran into the back of large post drills being thrust into place by a couple of operatives, with other men slicing into the rock with a huge cutter blade mounted on a rail bogey. To the sides, workers were hacking and smashing large chunks onto the floor with hand chisels and smaller powered drills, the debris picked and thrown into an open metal cart sitting at the mouth of a much smaller, narrower tunnel to the left. Three Todt guards were laughing at the bodies slumped at their feet. Despite Fieseler's failing eyesight, he could see one of them had his head smashed in.

The noise from the drills was deafening. Not one of

the workers had any kind of protection on their hands or faces. Dust filled the air in waves, making Fieseler's eyes sting all the more. Pulling out a whistle, one of the grey-uniformed Todt guards blew on it sharply and the drilling stopped. From out of the smaller tunnel, a boy no older than nine or ten appeared carrying a large pail of water and ducked past the corpses on the floor. Even in this freezing cold, the miners were sweating, their bodies glistening and actually steaming due to the temperature.

One of the Todt shouted over to two of the closest workers to throw the dead bodies of their compatriots into the near-full cart, which they did without question or ceremony. Suddenly, the nearest guard became aware of Fieseler and brought his rifle to bear. It took him a few seconds to realise Fieseler's rank, and he reluctantly lowered his weapon as the corpses were balanced on top of the rocky waste.

'What is going on here?'

Fieseler mustered as much authority as he could in his voice and readied himself for bluff and bluster from the man.

'These two workers were not pulling their weight, so we disciplined them. Sir.'

Fieseler caught the grins between the other two Todt guards. The little boy scuttled about, jumping nimbly over large lumps of rock and ensuring everyone got a drink from his filthy bucket. Fieseler's stomach lurched and more acid burned its way up his throat. On top of everything else, he now felt physically sick.

'Where are you taking the bodies?'

The question seemed to genuinely puzzle the guard. Looking behind Fieseler towards the way he had come, he suddenly became suspicious.

'I do not recognise you, sir. May I see your permits to be in here?'

Fieseler took a couple of steps towards the guard. He fell back, his two compatriots turning as one and throwing

the bolts back on their rifles. Realising this could all get ugly very quickly, Fieseler reached slowly into his coat and produced his papers. The guard closest produced a torch, shone it on the document then into Fieseler's face. When he saw Gottschalk's signature at the bottom, his demeanour changed significantly.

'Begging your pardon sir, we have orders to ensure the very highest security is maintained here. To answer your question, the bodies will be dumped with the rest of them.'

The back of Fieseler's head began to burn.

'Show me.'

The guard wiped his mouth with his gauntleted hand and darted a glance at the other two. They shrugged and pointed their rifles down the narrow tunnel from where the boy had emerged. Reaching down to pick up a paraffin lamp, the guard lit it and handed it over to Fieseler, who squeezed past the laden cart behind the soldier. As he crouched and squeezed his way through the roughly hewn rock, he heard the Todt guard trying to justify himself.

'Discipline has to be maintained at all costs, sir. They are our primary orders from Einsatzgruppenleiter Architekt Walter and Oberführer Gottschalk. We are to tolerate no idleness in the conscripts. They do as they are told or punishment is immediately administered.'

The tunnel was barely a metre and a half high. Fieseler had no idea what direction it led in, and was surprised when he could see daylight up ahead. Within a minute he was back outside, but this was not the huge sprawling entrance to the tunnels into the main excavation. It was still a relatively large area, but what it contained was infinitely more dreadful.

The track on which the carts were taken into and out of the cliff split into two directions. Arcing over to the right was a long row of filled buckets, their contents waiting to be tipped by a half-dozen strong crew watched over by a solitary guard. Fieseler could hear large diesel

engines idling somewhere out of sight, and assumed they were on a raised platform over which the trucks awaited loading. They would then be sent wherever they were needed to repair bomb damage or for other building projects. On the far right, where the track curved back and joined to the original in a large oval, were several empty carts waiting to be pushed back inside. Other than the unhealthy appearance of the workers doing their backbreaking work, there was nothing unusual there.

No, it was the heap of hard-frozen bodies to the left that stopped Fieseler from breathing.

At first, he could not process what he was looking at. Arms and legs and heads poked out from the five or six-layer deep pile, some of the eyes and mouths open and staring into the sky or right at him. Most were unclothed, some had rags thrown over them, but all shimmered with frost in the morning sunlight. From behind, a gentle rumbling sound became louder. The rock-laden truck with the bodies on it was pushed past him by two grunting French slave workers, closely followed by the apologetic Todt guard.

Nodding to Fieseler, he shouted at the emaciated workers to dump the corpses on the pile, take the load over to the waiting area for the trucks then pick up an empty wagon for the return. The cold efficiency of it made Fieseler want to retch. The guard seemed surprised at Fieseler's reaction to the scene, and felt additional explanation was required to ease his mind.

'Do not worry, sir. We'll not leave them until the spring. When the pile gets too high we'll burn them then bury what's left in lime.'

The guard smiled.

'That's what you get for being a lazy bastard.'

Fieseler could not think of a reply. Tearing his eyes away from the bodies, he looked back at the tunnel as the two workers rumbled an empty cart back into it. How long would it be until they joined their compatriots? Or that

little boy?

'Is there another route back to the main excavation?'

The Todt guard sucked the freezing air between his teeth and motioned over to the far end of the loading ledge.

'There is sir, but it's a good two kilometres around the hill.'

Fieseler did not think he could take another step. He had reached his limit, physically and mentally. The last day had seen him humiliated, ignored, lied to, thrown into a situation he had no knowledge of nor preparation for and, as a sickening conclusion, shocked to his absolute core. Even though he did not want to, he turned back to the bodies. Limbs angled outwards into the grey sky, crooked fingers looking like the naked branches and twigs of a dying tree - all covered in a shimmering crystal finish.

Witnessing such sights was, he realised, how madness started. For the briefest instant he understood the crying, shaking wrecks he had interviewed in convalescence homes during his work with the Abwehr-M, trying to coax information out of burned-out survivors from battles lost. This was the kind of day that broke a man.

And yet, somewhere deep inside, the remnants of his rage and fury banded together, pushing adrenalin into his impossibly heavy limbs and overwhelmed mind. Forgetting his discomfort and pain, he remembered who he was – an officer in the German navy, a man far above and detached from this atrocity. He would not let anyone, particularly that vile, insane creature Gottschalk, ever take that away from him. The Todt officer eyed him curiously, and Fieseler wondered how a human being could become accustomed to such a life as the one he led.

'That's alright. I could do with the walk.'

23. Desvres

Shepherd opened his eyes to see the concerned face of Alain looking down at him. He looked tired and drawn, the relaxed and jovial half-smile Shepherd had got so used to replaced by lines of worry. At first, Shepherd felt completely numb, but slowly an ache built in his right flank and the all-too-familiar itching from his left leg crept back – as did the memory of what had happened during the catastrophic raid on the trains. Everything after that was an indistinct jumble of images and darkness.

'Good morning, monsieur. How are you feeling?'

Alain's voice lacked the warmth he'd come to associate with the genial man, and there was a tension behind the words. How the hell had *he* got here? As normal sensation returned behind the pain, Shepherd tried to move but found it very difficult. His arms below his exposed shoulders were pinned beneath tightly drawn sheets and he could feel something rubbing against his wound, not the cloth of the dressing but inside his skin.

Someone had sewn him up.

Looking behind Alain's head he saw a cracked ceiling and a single light-bulb hanging by a twisted cable, its faint yellow glow doing little to alleviate the grey filtering in from somewhere behind the Resistance man. Gingerly moving his head on his hard pillow, Shepherd did not recognise the room straight away. After a few seconds, he realised he was lying in Albert's bed in the room above the shop, below the garret he'd occupied only the day before.

A dead man's bedroom.

'Terrible.'

Shepherd's reply was croaked, and elicited an unsurprised nod from the older man. Reaching down, Alain produced a glass of water and allowed Shepherd a few drops before resting his head back on the pillow. Standing back upright, Alain winced with the pain of his

hip and rocked slightly on his feet as he talked.

'You lost a lot of blood. We had to give you a plasma transfusion as we couldn't get whole blood and didn't know your type anyway.'

Alain nodded down to the battered bedside cabinet in front of him from which he'd just picked up the water. Gently turning, Shepherd saw two opened cans and a couple of empty glass bottles amongst a metal kidney dish and a number of half-rolled bandages. That would explain the soreness on the top of his left hand, although there was no sign of the drip bag or cannula that must have accompanied such a procedure. If he'd had the transfusion and only just awoken, that suggested he'd been there for some time. Alain held his left hip and pushed in with his hand to alleviate his own discomfort, but it didn't seem to make any difference.

'Before you ask, five days. We couldn't risk moving you as there's a lot of Boche traffic in and out the area. Albert always insisted hiding in plain sight was the best approach.'

Shepherd lay back and closed his eyes. His wound burned. Taking a couple of deep breaths, his head began to clear. With the pain and the rapid return to his wits, he assumed he wasn't being medicated. Something occurred to Shepherd and he cleared his throat before talking.

'I don't remember telling ISRB where I was. How did you find me?'

Alain hobbled over to the corner of the room, past an ornate wooden dresser on the opposite wall. Taking what looked like Shepherd's heavy coat from the single wooden chair, he laid it carefully on the floor. Turning painfully, he returned with equal awkwardness then placed the chair on Shepherd's left in front of the rattling sash window. Sitting down with a sigh, he leaned forward and stared through the dusty net curtains down onto the main street below as he answered in a measured tone.

'You transmitted in English, which is about the worst

possible thing you could have done. Thank God you fell unconscious and didn't keep your finger on the send button. You'd have awoken in quite different surroundings, let me tell you.'

Alain's words hung in the air. Shepherd took in another breath and felt the burn in his side peak, then tail off. Jesus Christ.

'I don't know what to say, Alain. If I'd thought I could have got over to you, then I would have done. This seemed like my only option. Things were very... confused.'

Alain's jaw tightened, the muscles pulsing below his ears. Without turning he nodded slowly a couple of times.

'It was a mess, I'll grant you that. A real mess.'

Shepherd's throat was dry and he coughed. It felt as if he had been stabbed again. Alain started to get to his feet but Shepherd waved him down. A sudden, terrible thought gripped him.

'Oh God, I didn't say where I was, did I? I didn't say *who* I was?'

Alain snorted a laugh and folded his arms, shivering. Despite wearing a thick sweater and beret, it did not protect him from the cold in the room.

'No, you did neither - which is to your credit. I suppose.'

Shepherd felt as if he was being told off by his favourite uncle. He really didn't need to be reminded just how much he'd screwed up. But then something approaching a twinkle returned to Alain's kind brown eyes.

'Believe it or not, the person who took the call recognised your voice.'

Shepherd frowned. Dammit, he thought she'd sounded familiar. Then it dawned on him - it was Corporal Reilly who'd been on duty in The Frythe's radio wing. Good God. Even during her brief but energetic fling with Richards, she'd spent enough time with them in various pubs and bars for her to know it was him on the other side

of the transmission. Hugh had managed to help save his life, even in death.

'Remembering Albert's identity codeword helped enormously, although of course they had no idea where this place is.'

Confusion flickered over Shepherd's face but Alain continued.

'They knew you'd first contacted me after the crash-landing and gambled I'd know where to go. Believe me, the way we usually operate, that was quite a presumption.'

Shepherd couldn't quite believe his luck. Then again, if the world had any kind of balance, surely he had been due some by now. Ever since he'd gone to see his mother at the hospital all those weeks ago, it'd just been one dreadful event after another. Perhaps there was some justice after all. Wriggling himself some room, Shepherd traced his fingers over the padding taped across his side. He was pleased to learn it was completely dry, not like the last dressing he'd put on himself.

'Who sewed me up?'

Alain sat back on the chair with a smile.

'Rita did, after myself and a colleague had dosed you up with morphine and got you on the kitchen table at the back of the shop. It was a very clean wound. Deep, but clean.'

Alain looked out of the window again, leaning forwards a little too deliberately in order to avoid looking at Shepherd when he asked his inevitable question.

'Who stabbed you?'

There was no need to see his face. The tone of Alain's voice indicated he suspected something was wrong. Shepherd realised it was pointless lying to the man.

'Francois Lacombe.'

Again, Alain nodded. Surely he couldn't have guessed that from looking at a hole in his side.

'We both survived the German attack. As we ran for it, he accused me of being to blame. I promise you Alain, I

wasn't.'

Alain cocked his head to one side and looked further down the road towards Desvres square. His voice echoed off the small panes of glass set into the wooden frame.

'Well, I've intercepted a lot of traffic from the other Saint-Omer cells. They're raging about it because it's obvious someone had tipped the Germans off.'

Shepherd felt his leg itch and chest tighten. He'd had more than enough of this, and thought his present state would excise any such thoughts for good.

'Surely to God I'm not *still* suspected?'

Alain shrugged. If it was meant to present some form of impartiality, it failed.

'I had to beg Albert to take me on the mission. You might find this hard to believe, but it was Francois who ended up changing his mind.'

Alain turned briefly to Shepherd and gave him a look. He wasn't sure if it was amusement or astonishment.

'Ask yourself - in fact, ask *them* why I would have gone on it if there was any risk at all of me getting killed? It was utter bloody chaos down there. You couldn't see a thing. It would have been easy for me to die along with the others. If I'd known what was coming, I'd have stayed here.'

Shepherd shifted his head away in misery.

'I wish to God I had.'

Alain breathed gently, appearing to consider all the facts. It was his turn to sigh deeply.

'I have assured them it's not you, for what good it's going to do.'

Alain rose to his feet and stretched, feeling down at his hip and grimacing. He looked straight at Shepherd with a troubled, tired look on his face.

'Nothing makes sense here. We're missing something right under our noses, but I'm damned if I can come up with an explanation.'

It was the same expression he'd carried for two days

back in Ancourt, all the way from the stand-off in his kitchen to waving him and Albert goodbye from his front door.

'Notwithstanding the loss of Albert, Francois and their men, this is going to cause a lot of trouble because now we've got to decide who we can really trust. Again.'

The light seeping in from outside was as bleak as Alain's voice. Shepherd could see that fighting in this way must take a terrible toll, particularly on a man so intelligent and cultured. And yet, it was the very reason Alain and the rest of the Resistance kept on battling the enemy; they felt their way of life, their culture and history, was worth fighting for. Shepherd once again felt immense respect for the man. He was everything good that France had to offer.

Shepherd's reverie distracted him from his discomfort, and he felt brave enough to try moving. Testing his arms, he pushed himself backwards and up against his pillow. The pain came back and far surpassed what it had originally been. It was a reminder not to undo all the good work that had been undertaken on his behalf. He acknowledged it by sliding back down into place. Alain turned from the window and saw the expression on his face.

'I'd lie still if I were you. I contacted England this morning to update them on your progress. As far as they're concerned, your mission is to continue once you have fully recuperated. That, however, will be -'

The sound of vehicles squealing to an abrupt halt echoed from outside. Alain looked sharply out of the window.

'Putain de merde.'

Alain hobbled across the bedroom as fast as he could, threw open the bare-wood door and stamped down the narrow stairs as quickly as his damaged hip would allow. A tall blonde man and dark-haired woman were at the bottom, standing next to each other in the shop and looking up at him with wild eyes.

'Christine, get out back and start up Albert's van. We'll have to try and get him out as best we can.'

Alain had barely finished the sentence when a loud banging started on the shop's locked door. The back of the showroom was unlit, but the soldiers must have seen the woman exit out of the rear door as their protestations increased. Alain saw the silhouettes of German soldiers through the rolled-down blinds of the shop's two big windows, with a large shape filling the glass door and peering into the gloom. In the back of the shop, Alain heard a heavy table being hastily moved out of the way then the opening of the back door. Shouts followed, a scream of fury and a single shot, then a torrent of automatic fire in response.

The blonde man withdrew his pistol and started out after the woman. Alain went to grab him, but his hip betrayed him and he fell backwards into the stairway from where he had just come. The man turned to see Alain falling, and bellowed in rage. Thinking the Germans had opened fire outside the front of the shop, he pumped bullets into the door and large plate glass windows.

Alain knew what was coming and flattened himself against the brick wall of the stairwell. A hail of lead tore into the shop from the German forces, thumping into the blonde man's body and hammering him backwards with the force. Bullets sprayed into the display shelves, exploding plates and cups and crockery into spinning slivers of pottery. Alain was showered in debris, then a series of holes tore through the partition wall to the stairs on his right and he felt a thump in his shoulder.

A single word from outside stopped the firing. Alain sat on the stairs, listening to the sound of his own heavy breathing. White dust swirled past the doorway into the shop, covering the face of the dead blonde man. Boots crunched on shattered glass and smashed pottery, alerting Alain to the careful entry of the enemy into the ruined shop. Similar cautious noises came from out back, and

Alain realised he – *they* - were absolutely, totally trapped. Despite the burning in his shoulder, Alain carefully moved up the stairs in time with the Germans' approach. He could hear low murmurs, orders and directions being calmly relayed and acknowledgements given. Whoever was in charge was a cautious type.

Alain knew German tactics. They would secure the ground floor first before risking going up the stairs. This, at least, would buy him and Shepherd a little extra time. Exactly for what, he wasn't sure. Backing up into the bedroom, Alain left the door open and turned to find Shepherd desperately trying to pull himself free of his bedclothes and failing miserably. The man couldn't even get out of bed, let alone make a run for it. Alain limped over to the window, clutching at the seeping wound in his shoulder. He'd been shot before, and knew this wasn't anything too serious unless bits of his clothes had gone into the wound. That could be quite nasty.

What the hell was he thinking? Did he really expect to get out of this alive?

The street was jammed with military vehicles. One of the trucks was a long wheel-base affair with a series of aerials on its roof.

Merd. Shepherd's transmission.

The officer in charge stood with his arms folded next to a staff car, flanked by SS troopers. He was pointing into the shop, then paused and looked straight up at Alain. Seeing him, his finger swept upwards and all the heads of the assembled troops followed it then began scurrying behind any cover they could find. The officer stood with his hands on his hips and waved at Alain to come down.

Alain snorted. Not a typical SS hot-head.

Somewhere downstairs, one brave soul had started his ascent up the stairs. Alain looked down to Shepherd, who was trying to swing his legs onto the cold bare floor.

'Do you have a capsule? An 'L' tablet?'

Shepherd turned to face him. He had no idea where it

was. Another creak issued from the stairs, louder. Alain winced as he pulled up the back of his sweater and retrieved his Webley revolver then moved over to the large dresser, opened it and turned with Shepherd's Welrod in his free hand.

'We cannot be captured, monsieur. We will have to take as many of them with us as possible, then kill ourselves.'

The officer was shouting from the street below in perfect French. There'd already been too much loss of life and no need for further bloodshed. If they gave themselves up immediately, he promised they would be treated fairly. Curiously enough, Alain actually believed the man's pleas. Unfortunately, it wasn't going to make any difference to his decision. Taken alive, it would be catastrophic for the Resistance all the way back to Dieppe. He had an iron resolve when he needed to, but the wide range of methods available to whichever agency ended up tying him to a chair would inevitably result in him talking. He'd much rather not die at all, but given the choice he'd prefer all his teeth still in his head and genitals intact when he did eventually pass.

He glanced back at Shepherd, who looked entirely miserable. Alain could hear the breathing of the German coming up the stairs now, and flattened himself to the side of the open doorway. Shepherd rocked himself onto his feet but shouted with the pain. The German's advance stopped, his weapon knocking against the plaster of the inner wall. Alain pulled the hammer back on his Webley, felt the cylinder rotate into place. At this range, whatever he hit would have a hole in it the size of a dinner plate.

Shepherd was on his feet, but not for long. Legs buckling, he fell towards the bed then bounced onto the floor. His Welrod clattered a yard or so away, out of reach and useless in the position in which he landed. Alain couldn't watch any more. If he had to kill the man himself, he would do so. Raising his weapon, he waited for the tell-

tale creaking of the last few stairs. Moving forwards with hand extended, he angled to the right and fired four times, the muzzle flash illuminating the door frame in brilliant white light. There was a loud gurgling scream then a crashing, thumping noise as the soldier fell back into his comrades behind him. Shouting began again, and the sound of running from beneath the bedroom. Turning back into the room with a look of absolute resignation on his face, Alain flicked open the chamber of his revolver, counted then flicked it back closed. There was one bullet each.

Shepherd had made his way to the far wall on Alain's left, and was desperately trying to sit himself up against the peeling wallpaper. Something seemed to give way and he noticed a red bloom spreading through the bottom of his borrowed pyjamas. Alain took a couple of faltering steps away from the doorway and raised his weapon, pointing it directly at Shepherd's head. Pulling the hammer back, it clicked into the cocked position. His hand was shaking and he had tears in his eyes.

'I am so sorry.'

Alain flew back through the open doorway, immediately followed by a storm of brick and glass. Smoke and dust swirled in on the freezing December air through the rocket-propelled grenade blast hole where the window had been and Shepherd shielded his face from the debris as bits of plaster and wood showered him in filth. A low groan drifted up from the stairwell, followed by heavy boots and shouting in broken French. Shepherd steeled himself for the report of a pistol, but it did not come. Instead, heavy dragging noises and curses tracked Alain's extraction from the building through the shop and out the ruined frontage. The slam of a car door finally cut off his ferocious verbal assault, followed by the revving of an engine as he was driven away.

Shepherd dragged himself into the corner of the room and held his breath. The angle to the doorway was acute, the open door itself shielding him from being seen. The barrel of a rifle slid into view, then the tip of a boot. Behind Shepherd, more of the wall collapsed around the hole made by the RPG and fell into the street accompanied by warning cries from the troops outside. Thick, choking dust swirled around the room and the unseen soldier behind the door began to cough violently. Thinking the room too unstable to enter, the weapon disappeared, and Shepherd heard boots thump down the stairs. He couldn't believe his luck. Around a minute later, several diesels laboured into life down below. A truck rumbled away along the cobbled street and a chorus of doors slammed shut, some of the men joking and laughing at a job well done.

Well done, but not complete.

Shepherd shook his head and tried to listen through the ringing in his ears from the explosion. Perhaps, if he waited it out, he might be able to leave the ruined building under the cover of darkness. He might freeze or bleed to death before then, but, miraculously, he might just survive the day after all. But then, in the shop downstairs, Shepherd heard someone walking through the smashed debris. The steps were slow and measured and reminded him of the way Sergeant McKenzie had tried to sneak past him that night in Cold Morham. Shepherd spotted the Welrod a few feet away, its black gunmetal covered in fine white dust. He tried to lean forwards to pick it up, but another sensation of snapping came from his wound and he yelped in pain.

The walking stopped.

Shepherd threw himself onto his left side and landed heavily on his shoulder. He was past caring about his leg, the discomfort from which had receded out of sight in relation to his current problems. Pushing away from the wall, he managed to get a few inches closer to the gun, but

he started to retch drily onto the floorboards.

The careful steps started again, quieter in an attempt to dodge the broken pottery covering the shop floor's ornate tiles. It was obvious to both Shepherd and the mystery person it wasn't working, and the pace picked up until his unseen stalker stepped onto the bottom step leading up to the bedroom. Another step, then another - but slow and wary. Whoever it was, they knew how to control their fear.

Shepherd's fingers scabbled over the long pistol's magazine handle and he clawed it closer to his body. Shuffling backwards until his backside touched the bedroom's damp wall, he managed to get the palm of his left hand flat and pushed upwards with the remains of his failing strength. The effort made him shake even more than he was from the biting cold and he strangled a scream of pain in the back of his throat, making it sore.

He was sitting once again, exactly where he had been when Alain had been blown through the doorway by the rocket explosion from outside. It was a good view and his would-be assailant might not think to look down first, particularly with the spectacular hole in the wall and partly demolished ceiling directly above it. This could work to his advantage.

Pulling the Welrod onto his right thigh, Shepherd saw the patch of red had now spread much further. He tried to avoid getting blood on the gun's long muzzle, but it was near-impossible to do so. The weapon wasn't particularly heavy but it didn't have great balance, so he had to grip it close to the front of the exposed trigger in order to pull back on the circular breach handle forming its rear. With a click it slid back, exposing the chamber set into the top. It was an ingenious design, allowing the user to load a single bullet into the top or multiple from below via a spring-loaded magazine.

Shepherd could hear the dragging of material along the stairwell. This suggested the man was flattening himself

against the wall to reduce himself as a potential target lest someone suddenly appeared at the top of the stairs, much like Alain had done to dispatch their original visitor. Shepherd tried to control his ragged breathing. If he kept very quiet, he just might be able to squeeze off a shot as the person looked inside.

Shepherd steeled himself for his last stand. Looking down to his weapon, he expected to see the comforting glint of brass shell casings nestled on top of each other below the breech. Instead of that, he saw an oily black hole.

No ammunition.

If it hadn't been so tragic, it'd almost be funny. Shepherd didn't have the strength to throw the weapon, so he tossed it to his right. The clatter froze the man's approach on the stairs and then, after a few seconds, he continued. Shepherd rested his head back on the heavily cracked wall and let his hands fall to his sides. Hopelessness overwhelmed him. There was no fight left. His gaze fell onto his coat, only a couple of yards away on the floor in the corner.

Oh my God. My letter.

I must read my letter before I die.

Shepherd fell onto his wound but ignored the searing pain. Outside, the steps grew ever-louder as the last few stairs were mounted. He could feel what remained of the stitches tearing in his flesh but it didn't make any difference now. All he wanted was to get to his coat and find that precious piece of paper he'd carried with him since the funeral. He'd been fretting what time would be right to read it, but as he now had precious little left it seemed the perfect opportunity. His fingers traced over the mud-encrusted coat bottom and he pulled it over. Lying on his torn side, he rummaged around in the ruined

lining.

The blunt muzzle of a semi-automatic pistol peeped through the doorway on his left. Outside, the engine noises and shouting had stopped, the only sounds the creaking of the damaged building and his own panting. God, where was that bloody envelope?

A uniformed tunic sleeve appeared showing three broad golden bands and a single star above it. Shepherd's frantic scrabbling was taking up most of his remaining concentration, but something at the very back of his mind thought it odd the gun belonged to a naval officer and quite a high-ranking one at that. Shepherd felt creased and folded paper. Yes. He'd found it.

A boot appeared, a thick layer of pink/white dust underfoot but otherwise highly polished and well looked-after. The man was being very cautious, not rushing into a situation until he could gather as much information from a position of cover and safety as possible.

Good training.

Shepherd pushed the coat into the corner and heaved himself back upright. His flank was bleeding freely now, but it didn't really matter. In fact, the sensation was warm and quite pleasant. Looking down, he unfolded the envelope and began tearing at the top of it. Unfortunately, his fingers suddenly wouldn't do what he wanted them to. They felt cold, and he had the oddest sensation they didn't belong to him.

The peak of a cap bobbed into view then back again. There was a short pause, then the doorframe was suddenly filled with the shape of a man pointing his weapon straight at Shepherd's slumped form.

Their eyes met.

What the HELL?

The world was beginning to drift away and Shepherd couldn't focus properly. Even so, it was eminently clear to

him that he offered no threat whatsoever, dressed as he was in ragged, ill-fitting pyjamas, bleeding heavily and armed with nothing more challenging than an envelope he didn't have the strength to open. The German moved closer, a look of astonishment on his face. Slowly, he lowered his pistol. Shepherd closed his eyes.

When he opened them again a few seconds later, he was engulfed by confusion. He knew he was still propped up against the wall in Albert's bedroom and still bleeding. His left leg and right side continued to burn so that meant he hadn't died. He was still shaking from the cold. All this he fully understood.

What he couldn't work out was why someone was holding a mirror in front of him.

24. Wimereux

Fieseler sat without moving and stared at the heavily bandaged head of the man lying in the hospital bed before him. His mind was an absolute torrent of thought, one smashing into the other to form a third. His heart was thumping in his chest and he felt dizzy. While the business with Gottschalk had left him feeling helpless, the events of the last few days had taken all sense and reason from his life. He felt as if he did not know who he was anymore, or what purpose he served. He had flipped from rage to bewilderment via depression then back again, and all because of this person laid out in front of him.

Good God almighty, Leon. What the hell are you doing?

Much more to the point, what are you going to do?

A sharp knock came at the door and a hospital orderly snapped it open without hesitation, nodding over to Fieseler and marching towards the unconscious patient.

'I need to check his stitches Korvettenkapitän. It would be preferable for you to leave.'

Fieseler blinked a few times then frowned at the white-coated medic.

'You know this man is a prisoner of the Abwehr-M. I am under instruction to interrogate him once he is conscious. Go about your duties and if I order you to leave, leave immediately. Understood?'

The orderly was clearly not used to being addressed in such a manner, but was intelligent enough to bite his lip at mention of the Abwehr. Fieseler had already spoken in no uncertain terms with his Major Oberstabsarzt. He, too, was a highly suspicious man. However, the orderly's superior had dealt with the Abwehr before. It was not the first time he had been commanded to keep a patient in

isolation. That had been three days ago, and as Fieseler had not received a furious message from Kommodore Arnold asking how his signature got on the authorisation, he assumed he had not gone ahead with his threats to complain about Fieseler's belligerent tone.

'Very well, sir. If you will excuse me.'

The orderly nodded towards Shepherd's right side. Fieseler stood up from his seat and moved away, allowing the man to pull away the sheets, peel back the dressing and take a look at the puckered pink flesh. As he delicately pushed and probed the healing skin, the man groaned something in English. Both Fieseler and the orderly looked over to him, then at each other. Fieseler did not have to say a word; the set of his jaw and cold stare did it all. Within two minutes a fresh dressing had been applied and with a curt nod, the orderly left and closed the door behind him with a soft click.

Fieseler followed the man to the door then locked it. Walking over the linoleum of the white-walled hospital room, he took a look out of the large sash window onto the car park down below. Other than a couple of military ambulances and his own staff car, there was little traffic outside. He had chosen this building carefully for its location and the fact it was on the outskirts of Wimereux - that, and it was an exclusively naval facility. What he was doing was treacherous beyond all reason, but the second Fieseler had seen this man slumped against the wall of that shattered room in Desvres, he had known his life was going to change completely.

Another groan, this time more recognisable as words. The Englishman was regaining consciousness, not before time. Fieseler could not afford to keep him here much longer, particularly as he had to balance being visible to Gottschalk over at Wizernes then scurry back here at every opportunity. Luckily, Gottschalk had decided to take a trip to an electronics company in order to oversee the final construction of the network board for his control room.

Other than Gottschalk discovering Fieseler had not been following up on the hunt for the English agents, his biggest fear had been Shepherd making a fuss and noise to anyone but him. Fieseler was no expert, but the stab wound in his side seemed to be healing very nicely considering the absolute mess he had been in.

Fieseler leaned over to Shepherd and talked in a low voice, using his best French. The last thing they needed would to be overheard conversing in English.

'I'd appreciate it if you could be as quiet as possible. We are both in considerable danger.'

Fieseler saw Shepherd's eyes flick open in the rectangle of exposed face from the bridge of his nose to his eyebrows. Reaching up out of the bedclothes, Shepherd traced his fingers around the bandages covering most of his face, then around his lips in the slot left clear for his mouth. His stare of initial alarm gave way to puzzlement when he realised he was not actually wounded underneath.

'Theatrical perhaps, but it was the best I could think of at the time. If anyone sees you and I together, it's going to be very, very difficult to explain.'

Shepherd turned his head to face the immaculately dressed naval officer. God Almighty. He hadn't been seeing things in Desvres. This man looked virtually identical to him.

'Would you mind if I took a look at your leg?'

Shepherd didn't quite know what to say to that. Here he was in another bloody bed with more bloody stitches, but this time it was a German military hospital. As a spy, the routine would be interrogation, torture then execution, but something told him this wasn't going to happen - unless this man was going to start proceedings with his leg. Seeing no reason to object, he looked the man in the eye and replied in as even a tone as he could muster.

'Not at all.'

The German straightened and tugged out the

bedclothes. Lifting them up, he reached under the covers and gently pulled up Shepherd's left trouser leg to the knee, exposing the damaged skin on his calf and ankle. Apparently satisfied, the man carefully replaced the pyjamas and rested the bedding back on top of him.

'Now I have something to show you.'

Shepherd's leg was itching, not from the inspection but from the increasingly bizarre way this man was acting. Unbuttoning his tunic, the man walked over to the other side of the bed, slipped it off and placed it carefully on the chair. He then pulled off his tie, unbuttoned his crisp white shirt and slipped off his vest. Shepherd's eyes raised in astonishment. They had an identical physique, but his eye was particularly drawn to a raised red mole just underneath his left nipple. He also had one, except on the right. Seemingly unphased by his exposure, the man opened out his arms straight then rotated himself until his back was facing Shepherd.

Reaching up from between his shoulder blades in a thick line to the base of his neck was a tract of damaged skin. Shepherd recognised it immediately. He had sustained burns - severe burns - when he was young. It looked exactly the same as the outside of Shepherd's left leg. Lucky for the man, it didn't go any higher up his back or it would be on permanent display above his collar line. Then again, it must have been equally uncomfortable in certain conditions.

Maintaining the pose for a few seconds, the German turned around then reached for his vest from the chair and put it back on. Tucking it into his trousers, he fished out a blood-smearred envelope from inside his tunic pocket and handed it over to Shepherd who recognised it immediately. His eyes widened in fury when he realised it had been opened, but the man shook his head and continued to dress.

'Before you say another word, read it.'

Shepherd's hands were shaking as he extracted the neatly

folded pages while the German continued to dress. Some of Shepherd's blood had soaked through in places, smudging the ink and making it difficult to read, but the letter was nevertheless legible.

My darling Archie,

The first thing you need to know is that I love you. It will be hard for you to think that, once you have read what I have to say, but please believe me, above all else, this is the truth.

I am writing this letter because I am disappearing. I know my mind is going, and every day I feel something more is missing. In the next few months I fear there will not be enough of me left to say what I have to say, so I'm going to do this now and entrust it to Win to give to you when I have gone. However this might happen, you must not blame her. She has sacrificed so, so much for you and I. Please look after her, as I am sure she will look after you.

The second thing you need to know - and the very hardest thing for me to say - is that I am not your mother. Neither myself nor Win have any children of our own. However, our sister - Rosie - did have two children. Twin boys.

One was you, the other was Harry.

Just after you were born, Win and I went over to holiday with our sister and your father, Wolfgang, in Austria, from where he came. Win and I were dazzled by you both. Such gorgeous, perfect babies - full of life and love and wonder. We both fell in love with you instantly and even felt a little jealous of Rosie. That was nothing new - she was always the most adventurous and cleverest of us all, and while it had been a great point of contention in the family when she'd decided to leave England, it was not surprising. She met her handsome prince and left to live happily ever after. It hurt us in one respect, but when we saw how happy she was, the past was forgotten.

We spent four wonderful weeks getting to know you and your father much better. He was a true gentleman and it was hardly surprising Rosie fell for him. Tragically, it was his love of life and sense of adventure that led to the terrible events that would shortly follow. When Wolfgang wasn't out on a lake sailing or skiing in the nearby mountains, he would go walking and climbing. He was such a

strong, handsome man - you look so much like him, Archie. Anyway, he and some friends were caught in a rock-fall and he was crushed to death.

Your mother went crazy with grief and she accidentally started a fire in the summer house at which we were staying. You and Harry were in the same crib and a piece of the ceiling fell between you, burning you along your side and Harry on his neck. We thought Harry was going to die and you might lose your leg. Your mother, meanwhile, went from bad to worse. We tried to calm her but she loved your father so very, very much and felt completely responsible for the fire - she wasn't.

One evening, your mother went missing from the house. We looked all over but she was nowhere to be found. Then we received a call from the hospital - she had taken Harry away, despite his burns, and left you behind. Despite all of our efforts, we could not find either of them. Perhaps I, too, had a breakdown of sorts when I told Win we were taking you home with us, but it seemed the right and only thing to do. We fled back to England - we didn't want you brought up in some Austrian orphanage or given to Wolfgang's family. This caused great problems for us, and meant I could never return with you to Austria again in fear of them taking you away from me.

For three years, Win secretly tried to find your mother and brother. She had to avoid your father's family, which was very well connected and powerful. Despite this, Win discovered they, too, were unable to find Rosie or Harry. Then, the Great War came and everything fell apart. Win and I both tried to pick up the pieces in 1919, to resume the search, but bitterness and loss here in England and in Austria meant it was impossible to go back to where we were. We tried, Archie. We really, really tried.

I often think how wonderful it would have been to see both you and Harry grow up together, and to see how similar and different you might have turned out. Rosie was my twin, you see, and to lose both her and Harry on that terrible night was just too much for me to bear. Perhaps I was selfish, perhaps I was wrong - I hope you don't blame me for anything. Win and I tried our best, as did your dad who took you on without question and loved you as his own.

Win and I have carried this with us for over thirty years. It has

been very difficult and even dangerous for us at times. There is something very special about you Archie. Even though you've been away at sea and fighting in the war, I just know you will come through all of this and on to greater, better things.

My time here is nearly over, I know that, and it makes me sad to think I will not see you again but I have at least watched you grow up and become the wonderful man you are. I just hope the love I gave you was enough, and that Win and I made up for the parts of your life that were taken away.

All my love forever,

Mum x

Shepherd rested the pages onto his lap above the bedclothes. The German, now fully dressed, stood with his arms folded and looked down at him.

'My father died in June 1931 and my mother in August 1932. I never really got on with him. He always seemed distant for some reason. Mamma was English.'

Shepherd saw the German reach behind his neck and scratch at the skin. He could not describe the sensation that created within him. The man continued, struggling to find the words.

'In her last few days before she died, she said many strange things. She died of a brain tumour, and I was told not to take any notice. Most of it was nonsense, but she kept on repeating two things – that even though I did not know it, I had been looked after very well by my real father's family, and that one day I would meet my brother.'

Shepherd's mouth was open.

'This was incomprehensible.

'Brother.'

The German nodded. Shepherd could see he was shaking as he pulled up the chair and sat down beside him. Shepherd shook his head. He felt angry, astonished, stupid. No. This was completely unbelievable. Sitting up, he felt a dull ache in his side. He ignored it.

'This is preposterous. I mean... what are the odds? It's ridiculous. It can't happen.'

The German looked down to his hands. They were clasped tight, knuckles white. He nodded then looked back at Shepherd. It was a reflection of his own emotion.

'I know. The odds are enormous. But look at the situation. We both do similar things - I work for Abwehr-M and you, I'd assume, are either SIS or SOE. Taking that into consideration, I'd hazard a guess we have similar skill sets. We both speak English and French, have above-average intelligence and have been recruited into specialist fields accordingly. Because of the nature of our language proficiency, we'd be of most use in North Africa or this country, and as much of the action here is along the coast, it narrows the odds a little.'

Shepherd took in a deep breath. He chose to ignore the tingling from his leg. He was way past needing any kind of warning that strange or dangerous things were on their way. A flicker of a smile danced over the German's lips.

'There's a mythological creature in German folk lore. The ghostly double - the *Doppelgänger*. Perhaps they exist after all.'

The German stared around the room, not wanting to confront the absurdity of the suggestion. Shepherd grunted.

'Perhaps.'

The German scratched his lower lip and sighed. Straightening in his chair, his brows knitted, as if he was trying to work out a problem. Indeed, that is exactly what they were both trying to do.

'Regardless of the chances, the fact of the matter is we are both here and know our real identities. What we have to do now is decide what on Earth we do next.'

Shepherd scratched at his bandages. They were rubbing against the nap of his rapidly growing facial hair. He couldn't remember the last time he had shaved, but

was relieved someone had taken the trouble to bathe him thoroughly since the carnage in Desvres. His face itched and the cotton bands weren't helping matters one bit.

'If you're in the Abwehr and you've apprehended a spy, I'd say there's very little choice as far as you're concerned.'

The German – God no, his *brother*, looked down at his hands.

'What you need to understand is that my actions of the last few days have put me in as much danger as you. I find myself... conflicted.'

Shepherd laughed despite himself at the colossal understatement. The German looked up and smiled again. Shepherd frowned beneath his bandages. Other than the sound of a trolley being wheeled noisily down the corridor outside, nothing else could be heard. Shepherd needed to say something to break the silence.

'I have absolutely no idea what your name is.'

Fieseler offered out his right hand. Shepherd took it.

'Leon Fieseler. At least, that was what I was led to believe.'

The two held the handshake for many seconds. Neither wanted to let go, but both knew they should. Fieseler sat back and folded his arms.

'So Archie, what exactly are you doing here? And before you answer, bear in mind if we are discovered, I will share exactly the same fate as you. In fact, even worse.'

Shepherd lay back on his comfortable, crisp pillow and stared at the man. This situation was so impossible, he couldn't pile on another absurdity of his question being some elaborate ruse to get the truth from him. He could have been shot or left to die in Desvres, or taken to a Gestapo or SS stronghold to be immediately questioned. They wouldn't have taken quite as much care of him, that's for sure. But more than that, there was something he could not identify, a feeling he had only ever felt with his mother and his aunt. He inherently trusted this man.

'I am here to find a way to destroy the missile base at Wizernes-Helfaut, preferably through aerial bombardment. I studied engineering at University, and for the last couple of years I have specialised in large concrete structures - sonderbauten.'

If Fieseler was surprised at his words, he did not show it. Sitting back in his chair, he rubbed his chin with one hand, weighing up Shepherd's words.

'Ah. Yes, we have been expecting you.'

There was more than a hint of Germanic pride in Fieseler's words. Shepherd did not find it in the least bit surprising his mission might be known to the enemy. He had been in intelligence long enough to know that secrets rarely stayed that way for long. Fieseler stood from his chair and walked around the room, hands in pockets.

'Aerial attacks have been tried several times. All they make are a mess of the surrounding area. You will not be able to disable the base like that.'

Shepherd was confused at Fieseler's reply.

'Don't take this the wrong way Leon, but how would an Abwehr-M man know so much about a missile site?'

Fieseler stopped pacing and turned. His face was grim.

'I am currently working under the Oberführer in charge of its construction.'

'So it's not a Todt project then?'

Fieseler's face darkened.

'Yes, but Gottschalk's got his own little development running as a side-line. He's put all of these trains together, his own private collection, but I do not know what the connection is with the rocket base.'

Shepherd itched at his face again through the bandages. It was a shame he'd not be able to carry out his mission. Despite its danger, he would have loved to get inside that site and take a snoop around. Fieseler's brows were knitted as he looked out of the window to the outside world.

'I'm assuming you were to report back via the

Resistance network and then disappear once your mission was complete?’

Shepherd nodded. The Resistance network. Alain.

‘What happened to the man I was with?’

Fieseler turned and gave Shepherd a long, hard stare. Christ, he thought. Is that what I look like when I’m annoyed?’

‘He was taken away by the Milice. I have no idea what they’ve done with him, but it won’t be very pretty. There have been several arrests in Saint-Omer and things have gone very quiet. Hardly surprising, given the slaughter at the engine sheds.’

Shepherd’s heart thumped in his chest. Oh my God. *He* was the officer he’d seen just before the attack.

‘You should have been in those trees when your train opened fire. It wasn’t very quiet then, let me tell you.’

Fieseler raised an eyebrow. He went to say something, but held it back and simply nodded.

‘I had nothing to do with that. It was a little surprise from the SS.’

Shepherd stared up to the ceiling. Another question occurred to him.

‘Just how did you get drafted by the SS? We’d not be having this conversation if you were a...’

Fieseler waited for him to say the word. After a pause, he completed Shepherd’s sentence for him.

‘Nazi? Let me tell you something. If you’d seen what I’d seen at the base, you’d understand why I hate them just as much as you do. Some of the – ’

Fieseler stopped mid-sentence. Shepherd suddenly became alarmed. Had he seen something outside? An approach by unfriendly forces perhaps?

‘What? What were you going to say?’

Fieseler stepped back from the window. He looked quite pale. Turning, he walked a few steps towards the door then back again. Shepherd’s itch swept over him like a wave, and he reached down to rub it. At exactly the same time,

Fieseler went for the back of his neck. Their eyes met, and he stopped pacing.

'What if I helped you fulfil your mission?'

Shepherd cocked his head to one side.

'What... did you just say?'

Fieseler took a couple of steps towards the bed and looked down at his brother.

'What if I got you into the structure long enough for you to get the information you need to destroy the site? Just the site though. Not anything else. That would be my condition. Once you have what you need, I will get the information to wherever it needs to go.'

Shepherd couldn't quite believe his ears. Then again, it was a day for the incredible.

'Why the hell would you want to do that? You're an officer of the German navy for God's sake. You're no traitor.'

Fieseler looked ashen. His eyes were glittering with anger, his reply almost hissed.

'I am an officer of the German navy, yes. I love my country, as you do yours. But what I have seen at La Coupole, the things that are likely yet to happen... they have to stop. They are not the actions of the German people I am fighting to defend. They are the actions of the very worst kind of creature, regardless of race or nationality.'

Shepherd could sense Fieseler was getting very close to losing his temper. Here before him was a man who had been pushed past what he believed to be reasonable. He could see it because he could see himself.

'If... when we lose this war, we will be judged by such actions, and rightly so. There will be no distinction made between 'good German' or 'bad German' - everyone will see us as the same. We will *all* be found guilty, and the world will never, ever forgive us.'

There was a brutal logic to Fieseler's words. Shepherd didn't know the specifics of what he was referring to at the

construction site or who this Gottschalk might be, but in his time at the Admiralty he'd been privy to some deeply disturbing rumours with regards to civilian death camps deep in the heart of Germany and Poland. There were hushed discussions of killings on an industrial scale of those deemed 'un-German' or not fitting with Hitler's Teutonic ideal.

One of the explanations Shepherd had provided to explain the extraordinary speed with which some of the Todt's structures had been constructed was due to almost unlimited unskilled manual labour. It was very likely the V-2 base was employing similar draconian techniques, and that thought filled him with dread. He had come here to do a job, and up until now had encountered nothing but frustration and disaster. Here was an opportunity to carry out his mission; it didn't matter a jot how at this point. Other than get to know his brother, it was the only thing he wanted to do.

'If you can get me on that site, then it shouldn't take me more than a day to see what I have to see - with as much access as is practicably possible.'

Fieseler nodded gravely. There was a pause, then Shepherd continued.

'I'm assuming the chances of us getting out of this alive are fairly poor?'

Fieseler dug his hands into his pockets.

'I'll try my best to get us out, but that's about as much as I can promise. For now, we need to get you out of here as soon as you're fit to move. There are a couple of places I can hide you in Wimereux until that beard beneath your bandages grows thick enough for you to look less like me. We might have to dye your hair, cut it, do something to differentiate us. Looks to me you've lost quite a bit of weight so we just might get away with it. How's your German?'

Shepherd smiled. It'd not occurred to him as a question up until that point either. He answered, in

German.

'Not too bad.'

Fieseler frowned.

'Your accent isn't up to your French, that's for sure. I guess I'll have to do all the talking then.'

It was Shepherd's turn to look confused.

'What do you mean? I'll go in as a French engineer. That was the plan.'

Fieseler walked back over to the window. He saw a flash of light from a car, a reflection from a mirror as the door slammed shut.

'That's not going to work. I destroyed everything in Desvres that was potentially incriminating, and I had to work very hard to stop the F.Fu searching the rest of the house for other radios. Sometimes, being connected with the SS can be very useful.'

Shepherd saw the regretful frown on Fieseler's face.

'We are, however, still in very serious danger.'

Fieseler cleared his throat and flexed his shoulders.

'The surviving Resistance operative – the man who sacrificed himself on the stairs for you - has just been transferred to SS custody at motte castrale. Up to now he has not talked. Eventually, he will – or die in the process. If your existence is discovered, it will not take Gottschalk long to realise I have been sheltering you and then things will get out of hand very quickly.'

Fieseler took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

'The best I have to look forward to, if I do not help you, is possible discovery of the protection I have given you and a firing squad. If I spirit you away before you complete your mission, I then have the potential pleasure of being transferred into the SS as part of Gottschalk's permanent staff. One way or the other, I will die in his company. That is something I do not wish to happen.'

Fieseler's mouth was twisted in anger. Closing his eyes, he looked down to the floor, concentrating on his words.

'If you can find a way to destroy the place, things can happen during such attacks. In confused situations, people can get killed – if you take my meaning.'

Shepherd saw Fieseler's mouth set hard. He took his meaning perfectly.

'I cannot get you French work passes, French travel documents, French identity papers or French permits. I can get you German travel documents, German identity papers and German permits.'

He turned to his brother lying on the bed and looked him up and down.

'I can also get you a naval uniform that will definitely fit.'

25. Tunnels Gretchen and Gustav

Gottschalk stood before the large black panel in his control room and smiled. He had not liked leaving his beautiful trains, but the craftsmanship and detail before him had been worth the effort. The oval of his track, now only metres from completion in reality, was represented by a silver metallic line into which a series of four-abreast light bulbs had been set. Once the board was activated, it would show the progress of his trains as they moved around the circuit - including a code number for the particular locomotive, something he had designed himself and was particularly proud of.

Looking behind, he could see the newly-installed levers set into the long workbench, his remote switch gear that would allow him to divert the trains out into the open space of the quarry. From there he could either direct them onto the main network or use his private arrangement of sidings and junctions to re-arrange their order back into his tunnel.

The control room had been finished exactly according to his specification, and he felt magnanimous enough to congratulate Walter when he next saw him. The electronics had taken a little longer but, given the subterranean conditions, this was to be expected. It was all the design problems of a closed-circuit line combined with tunnelling issues. Even Gottschalk found it astonishing it was so near to completion. All those hours spent poring over photographs and schematics of railway junction boxes, major control rooms and tunnel complexes had paid off. He had known precisely how this haven, this oasis of his should look. And now it was finished, all polished mahogany and chrome-on-black levers and handles.

Wunderbar.

In the connecting room, he could hear Bauer moving office furniture around and sorting out papers. Both had travelled here before dawn, unannounced to the adjutant until last night. Since rousing Gottschalk at five this morning, Bauer had been a bundle of nerves, his previous efficiency and precision now gone. Gottschalk could only guess the mess he was causing in the adjoining room. Bauer did not realise it, but Gottschalk had started arrangements for him to be transferred to active service. He would not last a day of course, but that was of no consequence. Once Gottschalk moved in to this suite of rooms, he could reduce his current staff and get someone new drafted in. Even Walter had a few promising-looking candidates; he would sure as hell not be going back to Kommodore Arnold.

The tunnel outside reverberated with a rumbling sound, the ceiling lights dimming for a few seconds until it died down. Bauer let out a nervous cry then, after a few seconds, resumed his shuffling of papers. Yes. Bauer really was becoming something of an embarrassment. They were blasting a series of ante-chambers off the launch preparation area, creating a number of parallel assembly tunnels for the missiles – the *real* ones. Gottschalk may have presented himself as a single-minded obsessive to the Todt, but he had read every detail of the base's proposed design and operation.

Once complete, the twin missile launchers would rain down death and destruction on London or wherever they chose to aim. No-one could weather such an attack for long, and the RAF's feeble attempts to smash the enormous concrete cap protecting the base had failed. The allies would capitulate and they would triumph. Gottschalk smiled to himself as he ran his fingers over a series of toggle switches set into a panel beneath the control board. England had some beautiful trains; he rather fancied

adding the LNER Class A4 to his collection, particularly as The Mallard had set the world speed record for steam locomotives in 1938. He even liked the colour.

Gottschalk caught his own reflection in the highly polished gloss panel and admired himself. He really should be completely happy at his genius. There was, alas, a single cloud on the horizon - Fieseler. Gottschalk was not one to admit mistakes because, frankly, he did not make them, but this had been the closest he had come to an error of judgement for several years. Despite fulfilling every command given to him, Gottschalk found Fieseler a disappointment. It was not so much his occasional belligerence or the supercilious looks he sometimes gave, but far more to do with his total lack of faith in their victory.

He had over-estimated the man's character, and found it incredible Fieseler had not immediately jumped at the suggestion he transfer his commission to the SS. Why the man would not want to be a part of Germany's elite, the Führer's very own chosen, was utterly beyond him. Once this base was up and running, nothing on Earth would be able to stop the tide turning back in their favour and the Fatherland would triumph. The SS would, ultimately, absorb all the military, from the Luftwaffe to the Abwehr, and Fieseler should take the opportunity while it is being handed to him. Some people are ungrateful. Perhaps he should not have read so much into his fight with the train saboteurs after all.

Gottschalk turned and took a couple of steps over to the newly glazed observation window overlooking the Schienenzeppelin. God, it was beautiful - so worth all the trouble it had taken to get here. The extra lights had been installed as commanded, and it positively shone as a team of overall-clad men worked on the exposed nose of the train, the detached cone resting to one side. One of the engineers looked over and caught Gottschalk's eye; he waved cheerily and gave a thumbs-up sign followed by two

open hands.

Ten minutes. In ten minutes it would be ready to run, with him at the controls. Only for a few metres, but enough for him to feel the thrill of it. Oh the joy.

Gottschalk felt dizzy at the thought. My God, if those French bastards had caused so much as a scratch on his treasure, he would have rooted out every single Resistance fighter, sympathiser, their families, whoever - and had them all shot. The old man at motte castrale had given some information before he had died, but nothing of any great value. Gottschalk detested the Resistance - a people should know when they are beaten - and it was surprising the man had lasted a week. With him gone, that should have been every attacker accounted for - even if the man strenuously denied any involvement. It had become too tedious for Gottschalk, who had finally lost his temper and shot him through the head. After a few hours though, a suspicion had grown in Gottschalk that Fieseler had not done quite as good a job at rounding up the survivors of the attack on the sheds as he had claimed.

That was why he had sent Dietrich to spy on him.

Glancing up at the white-faced Junghans SS edition clock above the control panel, Gottschalk saw it was a few minutes to mid-day. He looked back out at the train, to its open door and men stepping into and out of the streamlined silver carriage with tools and equipment. He so wanted to get in and take the controls, but after all these years, it *had* to be perfect. Nothing should spoil this, and nothing would.

Gottschalk would deal with Fieseler first. Despite Dietrich's skills at reconnaissance, he had been unable to discover the identity of the badly injured person Fieseler had been visiting at the naval hospital on the coast. On a couple of occasions Dietrich had managed to see into the private room through his field glasses, and while he had recently feared being spotted, this had turned out to be a false alarm. What had angered Dietrich - and, in turn,

Gottschalk - was the complete disappearance of the mysterious patient, seemingly under Dietrich's nose.

It might have been something as innocent as a wounded comrade, but the orderly in the hospital had been adamant he did not know the identity of the man and had been effectively told to keep out of the way during his stay. Dietrich had learned the patient spoke French, German and, most tellingly, English and had been admitted with a poorly stitched puncture wound to his right flank. In addition, the timing of the man's appearance so quickly after Fieseler's ambush on the Resistance fighters bothered Gottschalk. It bothered him deeply.

Realising his good humour was rapidly disappearing, Gottschalk turned his attention to the three-strong crew carefully replacing the aluminium nose cone back into place beneath the driver's cabin windows.

'Bauer! Come here.'

Shepherd tried his best not to be impressed by the view before him. From an engineering perspective, it was staggering. He'd never seen so much scaffolding erected in a single place; it ran around the outer ledge of the enormous concrete cap dozens of metres above him out of sight on both sides, men swarming over it like insects. They were busying themselves with finishing a line of massive angled buttresses that stabbed out into the crisp blue sky at precise intervals around its perimeter.

He surmised their thickness and shape were not only designed to support the dome, but deflect blasts outwards or downwards into the wide expanse of the quarry floor across which he was now walking. He closed his eyes and visualised it from above. That would explain the pattern of craters around and below. Even the curve of the dome had been calculated to deflect bombs and dissipate explosions. Very, very clever design.

Apart from the squat rectangular blockhouse being

assembled near the mouth of the quarry, much of what spread before him seemed to be finished - a long straight rail ran past him on his left, one section heading into a partially exposed reinforced tunnel and another angling away to a much bigger hole in the hill wall to his far left. To the right, another rail track curved off into the middle of three smaller tunnels and he could see large carts being pushed out, laden with rocks. That meant they were still excavating which, as far as he was concerned, meant it was that bit further away from completion than he'd feared.

As a ragged Todt work crew approached under the watchful eye of a brutal looking guard, a hand rested on Shepherd's arm and he stopped. Fieseler pointed over to the twin vertical slits cut into the angled face of exposed rock beneath the dome and talked in an over-loud voice.

'You see Herr Kapitän, that is where the rockets will emerge, one at a time, to their launch platforms. It is quite a remarkable system, and I am sure it could be adapted for use on a ship.'

Shepherd put his hands behind the back of his long great coat, nodded a couple of times and did his best to look like the Fregattenkapitän he was dressed to be. It'd taken a few days longer for him to grow a convincing - and concealing - beard, but with his hair dyed jet black, crew-cut in the fashion of a serving seaman and loss of a few pounds, the two men looked about as different as they ever would. The extra time had also given his wound time to knit and while it still ached, he'd healed well during his secret convalescence out of the hospital.

Shepherd adjusted his pristine cap on his head. It was slightly too large, meaning they weren't quite as identical as they may look but he still cut a commanding figure, all shiny brass buttons and well-polished boots. Leon had suggested he pose as a visiting higher-ranked naval officer curious about the potential use of missiles at sea; he'd been deeply concerned about appearing so obvious, but when Fieseler had presented him with his new identity card and

papers, he finally abandoned his arguments about going in as a French engineer. Even though what they were doing was lunacy, it stood a far better chance of success than anything else. Besides, they both agreed the sheer balls of walking through the front door had a certain terrifying charm all its own.

The work party passed by and Fieseler held out a gloved hand for his brother to continue his tour. They had been there since just after dawn, and having taken a good long look up top at the damage caused by the RAF so far, Shepherd had concluded he needed a couple of hours inside the complex to work out if this place could be damaged enough from the air to prevent it coming into service. Fieseler had nodded in resignation. His nerves were clearly on a knife-edge lest Gottschalk appeared on-site. This was despite the information Fieseler had received from someone called Bauer that the SS man had business at Saint-Omer station and would be tied up there well into the afternoon. Both men were too tense to be tired, despite having worked through the night to get the newly-acquired rank badges sewn onto Fieseler's spare uniform and discussed the security they would encounter dozens of times.

So far, Fieseler's connection with the despised Gottschalk had smoothed the way, but both men knew they were riding their luck. There were parts of the complex even Fieseler hadn't visited before. Shepherd's ears had pricked up when his brother had mentioned the newly-finished drawing office in the administration building towards the entrance of the base's approach, but getting him in to scrutinise blueprints under the nose of Walter was a risk too far. Fieseler had, however, presented Shepherd with a fairly accurate set of drawings from his own observations, for which his brother had been hugely grateful. He was particularly impressed with the maths.

"That's the administration section over there, where the carts are coming out?"

Shepherd's voice was low, but sound carried extremely well in the cold air. Fieseler looked over to where the steel wagons were coming in and out to their right and nodded.

'And you're sure it's just a series of interconnecting tunnels? No munitions storage, or fuel tanks?'

Fieseler nodded his head.

'It's a hospital as well - the least developed part, thanks to Gottschalk's insistence on his railway being built first.'

Shepherd glanced over to the gaping hole with its shiny tracks connecting with the main railway behind them. He, too, was at a loss to suggest what it might be for, particularly with it effectively attaching to nothing within the base. Perhaps other structures might connect to the loop later. One thing did bother him though - just how quickly it had been constructed. His knowledge of tunnelling was limited, but the speed with which the circuit had been excavated and reinforced seemed impossibly fast. Still, Gottschalk's train tunnel didn't seem to have any bearing on the rocket base per se, which was one less thing for Shepherd to investigate in such an impossibly short amount of time.

'I don't see any point in visiting it then. Where do the other two entrances lead?'

Fieseler looked up to them, one partially exposed like the rocket assembly entrance on their left and the other tucked in the corner very close to the twin launch tracks - labelled on the plans as Gretchen and Gustav.

'They are entrances to the same interconnecting complex. I think they are planning eleven tunnels in total, all running off Hugo boulevard.'

Shepherd stopped and peered at the holes in the bare rock face. Crews scurried in and out, some pushing carts, others walking in with tools or carrying equipment between them. The sun had hardly been up a couple of hours, but there were Todt guards everywhere. The

organisational skill was extraordinary.

'They pick some pretty names for such a dreadful place, don't they?'

Fieseler looked down and ground some lumps of chalk into the quarry floor with his boot.

'Oh it gets better. The entrance tunnel closest to you is Sophie. The furthest one is Katharina. There's a few others but I think you get the point. Good, solid German names.'

Shepherd tilted his head back to the cloudless blue sky and sighed. Even from here, he could see the complex both tunnels served would be bloody awkward to damage from the air. That, of course, was the entire point of their design. Those tunnels would be deep and, from Fieseler's drawing, set into the rock too far to make much of an impact – literally and figuratively. Sure, they might be able to block the entrances with a rock fall but they'd be cleared in a day or so. He had to find a weaker spot than that.

'Let's go to the rocket preparation area.'

The two picked up the pace and headed towards the sloping rectangles built into the dead-end wall of the quarry. As they walked, Fieseler relaxed a little because it put them out of sight of Gottschalk's tunnel some way behind and to their left. Within a minute they were closing in on the gaping slots cut into the rock, and a couple of Todt guards eyed them from the Gretchen tunnel entrance on the left. One made a half-hearted gesture for papers so Fieseler pulled his out from inside his thick coat, as did Shepherd, and handed them over. Within half a minute, they were inside the enormous hall and looking up at the reinforced concrete ceiling twenty metres above their heads, condensation dripping down in heavy drops onto their caps.

The place was seething with activity. Scaffolding covered the massive wall on the left all the way up to the ceiling, with work crews balancing precariously to route long silver pipes into holes cut above their heads.

Shepherd spotted a couple of workers in one corner being watched by a grey-coated guard from below. His shouted threats only made their struggles more pathetic and the length of impossibly slippery cable even worse to work with. Workers in various states of ragged dress hammered and banged and drilled at stations all around the cavernous room. Fieseler had warned Shepherd time and again about what he would see, but even so he had to clamp his mouth shut to hide his revulsion. It looked like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*.

It was obvious to Shepherd the two men with the cable would never get it inside the hole intended. From what Fieseler had told him about the treatment these pathetic creatures were receiving, they'd better find a way to do it before they ended up on the frozen pile of bodies around the back. Shepherd caught Fieseler's eye. It was a clear warning to get on with it. Nodding, Shepherd took a step back and tried to ignore the slaves before him. He scrutinised the structure from corner to corner, ceiling to wall to floor. The build was astonishing, but he felt no shame in trying to formulate the best way it could be ruined.

'This isn't final assembly, is it?'

Shepherd reduced his voice to a near-whisper. The acoustics of the rock amplified and bounced sound all over. The last thing he wanted was the imperfections in his German accent having attention drawn to them.

'No, this is where the missiles are stored in readiness for launch. Assembly takes place in the tunnels through that corridor. The unloading station is currently being finished deep in the rock.'

Fieseler nodded to a huge, roughly-cut hole to their left.

'The sections are brought in on that straight track you saw outside then put together on an assembly line. Once complete, they are transferred through there then pulled upright by an overhead gantry crane.'

Shepherd looked up to the ceiling. Sure enough, the support pins for a gantry shined dully in a perfect line. Fieseler shuffled over to the right and looked up at the lines of pipes being screwed together on the scaffolding and pushed upwards into the flat roof.

'The gallery they're building will be the fuelling station. Once they're ready, they go through either Gustav or Gretchen to the launch pads outside in the quarry.'

There was an angry exchange somewhere towards the back of the hall, and several men appeared carrying picks, hammers and chisels. Some of them could barely walk as they scraped across to the assembly exit and disappeared into shadow. The place was freezing cold, miserable and unforgiving. Shepherd saw Fieseler's jaw muscles bulge. Before he was told off again, he quickly got back to his analysis. One area caught his eye; where the cast concrete ceiling joined the cliff above the rectangular exits.

'Interesting how they've pinned it against the cliff wall. You say the dome is directly above?'

Fieseler looked straight up and nodded. There were several thousand tonnes of reinforced concrete above their heads, all designed to protect the missiles as they awaited transfer out into the quarry. Once outside, launching was controlled by the soon-to-be completed blockhouse. There was no wonder the allies hadn't even put a dent in the place.

Shepherd looked back through the passageway through which they'd walked, the two guards little more than lazy shapes against the bright morning daylight.

'How thick would you say the cliff is here? Thirty metres?'

Fieseler stared through one of the tunnels. That was just about right.

'But the wall outside angles backwards as it goes up... which means it'll be narrower towards the top.'

For the first time since stepping foot onto this enormous site, Shepherd felt the risk had actually been

worthwhile. Fieseler looked over to him, reading his mind. Excitement mounted in Shepherd as he continued.

'I think I might have found -'

'Walk out through Gustav. Right now.'

Shepherd saw the change in Fieseler's eyes. Marching towards them was a man making his way through some workers from the assembly area exit, his machine-pistol slung casually over one shoulder. He couldn't quite see his face as he stepped in and out of the brilliant pools of white cast down from the floodlights high above, but even at this distance he was sure he recognised him from somewhere.

The urgency in his brother's voice allowed no time for questions. Shepherd turned on his heel and strode into the brief darkness of the missile transfer tunnel. Emerging into daylight, he kept on walking until shouts began echoing out behind him. Looking around, he saw the two Todt guards he had just passed conversing with the man, who pointed directly at Shepherd.

As they readied their weapons, Shepherd realised he had two choices - either to make a run for it out through the quarry back towards the station, which would likely result in him being gunned down within seconds, or take his chances in Katharina tunnel coming up on his left. The single bullet spanging off the rock close to his foot made the decision for him. While the workers around the excavation reacted to the shot's echo, Shepherd threw himself behind a line of rock-filled carts and dashed inside Katharina, past a number of too-tired-to-care workers and into the damp gloom.

'I would very much appreciate it if the Oberscharführer would not point his machine-pistol at me.'

Gottschalk was not listening. He was too busy discussing the levers, buttons and switches arranged in front of the cockpit's skeletal-framed aluminium seats with

the engineer-driver brought out of retirement from the Hannover-Leinhausen works where the Schienenzeppelin had been originally built. Fieseler knew he had promised the man his son would be taken from active service in return for a few days of his time, and while Gottschalk had lied to, swindled and cheated the good majority of people he had wanted something from, Fieseler also knew that, curiously, Gottschalk had every intention of honouring his deal with the old man. Keeping him happy meant Gottschalk could get to know how to drive the extraordinary machine, and get some bright young apprentices from the Hitler Youth to learn first-hand how to maintain the beautiful creation once the old man had been dispensed with. Yes, he had even thought of that.

'I'd keep your mouth shut if I were you Fieseler. You're in enough trouble as it is.'

Dietrich had not moved a millimetre from his position in the aisle since he had shoved Fieseler up the low step into the long, narrow body of the train's silver body. Despite his situation, Fieseler had been rather disappointed with the less-than-luxurious interior. Sure there were seats, but it was mostly bare metal inside. You could even see the drivers in their raised position at the nose of the train, through an elaborate metal framework that revealed the controls to the sleek machine. Even the feature windows running the length of the passenger area had angled buttresses restricting the view, revealing the skeletal structure of the Schienenzeppelin's revolutionary construction. This allowed the harsh tunnel lights to throw triangular shadows over the dimly lit cabin, somehow making it look even more unfinished.

Fieseler sat back in his seat and rested his hands on the small table separating him from the lightly-upholstered chair opposite. Across the narrow aisle facing the bulkhead set below the raised cockpit, Bauer sat in the first row of seats adjacent to the forward entrance. As he had entered, Fieseler thought Bauer was watching the movements of

Gottschalk and the old engineer through the metalwork separating the cockpit from the passenger area. But now, even with Bauer's back to him, it had become obvious to Fieseler that Bauer was staring vacantly into space, his slender fingers drumming absently on the top of Gottschalk's briefcase.

Christ, he was still chained to it.

Well, better him than me.

Laughter erupted from the cockpit. Bauer jumped in his seat. Dietrich did not turn around. Even though he could only see their seated figures from behind, Fieseler watched the movements of Gottschalk and the engineer. Three clicks, a lever being pulled, tap-tapping on a dial... then a countdown. Drie. Zwie. Eins. An electrical contact closed, a low buzz and then, somewhere behind Fieseler at the back of the train, the laboured chugging of a diesel engine began. Within seconds it had engaged, and the unmistakable sound of an idling aircraft propeller buzzed into life at the rear of the Schienenzeppelin.

The whole train jolted, rocking Dietrich forwards and making Bauer gasp in surprise. Dietrich quickly recovered his footing and gave Fieseler a 'don't even think about it' look, to which Fieseler shook his head and closed his eyes. Gottschalk's reedy voice could barely be heard over the drone. As the engine pitch increased, the train began to vibrate. Fieseler looked forwards to Bauer. Despite the angle, Fieseler saw Bauer's hands clasped together on top of the case. From the movement of his jaw, Fieseler assumed he was muttering to himself.

My God. That man is falling apart.

The whine of the engine decreased back to an idle, and the shaking reduced along with it. Fieseler heard an exterior door open from the cockpit. First the engineer

and then Gottschalk left the driver's cabin, stepped across the narrow walkway to the platform along the side of the train then into Gottschalk's brightly-lit control room. A few seconds later, Gottschalk re-appeared, his face flushed with exertion and excitement. Fieseler stared at him through the windows opposite. As soon as their eyes met, Gottschalk's face changed. Straightening his tie in, to Fieseler at least, a comic fashion, Gottschalk descended the control room steps and disappeared for a few seconds until he entered the carriage through the passenger door. He did not even acknowledge Bauer, instead squeezing past Dietrich who stepped between a couple of seats to let him past.

Fieseler's neck was burning with indignation at the way he was being treated, his heart racing with terror for his brother who, at this very moment, was likely being hunted down like a rat in a sewer. They would find him and, knowing Shepherd as he felt he now did, they would have to kill him. If only Dietrich had not walked in on them at that point, if only they had gone to another part of the complex, if only he had not come up with this ridiculous idea in the first place. If, if, if.

'Before I have Dietrich shoot you, I would very much like to know if the gentleman we're now looking for is the same person you were visiting in the naval hospital - and who he actually is.'

Gottschalk stood in the aisle a metre or so in front of Dietrich, but was not stupid enough to get in his line of fire. Gottschalk probably assumed Dietrich would not dare think of firing in his precious treasure, but Fieseler knew otherwise. Dietrich would pull the trigger first and answer questions later, of that he was certain. Fieseler looked up at Gottschalk. It was the first time he could think of where he had to do this, and the situation clearly was not lost on the man who puffed his weedy chest out with his own self-importance. There it was again. That look of superiority. Gottschalk's voice was its normal reedy self, its high pitch

curiously making it easier to hear above the drone of the massive BMW 12 Cylinder engine metres behind in the drive compartment at the rear. Fieseler turned to Dietrich and regarded him coolly.

'So that flash I saw from the window was you spying on me from the hospital's car park, I take it? You need to take a little more care with regards to the position of the sun when using field glasses, Dietrich.'

The SS man shrugged his shoulders, making the muzzle of his machine pistol bob up and down. His finger was still resting lightly on the trigger, and Fieseler smiled. Yes. He clearly did not care if he smashed the place up in a volley of fire or not. Well, there would be no great Wild West shoot-out here - the first thing the bastard had done when he had jumped him in the missile preparation area was take Fieseler's pistol.

Ah, to hell with it, thought Fieseler. I am clearly done here, one way or the other. Christ, we *both* are.

Sorry, Archie.

'Before I answer that question, may I ask one of my own?'

Dietrich rolled his eyes. Good, thought Fieseler. If I get him impatient, he might make mistakes. The reaction from Bauer, meanwhile, was very odd. He had lifted his hand up and seemed to be examining the chain around his left wrist as if he had never noticed it before. At the sound of movement, Gottschalk glanced behind towards the cockpit for a couple of seconds then back again. Folding his arms with a frown, Gottschalk sighed his reply.

'I really don't think you're in any position to question me, do you?'

Fieseler looked down at his hands then past Gottschalk through the windows to the control room. The old engineer was doing something with the control panel, flicking switches and looking up at the board. Fieseler's

neck burned. He had an itch he simply could not satisfy, and now seemed as good a time as any - in fact, possibly the last opportunity he would ever have - to scratch it. Clearing his throat, Fieseler slid out from behind the small polished wooden table and stood to face Gottschalk, his head only inches from the low ceiling. Dietrich immediately took a step forward, changing his angle to maintain his aim on Fieseler. From his standing position, Fieseler saw that Bauer's shoulders were going up and down as he chuckled at something no-one else could see.

Safe in the security offered by his SS brother behind him, Gottschalk took a step closer and looked up into Fieseler's face. His worn-down yellow teeth ground together obscenely as he attempted to stare the taller man out. Fieseler raged inside, but managed to keep it all in as he pressed on regardless.

'Just tell me what you are planning to do with this train set of yours. That is all I ask.'

Gottschalk's face froze. Then, gradually, it turned to one of astonishment, something Fieseler had never witnessed in the brief and dreadful time he had spent with the vile man. From amazement came a smile, and then a laugh. Not just a laugh, but the hysterical giggling of a girl. His shoulders shook and he lowered his head, pinching the bridge of his nose underneath his glasses and wiping away a tear. Behind him, Dietrich looked bemused; Bauer was cringing.

'Planning? *Planning?*'

Fieseler shook his head in total bewilderment. What had he said that was so funny? Gottschalk started to cough violently and reached for a handkerchief from his long-coat, wiped his mouth of spittle then pulled himself together.

'It's funny what you say about train sets, Fieseler. If you meant it as an insult, you might be surprised to learn you've actually answered your own question.'

Fieseler felt a pang of disappointment. He *had* used

the description to piss him off.

'So you thought I had spent all these years getting my collection together and bringing them here for some tactically vital reason did you? To use them in the war effort, to further our cause?'

Gottschalk's face was getting redder by the second. Out the corner of his eye, Fieseler saw that Bauer had rejoined the world and had leaned out and turned to watch what was going on behind Dietrich. Outside, the engineer climbed down from the control room then hauled himself up into the cockpit through its separate hatch, busying himself between the twin drivers' seats.

'These trains are *mine*. I *own them*. Don't you see?'

Fieseler frowned. Where the hell was this going? Gottschalk's eyes were wide with fury behind his round-rimmed spectacles. He was like a child whose birthday party had been spoiled.

'Everything I have done, everything I have put you through, the scum that have died scraping away the ground for the last few months - it has all been so I can play with my toys.'

Fieseler's mouth fell open. The fury inside him disappeared, replaced by an emptiness that made his stomach drop. Not only did this creature understand the scale of misery and suffering it had inflicted on the world, it had been for little more than to fulfil some children's fantasy. What was more, he revelled in the pain he had caused. Gottschalk glowed with puce triumph, the undisguised look of horror on Fieseler's face only adding to Gottschalk's pleasure.

'Do you not see, Fieseler? NO. Of course you don't, because you are petty and narrow-minded and stupid. This is my proof to the world I am the master of my own destiny. Just like the Führer, I have willed this all into existence.'

Fieseler had no words. He just stood and stared, watching the amusement on Dietrich's face and the wide-

eyed astonishment on Bauer's. Gottschalk had not finished.

'Everything before and around you is here by my design. The trains, the tunnel, the track, the people. And very soon, those that have not served me well –'

Gottschalk looked Fieseler up and down with a sneer.

'– and those that have become useless to me –'

Gottschalk turned to look directly at Bauer, who stared for a few seconds then returned to gazing straight ahead in his seat.

'– will be eliminated. And finally, *everything* will be perfection.'

Gottschalk had his hands on his hips, a perfect copy of Hitler's triumphant stance. Behind Fieseler, the engine became louder then dropped. Gottschalk turned to wave at the engineer, who crouched down between the seats and returned the signal through the framework.

'So, now you know the answer to your question, would you care to tell me about the other man?'

Fieseler took a step back and straightened himself up. *Fuck you, Gottschalk.*

'I have absolutely no intention of telling you anything Gottschalk. I am going to leave this place, find the nearest telephone and tell anyone who will listen you are a lunatic and should be put down like the mad dog you are.'

Dietrich barked a laugh. Gottschalk went pale, adjusted his too-large collar then cleared his throat. Fieseler could see that Bauer was shaking in his seat.

'I don't think so. Dietrich, take him down the tunnel and shoot him.'

Gottschalk backed away, slid past Dietrich and towards Bauer and the open doorway. Dietrich sighed wearily and took a step forward. Still watching Fieseler, Gottschalk put his hand on Bauer's head rest. Fieseler cursed to himself; he should have grabbed Gottschalk around the throat and used him as a shield, even if he was not certain Dietrich would just shoot him anyway.

The 'clickclick' was barely audible over the hum of the engine but everyone heard it. Gottschalk looked down at his wrist to see Bauer had fastened on the handcuff to his case around his wrist. Dietrich turned and looked at Bauer without removing his aim from Fieseler with a question on his lips. Gottschalk beat him to it.

'Bauer... What the hell are you doing?'

Bauer threw himself upwards and forwards with a squeal. Hitting Gottschalk squarely in the chest, the two crashed onto the table and seats opposite the doorway, Bauer's stocky frame giving him the weight advantage. Gottschalk screamed for Bauer to get off him. Fieseler made a move forwards but Dietrich turned back, unsure whether to fire or not. An object flew past Dietrich and skidded down the aisle past Fieseler; it sounded like a set of keys. Gottschalk was yelling at Dietrich not to fire in the train.

With a great shove, Gottschalk threw Bauer back. Grabbing a hold of the seat he had just occupied to stop him from falling out of the doorway, Bauer heaved himself upright with a snarl and undid the flap of his holster. Drawing his Luger, the once well-groomed, elegant man crouched like an animal, his eyes bugging with madness and deadly intent. The muzzle came up straight between the Oberführer's eyes.

Time stopped for Fieseler. It was a perfect tableau from where he stood - the look of utter horror on Gottschalk's face, the change from confusion to realisation on Dietrich's and the complete lack of reality from Bauer, his mind finally gone.

Dietrich emptied an entire clip into Bauer, tearing great lumps from him and sending his body spinning into the polished metal bulkhead below the exposed lower section of the cockpit. Bullets tore into the foreword section of the train and ricocheted off the metal framework, several flying over Fieseler's head and down towards the end of the carriage. There was a scream of

surprise and a crashing sound, followed by an immediate and urgent rise in the engine's pitch. The train lurched forwards violently, throwing Dietrich off-balance and out into the aisle.

Gottschalk fell to the ground and cried for help. He tried to clamber to his feet, but was stuck in place by the case and chain which had hooked itself around the frame of the chair. Fieseler saw his opportunity and threw himself onto Dietrich who was reaching for a fresh magazine from his bandolier. The impact knocked the air from both of them and they crunched onto the bare metal floor, rolling and sliding towards the carriage's forward entrance.

Fieseler's movements were restricted by his coat, but he managed to grab a hold of the machine pistol. Dietrich thrashed and kicked, but the strap was still around his body and he could not move freely. By now the engine was screaming at the top of its rev band, making the whole carriage shake violently with the strain. Dietrich grunted in fury and Fieseler felt a sharp pain in his stomach. With a heave, Dietrich rolled away and scrambled to his feet, but tripped over the thrashing form of Gottschalk and landed on top of Bauer's body.

Fieseler grabbed a hold of the nearest chair arm and dragged himself upright. Before him, Dietrich had turned and was scrabbling for Fieseler's pistol which he had tucked into his thick leather belt over the base of his spine. Fieseler threw himself onto Dietrich, crushing the air out of him but the SS man had managed to free the weapon. Fieseler grabbed at Dietrich's wrist and smashed it against the bulkhead. He heard Gottschalk shout again in frustration and felt his boots kicking at his legs. Fieseler rammed Dietrich's hand again and again into the metal and was finally rewarded with a loud snapping sound.

Dietrich yelled in pain and the pistol clattered to the floor. Fieseler tried to make it for the open doorway, but the SS man saw his chance and grabbed at Fieseler's leg. At

exactly the same time, the train lurched forwards, making Fieseler spin into the seat Bauer had occupied. Outside, he saw the tunnel lights begin to move. They were under power.

Dietrich smashed into Fieseler with a guttural roar, pinning him down on the chair. Blows rained down on Fieseler's head, but Dietrich's right wrist had been broken and he could not hit Fieseler fast and powerfully enough with one good hand. Fieseler kicked outwards with his leg, sending Dietrich back onto Bauer's body, then lashed out at Dietrich's head. He managed to get on all fours, but dazed from the attack, was too slow – Fieseler threw himself behind Dietrich, avoiding Gottschalk's furious kicks and curses, and booted Dietrich as hard as he could from behind.

Dietrich disappeared out of the open doorway head-first. Fieseler stared at the regularly spaced floodlights flashing by; the frequency was increasing, indicating the train was gaining speed very, very quickly. One of Dietrich's shots must have hit the engineer or short-circuited something. If Fieseler did not get out of this impossibly fast train now, it would be far too dangerous to jump into such a narrow space with any hope of survival.

Red and black filled Fieseler's vision and he fell to the carriage floor in front of the first row of seats. Lights flashed as he blinked, and through the swimming colours he looked up to see Gottschalk standing over him, panting heavily with the black briefcase tucked under his left arm and pistol shaking violently in his right. His face contorted with hatred and rage, his words shrieked with frustration and fury as he tried his best to keep his footing on the accelerating Schienenzeppelin.

'I am going to *kill you*.'

26. Tunnels Katharina and Hugo

Katharina tunnel's entrance might have looked small in relation to the hillside into which it had been dug, but once inside Shepherd was relieved to see it stretched off into the far distance, thus giving him more potential room for manoeuvre. It was, of course, ridiculous to run into a confined space, but he would have been dead within seconds had he stayed outside and at least this offered some potential for escape. Leon had mentioned the secondary tunnel leading out to the rear of the complex which hid its dreadful secret, and there was no reason to assume similar passageways would not be used to remove the spoil from the underground excavations in this area. All logic aside, he'd had no choice.

Shepherd could hear the confusion breaking out in the quarry and the low wail of a warning siren echoed down the tunnel behind him. From the cast concrete floor with its inevitable train track running dead centre down its length to the apex of its partially completed curved roof, it had to be at least six yards high and about four yards across. Thick cables dangled from steel pins set into both sides, with some of them feeding power to oval bulkhead work lights set every ten yards or so.

He'd expected it to be full of people, but it appeared a work crew had only just left the tunnel with their V-shaped rusting carts filled to the brim with white and brown rocks. The only people to greet him as he ran as fast as his aching side would allow were a handful of pathetic looking workers pulling a thick black power line along the floor from a drum of cable around twenty yards away.

They barely looked up from their work, likely deafened by the continual hammering and banging that rang out from deeper in the tunnel. Everywhere was wet and cold; it was no way to live, and Shepherd could see

why his brother had been so intent on bringing it all down.

His brother.

Jesus Christ.

What had happened to him?

The Todt guard had three things going against him as he appeared from the left exit to Hugo tunnel. First, he'd not been given enough time to connect the barely-audible alarms from outside with the officer running towards him. Second, he was grossly overweight and struggled to untangle himself from his own rifle strap running across his distended stomach and chest in time to aim and fire. Third, Shepherd was so full of fury, he didn't really stand a chance as he grabbed a shovel propped against the rough chalk wall and swung it at his wobbling throat. Its surprisingly keen edge not only sliced through his carotid artery, but continued on through his larynx. As the guard fell to the soaking wet floor in astonishment, he scabbled at his opened neck with pudgy fingers. The very last sound Shepherd heard from him wasn't the scream he'd intended, but a deeply satisfying bloody gurgle.

Shepherd couldn't afford to stay still. Ignoring the amazed stares of the workers behind him, he ran down the bisecting Hugo avenue, equal in width and height to Katharina but with narrower tunnels disappearing to his right. From what he could remember of Leon's drawings, this would eventually curve left and connect with the unloading station behind the fuelling area he'd recently run from. He just hoped the guards following him didn't think he'd be stupid enough to head back in the direction from which he'd come – which he was fully intending to do.

As he ran, the lights reduced in number, throwing a green-yellow caste over the roughly hewn walls. The first side-tunnel he came to had barely been started, a group of

men hammering and chiselling - oh God, *by hand* - into the soft rock, their own noise masking his passing. The next tunnel was partially built but in complete darkness. He considered trying to hide in its gloom, but if it was a dead end it'd only take one man with a torch and a gun and it'd be his final resting place. Instead, he discarded his naval cap, the white material swallowed up in inky shadow. At least in the dim light he might pass for an ordinary Wehrmacht or Todt soldier - until they got close enough to realise he didn't belong there.

Shepherd arrived at the entrance to a tunnel that seemed to be complete, just as a group of men appeared from around the corner in the far distance. Ducking out of their view, he frantically tried to get his bearings. This one had a lower flat ceiling of thick wooden beams, above which half a dozen broad cables ran in a row. Three diverted to the left and three to the right, disappearing somewhere down Hugo in opposite directions. Shouted orders came from behind, barely audible over the machine noise from around thirty yards away. Hoping he hadn't been seen by the approaching men, Shepherd ran towards a brilliantly lit entrance, rhythmic thumping ringing out into the freezing damp air.

Shepherd had to shield his eyes from the bright white lights set into the walls of the generator room. Situated dead centre was a huge diesel engine, similar to ones he had seen on schematics of U-Boats but with a large semi-circular generator housing connected to the front. Shepherd had been given the impression by Leon the whole place was powered by connection to the external grid, but he guessed with all the air raids and constant disruption there had to be some form of back-up to keep the site going.

Despite having a number of large tubes running from the towering cast iron engine block disappearing into a conduit hanging from the ceiling, fumes filled the high-arched room to such an extent he began retching with the

stink. He'd not stopped running for some minutes and had gulped in air when he'd come to a stop. He fought the instinct to throw up, but failed.

The noise from the machine was deafening, so it was of little surprise the overall-clad engineer who casually strolled from behind the rows of diesel drums at the rear of the chamber was wearing heavily padded ear defenders. Had he not been staring at a clip-board and writing something on it, he would have seen Shepherd throwing up on the wet stone ground immediately. Under these harsh lights, Shepherd realised there would be no hiding the fact he was an intruder.

Quickly wiping his mouth, Shepherd walked smartly towards the man with his hand held out in greeting. The engineer, grimy and black from tending the machine in such an enclosed space, looked up in confusion. He was half-way through demanding to know who Shepherd was when Shepherd hit him as hard as he could on the side of his head.

The man collapsed to the floor unconscious, and Shepherd heaved the body behind rows of oil drums stacked three-high. He prayed they hid the exit to an access passage or potential hiding place, but was utterly dismayed to find nothing but wall, a couple of steel lockers and a workstation with various charts and papers strewn over it. Christ. It was a dead end after all. What the hell was he going to do now?

One of the locker doors swung open, exposing a set of overalls and work boots hanging the full-length of the cabinet. Within seconds, Shepherd was down to his underwear. He ran a hand over his wound; the stitches were still in, and the last time he'd inspected it he'd been pleased to see the skin was knitting nicely. As he could see no blood despite all the running and throwing himself around, he figured it wasn't going to get in the way of whatever came next.

Despite the noise and the stench and the danger, a

memory of Fieseler flashed before him. Leon had remarked he, too, recovered well from illness and injury - and then it hit him. He'd just seen the last of his brother, and he'd sure as hell not be sending any information over to England. Ridiculous and unlikely as it appeared, the success of this mission, which had and continued to be an unmitigated disaster, was down entirely to him.

Shepherd stood over the unconscious engineer. For a couple of seconds he eyed a long wrench and toyed with the idea of stoving his head in, but somehow it didn't seem right. His work clothes didn't include any Todt insignia, and it was likely he was a French or Polish engineer brought in by the organisation. He also thought about dressing the man in his now-discarded uniform, but that would take time he didn't have.

No, there was a better use for that big piece of metal. Getting him into the empty locker wasn't pretty or easy, but as he pinned shut the door with the wrench wedged against the heavy barrel of diesel oil a couple of feet in front of it, Shepherd satisfied himself the man, regardless of nationality or allegiance, wouldn't be raising the alarm any time soon. His navy uniform went into an opened barrel, quickly disappearing beneath its brown-black contents.

Shepherd ducked his head around the small gap between the stack of drums and the rear of the generator. Miraculously there didn't seem to be anyone around, so he hurried over to the row of flat inspection panels built into the far side of the diesel engine, wiped his hands over the furiously vibrating housing and rubbed filth and oil into his beard and around his face. One thing that might work in his favour was the hopeful fact no-one had managed to get a good look at him, and as they were hunting for someone dressed in a naval uniform his newly-acquired overalls should give him enough cover to get out alive.

Walking back out onto the brilliantly lit access floor, two armed guards appeared almost on cue and began

shouting questions. Shepherd pointed to his ears and shrugged; after a brief exchange between them and a couple of insults, the men turned on their heels and headed back the way they came.

Shepherd sighed in relief. This may just work.

The twenty seconds he gave himself for the coast to be clear were agonising, but he couldn't hang around for another engineer or colleague of the man he'd attacked to appear. Strolling as casually as he could past the whining generator room, he retraced his steps back up towards Hugo and then turned in the direction of Sophie instead of deeper into the complex past Katharina. Sophie was the final exit into the quarry other than the one being carved out for the administration block and hospital. If he kept his head down and made his way out towards the railway line, he'd only have the main guard tower to get past and...

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

I don't have any papers.

Regardless of how authentic he looked, of how good his French was, he'd never be able to get past the checkpoint. Leon had joked it'd be all plain sailing for them on the way in if they got past the heavily guarded entrance. It was, of course, nonsense but other than some raised eyebrows and an abortive discussion whether to ring through to Saint-Omer and check it was alright ('do *you* want to bother Gottschalk with this? Fieseler is one of his staff after all...') they had passed with relative ease. However, every worker who'd been in front of them had been scrutinised and grilled in a far less friendly manner – whether they were entering or leaving the site.

At best, Shepherd would be detained for further questioning, at worst, shot. What made it really infuriating

was Shepherd had seen what he'd needed to see - a potential weakness in the building of the base that, exploited correctly, could send this place back to the stone-age. His leg burned like crazy, not that he needed any further reminder of how crucial it was.

He *had* to get out of there.

A guard came running towards him, and it wasn't until he was a few feet away he recognised him as SS. Shepherd didn't alter his pace, but angled his face down to put it into as much shadow from the wall lights as possible without making it look as if he was avoiding the man. He needn't have bothered; the guard kept on running, disappearing around a corner and shouting to some unseen comrade confused reports about a major security breach and that reinforcements were heading in from Saint-Omer and Wizernes Station.

It wasn't the news Shepherd had been hoping to hear. With extra men, they would stop all of this disorganised dashing about then systematically and methodically work through every inch of tunnel, finished or unfinished, until he was found.

Nearing the end of the Hugo passageway, Shepherd looked to his right down tunnel Sophie. He could see daylight past the carts being pushed in and out. Figures ran to and fro, then a couple stopped dead centre of his partial view and stopped the cart nearing them. The net, it appeared, was closing. Directly in front was the final right hand turn, and Shepherd took it to get out of the way of a wagon being heaved by three panting workers. Walking past a row of rusting steel drums, he found himself in a short corridor crowded with carts and sheets of metal. Water dripped onto his head from above, and he hoped it did not wash away his grimy disguise.

'Hey!'

The heavy welding goggles nearly bounced out of Shepherd's hands as they hit him in the chest. A huge man, at least six foot six and well over 200 pounds, turned back

to the big sheet of iron propped against the tunnel wall. Flipping down the black glass circles of his own goggles, the man ignited his oxyacetylene cutting torch and began slicing into the metal. Shepherd was a little too slow closing his eyes and the after-image blinded him for some seconds. Putting on the goggles, he squeezed past the man-mountain and his two gas cylinders, balancing himself on a damaged cart as he did so.

Looking down over its lowest lip, he could see half of its base was missing. Three more carts sat in a row towards the end of the passageway, all showing signs of recent, hasty repair. As he watched, two workers appeared from around the corner and shouted over to the welder who was busy fixing the cart behind him.

'Stop what you're doing. We've got to get all of these trucks out into the quarry, repaired or not. All the tunnels are being evacuated.'

The man angrily snapped off the valve on the cumbersome torch and tossed it onto the wet ground with a clatter. Steam hissed up where the nozzle connected with water.

'What the hell? I've only got one more to do. I'm not leaving it for the next shift or they'll give me shit for the rest of the week. It'll be done in five minutes. Tell them they'll have to wait.'

Both of the men shuffled their feet and looked nervously at each other. It was clear from the huge German welder's demeanour and stature he was used to getting his own way. Grabbing hold of the nearest repaired cart, they gave it a couple of hard tugs but hardly got it to move.

'It'd be a lot quicker if you helped us. These are really heavy.'

The man rose to his feet, throwing down his heavy gauntlets and yanking off his goggles as he did so. Both men suddenly pulled a lot harder and slowly wheeled the cart out of sight, along the curved track into the gloomy

distance. Looking to the two repaired and single damaged cart, the welder turned and stared at Shepherd. He kept his goggles on, thinking it best not to show too much of himself even though the welder likely didn't have a clue what was going on this far into the tunnel complex.

'What the fuck do you want?'

Shepherd decided it was time to push the remaining pitiful fragments of his luck.

'I... have been sent to give you a hand.'

The man looked Shepherd up and down then wiped his hands on his heavy leather apron.

'Are you a welder? I haven't seen you before.'

Shepherd looked at the half-separated sheet of metal the hulking man had been working on then to the much larger sheet at its side. Whether it was down to all the time he'd spent poring over photographs and working out dimensions from angles and shadows, or the years he'd spent at University in countless machine-shops and materials labs, something formed at the back of his mind. An idea came together so outrageous, it had to work.

'I've been sent over from the unloading station on the main railway tunnel. I have done some welding before, and they told me to help you finish off so the tunnels can be cleared. There is a dangerous assassin on the loose.'

The man ran a calloused hand over his thick jaw, all the hairs blackened above the wrists where sparks had singed the skin. Looking over to two remaining carts, he frowned and glared back at the damaged one against the far wall. He seemed reluctant to make any kind of decision.

'If you want to help those two get these carts cleared out, I can finish cutting this piece and drop it in with the block and tackle. It'll just have to wait to be welded into place.'

The welder pushed past Shepherd to where the short tunnel curved to the right. Looking down, he dropped his head and shook it pitifully at what he saw.

'Look at those two clowns. Jesus Christ. We'll be here

all day.'

Shepherd stood his ground. Come on big man. Come on.

'You said you can weld?'

Shepherd nodded. The German growled something under his breath.

'Can I leave you to get that last cart sorted out? I'll get these two moved on my own.'

Shepherd bent down to retrieve the welding lance. God, it was heavy. Giving the gas supply a couple of turns, he spotted the igniter on the floor, clicked it a couple of times and lit the pilot light to the torch. The German nodded, unbuckled his apron and threw it over to Shepherd. Pushing his sleeves up even further, the welder yanked the furthest carriage away from its neighbour, making enough space for him to squeeze his barrel chest between them. With a roar he heaved, and within twenty seconds he'd disappeared around the corner, yelling for the other two to get the fuck out of the way.

Shepherd pushed back his goggles, grabbed the hook suspended above the damaged cart and threw two sets of chains over it. He did not bother with the apron, but instead pulled the block and tackle over towards the big, uncut sheet of metal next to the one the welder had been cutting through.

He'd have to work very, very fast.

27. Tunnel Gottschalk

Gottschalk squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He pulled at it again.

Still nothing.

Looking down at the weapon, he stared at it in fury and realised the safety was still on only a fraction of a second after Fieseler, still prone on his back in front of the first row of seats, came to the same conclusion.

It was all Fieseler needed.

Gottschalk's thumb moved to flick the lever up on the rear of his P38, but his left hand still had the case attached to it. Fieseler realised he would not have the time to get up before Gottschalk managed to pull back the slider and cock his weapon, so he pushed himself forwards on his back towards Gottschalk across the smooth metal floor and kicked as hard as he could just below Gottschalk's left knee joint. Gottschalk's mouth gaped as he buckled downwards into the aisle, firing upwards repeatedly into the polished metal ceiling as he collapsed, his yelps hidden by the shrieking of the engine at the rear of the Schienenzeppelin.

Fieseler grabbed a hold of the seat to his left and pulled himself upright, but a bullet sent a plume of material from the upholstery into his face from Gottschalk's shot.

Was that four or five?

The train began to tilt to one side as it hit the first tight bend on Gottschalk's track, sending Fieseler sprawling out into the aisle and directly into Gottschalk's aim. Luckily for Fieseler, he was desperately trying to pull

himself upright despite his ruined knee and fired over Fieseler's head. Fieseler ducked, but Gottschalk tracked down to follow his movements, his face a mask of hatred and outrage in the flashing tunnel lights. Again the train tilted, the twin bogeys beneath lifting due to the dangerous speed and forcing the heavy single door to the carriage shut. Gottschalk lost his balance completely and fell on his back, firing back into the engine compartment.

Six or seven? He *had* to be sure.

Fieseler looked to the doorway. If he moved to open it, even obscured by the last couple of seats Gottschalk could fire at his legs and feet. If he managed to get the door open, the centripetal force of the turn would likely smash him into its side. It was a chance he would have to take. Rising, he began to move towards the door. The bullet hit Fieseler just below his collar bone and passed out the back of his left shoulder, spinning him around with the force. It was an odd sensation, more like being punched very hard than stabbed, but within a couple of seconds the burning from his wound very quickly matched that from the back of his neck.

The bastard has shot me.

Was that seven or eight?

Gottschalk aimed his pistol and despite the extreme pain he was in, nevertheless managed to smirk. Fieseler grabbed a hold of the nearest chair and roared at Gottschalk.

Nothing happened.

Gottschalk pulled the trigger again, willing the gun to shoot.

Eight. It had been eight. He was out of ammunition.

The train straightened out, rocking violently to the left as the twin bogies supporting the carriage fell back onto the outer rail from the too-fast turn. Fieseler used the movement to launch himself forwards down the aisle and onto Gottschalk. His clawed hands grasped for the squealing pig's throat. The blow from the heavy chain hit

him in the face, and Fieseler fell backwards. Behind them, the engine started to rattle, not the normal sound of a diesel engine but something else.

Directly below, Fieseler felt the front bogie buckle, pitching him and Gottschalk forwards up the aisle towards the cockpit bulkhead. The sound of wrenching metal stabbed through the air and the train shuddered violently as the underside of the fuselage dropped onto the rails. Without guidance from the wheels, the Schienenzeppelin slewed over to the left, ploughing into the tunnel wall. Gottschalk was catapulted into Fieseler, who was in turn squashed up against Bauer's corpse but with such little space in which to move, Fieseler was spared any serious impact damage. Even so, one of the front chairs detached and slammed into his right arm, making him shout in pain.

To Fieseler's right, the skin of the Schienenzeppelin peeled away, shattering the glass along its flank and briefly exposing the geodesic criss-cross of interior framework before that also gave way to the enormous force of the carriage's momentum against the wall. Pieces snapped off and flew through the air in a lethal shower, rattling and clanging against the still-intact right-hand side. Some of the tubes thudded into Gottschalk, who was covering his head with his arms.

The back of the train snaked outwards, hitting the far side of the tunnel and grinding away the rear of the compartment behind them. More glass exploded and metal tore, but with the train now effectively angled across the tunnel and completely off the rails, the drag caused by the walls quickly brought the carriage to a juddering halt.

With the momentum of the train gone, Fieseler felt the pain from the seat pillars subside - which was more than could be said about his shoulder. Pushing up and away from the unmoving body of Gottschalk, he pulled himself upright and staggered towards the floor-to-ceiling gash where the doorway and left side had once been. The gap between the wall and carriage was just enough for him

to step into, but he had to drag his injured shoulder along the deeply gouged tunnel wall. It burned like hell. The air was filling up with diesel fumes from the battered engine compartment to his left, the engine still running at full pitch and propeller buzzing like a furious insect. The train suddenly lurched forwards again, shunting itself another yard or so down the track and dropping slightly. The bloody thing was still likely to grind its way down the tunnel with all that massive power still pushing behind it, but this was not the biggest worry he faced.

Lumps of rock were detaching from the arched ceiling all the way down to the bend they had just come off some forty or fifty metres behind. Some of the chunks were small, little more than pebbles caught in the surviving lights the train had not torn off the walls. Many were much larger, crashing onto the ruptured rails and shattering on impact. Fieseler did not have to be a tunnel expert to know the roof should not be doing that.

With the train effectively blocking any route forward, the only escape would be straight down the way they had travelled. He had only taken two steps when he was pulled back violently.

Gottschalk was not a powerful man, but given his height advantage inside the train and fuelled by rage, he had somehow managed to swing the briefcase around Fieseler's neck and grab a hold of the handle with his free hand. Ideally he would have stuck his knee into Fieseler's back and pulled with all his might, levering him backwards and choking the air from him with the handcuff chain, but he could hardly stand as it was. Instead he dropped to his knees, bringing Fieseler crashing down onto the bottom ledge of the torn-out carriage's side, his legs folded beneath him.

Gottschalk screamed from the burst of pain his wrenched out knee caused him, but it did not matter. He had this bastard now. All he had to do was keep on pulling and Fieseler would be unconscious within the minute.

Then he would be able to get out of the wreckage of his smashed toy and to safety.

Fieseler tried to move his legs but could not. They were bent underneath him, and he did not have the room this close to the tunnel wall to push back and ease the pressure from the chain. No matter how much he tried to grab backwards, Gottschalk remained out of reach. Flailing now, Fieseler got both of his hands onto the sides of the chain. Gottschalk kept pulling, making the muscles in his neck pop under the strain, ensuring Fieseler could not get his fingers between the chain and his neck.

The rock hit the top of the carriage with a bang so loud, it could still be heard over the whining engine and propeller noise. Another smashed into the wreckage where the cockpit had been, and then another, unbalancing the train and making it shunt forwards. Behind Fieseler, Gottschalk lost his balance, his ruined knee not up to the task of keeping him upright. Fieseler felt the chain go slack.

The relief was immediate, and as he dropped forwards Fieseler bounced off the tunnel wall and fell onto his side, gasping for air. To his left, the undercarriage of the train shifted towards him, narrowing the gap with the wall. With a wrenching squeal the Schienenzeppelin shunted itself forwards again, the enormous torque from the rear propeller attempting to straighten the train out despite a lack of wheels to guide it. Fieseler scrambled forwards from the hole in the train's side towards the rear, but a huge piece of the roof directly above the engine housing fell away, raining down boulders onto the once-elegant aluminium panels. Just forward of the engine cowling, vital supports were smashed away as lumps of stone hammered down onto what remained of the aluminium panels.

The entire housing tore away under the massive power of the propeller, turning them towards the tunnel wall closest to Fieseler. At the same time, it angled

downwards, reducing the gap beneath it.

Fieseler realised he had to move while he still had the chance of escape. He was within two metres of the furiously spinning blades when he felt a burning sensation in his calf. The shock sent him dropping to the cold floor, and he turned to see Gottschalk limping towards him, briefcase hanging on its chain from one hand and what appeared to be Bauer's pistol in the other. Fieseler looked down to his leg; even in the dim light between the tunnel lamps, he saw blood spreading over his trousers. Gottschalk staggered closer, shouting and screaming every insult he had ever heard, but his voice was drowned out by the furious insect-like whine of the Schienenzeppelin's propeller.

Gottschalk kept on coming, but this time held his fire. Fieseler knew he was going to shoot him point-blank to ensure he did not miss his chance again, and shuffled into the wall of the tunnel. More rocks fell, one of them smashing to the side of Gottschalk, but he took no notice. The rat was insane with anger. Behind him, Fieseler felt the train's engine block shift again. A furious rush of air blasted across the back of his head. Finally, Gottschalk arrived at Fieseler's feet.

Looking down at his leg, he put his boot onto the wound and pressed down. Pain seared through Fieseler, and he leaned forwards to grab at Gottschalk's leg. Gottschalk straddled Fieseler's body and levelled the pistol millimetres from Fieseler's head. Just as he did so, Fieseler heard a wrenching sound from above and behind as the propeller finally hit the tunnel wall.

Fieseler grabbed a hold of the case and threw it behind him with as much strength as he could muster. Unbalanced by the move, Gottschalk fell forwards, firing the pistol but missing Fieseler by a fraction. Lying on his back, Fieseler was covered in a shower of papers and leather as the case hit the spinning blades. Gottschalk followed a fraction of a second later as the chain wrapped

around the propeller's spindle. Chunks of wood splintered in all directions, but the spindle kept on rotating at full speed.

As Gottschalk was fed into the whirring, broken blades, the first part of him to be sliced away was his arm just above the shoulder, which splattered wetly onto the far wall. His other arm and left leg followed, thrown out of sight onto the other side of the train. The broken propellers did their work in the blink of an eye, tearing into him and throwing most of his entrails outwards in a glistening spiral. What was left of his torso was ejected upwards into the broken tunnel roof, smashing his skull into a red smudge before the mess slapped down onto the track.

The case's chain eventually jammed into the propeller shaft, creating a grinding sound that soon had the diesel engine clattering to a halt. Fieseler lay on his back, not quite sure whether he was alive or dead. The ominous sound of cracking from the tunnel roof directly above him told him very clearly that he had survived. Despite his shoulder and calf burning, Fieseler dragged himself to his feet. Using the side of the tunnel as a prop, the walk back to the control room was agony. Figures appeared in the distance, frantic shouting from guards and work crews who had realised something catastrophic had happened.

Fieseler's calf and thigh were bleeding heavily but he kept on going, hoping to reach the safety of the control room or, even better, outside, and get some medical attention before he went looking for Archie. Behind him, past the train wreck, he could hear frantic shouting, and realised a work crew would be trapped behind the twisted metal where they were trying to finish Gottschalk's tunnel. From ahead, unseen due to the curvature of the track, he heard the sound of footsteps approaching, likely a Todt guard coming to see what the hell was going on. Fieseler

tried to smarten himself up and brushed his hands down his coat, peeling off bits of gore. He could pass the wounds off in his legs and shoulder as being due to the crash, and might yet be able to blame the whole sorry mess on Gottschalk. Fieseler was, after all, the only remaining witness to this catastrophe.

Except he wasn't.

The left side of Dietrich's face was a bloody mess from where he had hit the tunnel wall. Three of the remaining fingers on his broken right hand were sticking out at an unnatural angle, but his left hand, the one holding his pistol and shaking from the cold and shock, was perfectly functional. Dietrich was breathing heavily, and bubbles of blood were running from his nostrils. It was amazing the man had survived at all, and it was quite clear he'd willed himself down the tunnel to exact his revenge on the man who had nearly killed him.

Fieseler stood between the tracks in the dead centre of the tunnel, all the fight gone from him. He couldn't go backwards because of the wreckage, and he couldn't go forwards. His shoulder was burning. His boot was filling with blood from his leaking leg. He was unarmed and incapable of defending himself. All he could think to do was open his arms wide, put his head back and hope Dietrich gave him the mercy of a clean head shot.

Dietrich stopped five metres away from Fieseler, angled himself sideways in a classic target shooting pose and levelled his pistol. He hated the elaborate performance some of his old SS colleagues used to enjoy when Jew-shooting or some other pastime. Get the job done then move on to the next one. Right now, all he wanted to do was kill this fucker, get his hand and face sorted out then crawl into a bottle. He'd deal with any and all questions with regards to Gottschalk, who he assumed to be dead if Fieseler was alive, later. Fieseler was ready and he was

ready. Despite the inadequate lighting, he took a deep breath to bring his shaking under control a little more, lined up Fieseler's head with the stubby foresight and put his finger on the trigger.

Dietrich didn't hear the enormous rock that killed him. A section at least two metres square simply fell away from the unstable ceiling, raining heavy blocks and much larger pieces of detached chalk directly onto his head, snapping his neck and partially burying him where he fell. Fieseler opened his eyes just in time to see the last piece drop on top of the stony tomb and roll to one side, finally coming to rest on the tunnel floor.

The cracking noise from the roof got louder, and more sections began to detach themselves behind and in front of him. Fieseler began to run as fast as his damaged leg would allow, trying to dodge the chunks of rock and showers of brick raining down around him. Dust filled the air and his eyes stung. A boulder hit him on his wounded shoulder and he staggered into the rough tunnel wall. Still he lurched forwards as the world collapsed around him, hoping he had not been spared all of this pain and horror only to be buried alongside his enemies under a hill in France.

28. Baker Street

Major General Colin McVean Gubbins placed the report carefully back onto the polished table surface, leaned back in his chair and stroked his moustache. Colonel Redmayne stared unblinking at the enormous map on the wall behind Gubbins, not quite knowing what to say, having read exactly the same set of papers. Shepherd sat quite still, fingers criss-crossed together in front of him and examined the scabs along the sides of his hands. Considering how much skin he'd scraped away, they were healing quite nicely. Outside, the sound of traffic driving slowly past through the early February snow could be heard, punctuated by an occasional creaking floorboard and banging of a cupboard door from the connecting room to his left.

Gubbins picked up the manilla folder marked 'Classified S.O.E.', pulled out a sheet of typed paper, looked at it then stared directly at Shepherd, his thick eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

'So let me get this straight. You are recommending an aerial attack, not a Commando raid or resistance-led sortie against the facility at Wizernes-Helfaut?'

Shepherd looked up from inspecting his hands and met Gubbins' steely gaze.

'Yes sir. I believe an aerial attack concentrating on the chalk wall directly underneath the dome on Gustav and Gretchen tunnels will do the job. However, the RAF will have to use a new weapon to succeed. Present ordinance simply won't get the job done.'

Redmayne shuffled uncomfortably in his chair. It was clear this wasn't what he or Gubbins had wanted to hear, particularly after all the trouble this mission had caused. Still, the fact Shepherd had actually made it out of the place and back here was truly astounding, and he very much hoped they were doubting his conclusions. He had

been given the mission because of his expertise after all.

'And what new weapon might this be, lieutenant?'

Shepherd took a breath and sat back in his chair. The minute he'd worked out the weak spot in the roof of the fuelling chamber, he'd known it would need a large bomb - in fact, a *very* large bomb, to penetrate the still yards-thick outer chalk wall and bring the roof down on the enormous preparation chamber. Luckily, his previous life in naval intelligence and desire to keep up on latest engineering concepts had provided the answer.

'I believe the RAF are currently developing the Tallboy bomb proposed by Barnes Wallis in 1941. I don't think it's the ten tons he suggested, but I'm sure if he's involved it'll smash up hardened structures exactly as we want it to.'

Gubbins raised his eyebrows then reached over to another folder, blue this time, and fished out a piece of paper.

'Twelve thousand pounds total weight, filled with just over five thousand pounds of Torpex D1 explosive. It has the option of multiply redundant impact or time-delay fuses. They're referring to it as an earthquake bomb, which is typically over the top of them if you ask me.'

Shepherd nodded and smiled. Yes, it was a bit of a grand claim, but he knew it would work in the case of La Coupole. If even a single bomb managed to drop at the foot of the twin passages, it'd create an artificial cavern under the quarry's surface, a camouflet, so big the rock above it would drop down and take the roof of the fuelling area with it. One of them might even penetrate the concrete cap itself, but at five metres thick even a bomb that size might struggle.

'I believe it to be our very best option for success, sir. If the quarry floor or even base of the wall containing Gretchen and Gustav are undermined, gravity will do the rest.'

Redmayne fumbled about inside his trouser pocket

for his pipe and was about to put it into his mouth when he started to speak.

'All things being considered Major, I think it's time we passed this one on, don't you?'

Gubbins put the bomb information back into the blue folder, closed it and dropped it on top of Shepherd's report. Pushing himself backwards, he rose slowly to his feet and walked over to the map of France, hands clasped tightly behind his back. Once again he traced the line from Wizernes over to London and then back again. He spoke without turning.

'The Lancasters have to be specially adapted apparently, and the bombs are a devil to manufacture. The RAF Johnnies think the earliest they'll be able to launch an attack is mid-June. Will the base be operational by then, do you think?'

Shepherd rubbed his chin, took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He'd given his conclusions quite clearly in his report, but it was obvious Gubbins wanted to hear it in person. Redmayne had warned him he was like that, and Shepherd respected him for his directness.

'From the aerial reconnaissance photos I saw last week sir, I don't think so. It appears they are still trying to dig out the tunnel that collapsed during my escape. Part of the quarry wall came down with it, and while it was separate from the rest of the complex, it will most certainly have had an impact on the nearest workings which are for the main railway supply line and underground loading platform. I wouldn't suggest we leave it any later though, just to be on the safe side.'

Gubbins turned from the map and strolled over to the high windows to his left. The light was already fading despite being mid-afternoon, and the sky was dark, promising yet more snow.

'Any more ideas what that tunnel complex was actually for, lieutenant?'

Shepherd looked down to the table then back up

again. There was really no point in conjecture, and while he'd been asked to provide a list of possible reasons for the self-contained loop, he had been struggling to make any sense of it himself. All he did know for certain was that his brother had died in there trying to help him, but that was something that would *never* feature in any report he wrote.

'I'm afraid I have absolutely no idea at all.'

By the time Shepherd had finished his debriefing and got in the car, heavy snow was beginning to spatter on the windows of the Humber Super Snipe. Lansdale had been running the engine and had kept the heater on full blast, but it was still bloody cold in the back of the car. Shepherd had once been entirely convinced he'd never be as uncomfortable as he had been in the back of that Lysander squashed against Hugh, but having spent all that time in La Coupole's tunnels, anything other than that - including this car - was a luxury.

'Colonel Redmayne's staying in London this even Corporal, so it's just me I'm afraid.'

Lansdale nodded and adjusted his cap.

'Very well sir. Where to?'

Shepherd sat back on the deep ribbed rear seat bench and folded his arms. Where indeed?

'I've got a forty-eight hour pass, Lansdale. Where would you suggest?'

With a smile, Redmayne put the car into gear and started to move off.

'I could suggest several places sir. Depends on what you want to do.'

Shepherd looked at the traffic flashing by. He honestly hadn't given it any thought. There were things he *should* do, but the events of the past few weeks had left him barely able to think straight.

'Let's just head back to Cold Morham for now, shall

we?'

Lansdale adjusted his cap again and cleared his throat. Shepherd frowned and leaned forwards towards the driver.

'What's on your mind, corporal?'

Lansdale looked into his rear-view mirror and caught Shepherd's amused look. Squirming in his seat, he pressed on regardless.

'Well begging your pardon sir, but me and the lads over at 30 were wondering...'

Shepherd sat back again, resting his hand on the broken arm rest. So much for the top level secrecy insisted on by Redmayne and Gubbins. It shouldn't really be so much of a surprise; every man in 30 Commando had been recruited because of their special skills, and most of them had some form of covert or intelligence training and experience. It was like having a room full of University lecturers and being surprised when they turned out to be clever.

'How did I get back here?'

Lansdale flicked his eyes up to the mirror and then back on the road, the twin windscreen wipers squeaking their way across the gently curving windscreen as they streaked the snow away.

'Well not exactly sir... We know you managed to pick up the Resistance back in Dieppe after lying low for a few weeks, but... how did you get out of the tunnels?'

Shepherd took in a breath and stared at the car lights passing to his right in a near-constant line. His leg began to itch and his stomach dropped. He could still taste the acrid stench of the metal plate he'd hastily finished cutting for the huge German welder. Despite the cold leather of the arm rest, his hand still sported the burn he'd given himself clamping it up to the tackle gear without waiting for it to cool properly. Within a couple of minutes of the hulking brute disappearing from view with the cart, he'd winched the plate up into the air, swung it over to the damaged cart and lowered it down, clanging clumsily against the

downwardly angled sides until it had crashed onto the remaining part of the base. The German had measured it just about inch perfect; it was a little bit larger than the original bottom plate and, as such, rested perfectly on the sound metal of its sides, front and back.

With the new floor dropped into place, Shepherd had then winched the clamps back up on their chains and brought them over to the much larger rectangular iron plate on which the first one had rested. *That* had been the crucial one to cut correctly; it needed to fit first time, otherwise everything would have been over for him. He'd might as well attacked the nearest guard he could find, grabbed their gun and gone out in a blaze of glory.

The rough metal had taken the skin off his hands, but he'd had no time to mess around with gloves. Impossibly heavy though the plate had been, he'd still managed to lever up one side with a shifting iron enough to get the first clamp in place. All the while, he remembered feeling his recently healed wound complaining, but there had been no time to worry about it. He'd had to get that final big plate into the air and over the cart before the two men or the big German returned.

Shepherd had pulled the lowering chain as far as it would go before he'd thrown a short, heavy length of iron rod into the cart and then clambered into it, testing the new floor he'd just dropped in. It had settled a little to one side, but it'd be more than strong enough to take his weight. It'd taken a couple of good yanks to slide the tackle holding the newly cut plate towards him and it'd begun to spin, the last thing he'd needed or wanted. Restricted in his movement in the chest-high cart, he'd finally got it under control and aligned its longest side with the cart's corresponding edge. Standing at the far end of the cart, he had crouched underneath the plate and positioned its shorter end over the narrowest side of the wagon.

The gap between where it would eventually rest on the inwardly sloping sides and the new base plate turned

out to be around eighteen inches - a little tighter than he'd wanted, but at that point it hadn't mattered. He'd sat himself down and stretched his legs out, then quickly fed the control chain for the pulley so the second plate lowered down on top of him. When the gap was only just wide enough for the chain to pass through, he'd let go of the chain, the weight from the plate pulling it out of the gap as the metal clanged down above him.

He'd not quite been fast enough to avoid the plate crashing onto his head but as he was pushed down by the steel settling into position, he twisted onto his back and found there was a few inches of clearance from the tip of his nose to the underside of the plate - which now formed a new, false bottom of the cart. He might have been entombed, but it concealed him completely.

Shepherd realised he'd not answered Lansdale's question, and tore himself away from his claustrophobic nightmare.

'How did I get out of the tunnels? What tunnels, corporal?'

Shepherd didn't want to insult Lansdale's intelligence, but he also didn't want to be accused of confirming or denying highly sensitive operational details. It was bad enough he'd woken up sweating and shaking nearly every night for the last couple of weeks, reliving the deafening sounds and skin-tearing movements of the cart as it had been thrown around the rails with him inside it. He'd remembered being terrified of the rattle of his own breathing, but this had been just one part of the paranoia that had consumed him in his dark coffin. He'd had no real idea of time since the lid clanging down on top of him, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes until the big German had returned, moved the chain out of the way and kicked his welding gear noisily to one side before pushing the remaining cart back out of the tunnel.

The two men had re-appeared shortly after that, and hadn't thought to inspect Shepherd's repair in too much

detail. Instead, he'd felt himself being wheeled along at a snail's pace, the echoing squeals of wheels and voices suddenly replaced by the sounds of the quarry's exterior.

Soaking wet from head to foot, the cold had really started to get to him then. Despite the floor being a newly replaced one, condensation from his own breath and the less-than-perfect fit of the base meant water was getting in just about everywhere. The cart had come to a sudden stop and he could hear people running around and shouting, but then the ground had started to shake and the situation had changed quite dramatically. Something had happened in one of the tunnels; it had collapsed on top of the Oberführer and his trains.

Forget about the manhunt, that would wait. All available hands were called to the disaster area, but then the ground had shook again and a part of the quarry wall had given way, heavy thumps and occasional screams suggesting rocks had bounced all over the place.

That had probably been the worst part of all. Shepherd had suddenly realised they'd need the carts to clear the debris. Jesus Christ. What if they'd put rocks on top of him and the plate hadn't taken the weight, or just pitched down on one side? He'd have been crushed to death, slowly and excruciatingly. Shepherd shivered in the car. Thank Christ that hadn't happened. The collapse turned out to do him a favour; the order had gone out to clear the entire quarry of anything that could be moved, and this had included all of the carts hastily pushed from the excavation tunnels into the daylight. After much grunting and shoving, he'd felt himself come to rest in a relatively quiet part of the site, and when all of the voices had receded he'd calmed himself down as best he could and waited for night.

The plate hadn't moved the first time he'd tried to push up against it with the iron rod, but after a few seconds of panic he'd thought through his situation and formulated a far better approach. Turning on his left side,

he'd winced at the freezing cold biting into the damaged skin of his leg and the sudden pressure from the plate on the wound in his flank. Forcing himself around more, his hip had begun to lift the plate slightly and, by expanding his chest and pushing his arms outwards, Shepherd had succeeded in levering the plate above his head upwards.

As it scraped upwards, he had angled the rod further and further towards the vertical, raising it and stopping it from dropping back down in tiny increments. Whether anyone could have heard the shifting of metal on metal had been completely beyond his control; he'd committed to getting out. When the gap was big enough for him to get a good heave upwards, he'd gained enough momentum to lever the metal upwards in one final, desperate push with his torn bare hands.

Pivoting on its far edge, it had reached vertical then fell backwards out of the far end of the cart, falling onto the track then flipping onto its back. Shepherd had scrambled out of the cart and dropped to the floor, shivering with the freezing cold of the night air. All around him were raised rocky walls surrounding some kind of storage area for discarded oil drums and a couple of dozen carts. Most of the lights had been without power, certainly to Shepherd's advantage, and from the muted sounds coming from over the low ridge and sodium lights illuminating the sky, some way away from the main site. Shepherd had ran over to the nearest wall and climbed up a few feet until he got a view of what was going on. From what he remembered, he appeared to be nearly opposite Wizernes station.

The traffic going in and out of the checkpoint was frenzied; heavy lifting gear, excavators and trucks were being brought back into the quarry. It had been a scene of absolute panic, and as papers had been scrutinised and double-checked by the overwhelmed guards at the approach to the site, Shepherd had found a quiet part of the perimeter fence and snapped enough wire with the

length of metal he'd kept with him from the cart to slip off unseen into the night.

'Sorry if I've brought something up I shouldn't, sir.'

Lansdale's heartfelt apology brought Shepherd back to the present with a jolt. He'd been staring out into the darkness, thinking about how lucky he'd turned out to be. Then again, look at what he'd lost - two new friends and a brother.

Oh my God Leon. I am so, so sorry.

Win. I need to talk to Win.

'You've got absolutely nothing to apologise for, corporal. I'll tell you about it over a drink sometime. Now... is it too late to head back over to the South Bank? There's someone I need to go and visit.'

Lansdale looked into the rear-view mirror, the skin around his eyes crinkling with a smile. He didn't reply, just wound the window down, did his hand signal and then executed a U-turn that left a row of angrily honking horns and flashing headlights in its wake.

29. Somewhere in France

Achtung - Streng Geheim!

From: Major-General Dr Walter
Dornberger,

Senior Artillery Commander 191

Subject: V-2 Rocket base damage,
Wizernes

Date: July 4th 1944

The most recent air attack on the Wizernes site by the combined allied air forces and their employment of ground-penetrating Tallboy bombs has resulted in the total destruction of all external support structures, scaffolding and construction equipment. This in itself is not the main reason for abandoning work on the site; the collapse of the cliff face protecting the missile fuelling and preparation area and frequent landslides on all quarry walls has led to a situation where the OT and OKW feel completion and operation of the base is no longer feasible.

Furthermore, while the Führer is confident allied land troops will be pushed back into the sea, it is felt the proximity of such a concentration of enemy forces must be considered a serious factor opposing further construction. The weapons will instead be deployed from mobile launch platforms, offering a flexibility and attack capability that will ensure our counter-attacks will succeed.

Heil Hitler!

The man carefully folded the piece of paper and placed it back into its 'MOST SECRET' envelope unseen. The cafe was unusually quiet for the time of day, surprising given the sun was shining and it was agreeably warm. Ensuring no-one was watching his actions, he casually slid the paper into the inside pocket of his linen jacket and sat back on the rickety wooden chair with a creak.

To the world around him, he was in absolutely no hurry to do anything other than top up his glass of Ricard with some ice-water from the stone decanter standing on the clean white tablecloth before him. Over the low wall of the garden in which he sat, a stream trickled down rocks polished smooth with age, the high sun's power diffused by a large tree in full leaf above him.

Directly in front, down the path winding out to the main road of the little village, he saw a Wehrmacht staff car pull up and two smartly dressed officers get out. Both were wearing sunglasses along with their neatly pressed uniforms, and as they chatted and took their seats at a table a couple of metres away, it was clear they were there for the same reasons he was - to have a refreshing drink in beautiful surroundings.

Sure enough, the waitress, a pretty girl of around sixteen or seventeen, appeared with a small note-pad and pencil. The officers were respectful of her and spoke good French, ordering two local beers and two small Ricards. The man couldn't quite hear what they were saying, but their low, even tone sounded serious, immediately contrasting with the warm, brilliantly lit surroundings. The man took a sip of his own drink, stood up and, with the aid of his stick, walked a couple of paces over to the wall to watch the water sparkle as it cascaded down into the stream below.

A couple of minutes passed, and the fresh-faced waitress appeared with two opened bottles of beer, two narrow glasses of white liquid and a stone pitcher of water on a tray. Placing them down, she took the money from

one of the officers, refused the tip and disappeared back into the stuffy interior from where she had entered.

'Monsieur.'

The man froze. As he was the only one there, the German officer had to be talking to him. He took a sip of his Ricard and pretended he hadn't heard him.

'Excuse me, monsieur.'

Dammit. Now he'd have to respond.

Slowly the man turned, leaning heavily on his stick as he did so. Both German officers, one a Hauptmann, the other an Oberleutnant, both had their caps off and were smiling at him.

'We were wondering if you might like to join us for a drink on this glorious day.'

The man stood quite still for a few seconds and considered the request. It wasn't uncommon for the better-bred German officers to sometimes forget they were the hated symbol of Nazi authority and oppression and attempt to be sociable with the locals. Most would spit in their eye rather than talk to them, but some, not necessarily Vichy or collaborators, might have stomachs strong enough to spend five minutes to avoid unnecessary hassle and scrutiny. As far as the latter was concerned, that alone was reason for him to nod his agreement and stroll over.

Taking a seat, the man rested his walking stick on the side of the nearest table, raised his glass to the other two and took a sip, doing his very best to ignore the tingling sensation at the back of his head.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Dows has been widely and internationally published for over twenty years. His credits include a variety of independent and licensed-character comic books, and presently writes for both the Star Trek and Warhammer 40K franchises producing non-fiction articles, short stories, novels and audio dramas. Gaining his PhD from the University of Lancaster in 2007, he currently teaches Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln.