

BEHIND ENEMY LINES...

NO EASY MISSION



JACK HAYES

'A THRILLER IN A CLASS OF ITS OWN' - MATT LYNN

No Easy Mission

Jack Hayes

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[Extract from *Blood Red Sea* by Jack Hayes](#)

For my wonderful son.
You bring joy to my life.

1

‘Good morning, Maddox,’ Lyle said. ‘I don’t suppose you’d mind helping me out?’

‘Well, that depends, George,’ Maddox replied. ‘What are you doing hanging upside down from a tree in the wood outside my cabin?’

Major Lyle looked sheepishly at his friend, six feet below him, and then stared with a forlorn expression at his leg. His ankle was snared by a long rope that looped up into an ancient elm.

‘I realise this may appear somewhat awkward, given the usual visitors you receive out here,’ Lyle said. ‘But I wanted to see how close I could get to your house, knowing your level of paranoia. Think of it as me testing my skills...’

‘Uh huh,’ Maddox scratched at the back of his neck. ‘And how’s that working out for you so far?’

Irritatingly, Maddox observed, the answer was: ‘surprisingly well’. Trees stretched away for 70 yards in all directions around his rural retreat. Yet, despite the booby traps, Lyle had sneaked to within 50 feet of the front door. The American had even managed to avoid setting off the outermost of his three early warning systems.

A biting December breeze blew between the branches and Lyle began to swing like the slow moving pendulum of a cathedral clock.

‘Any chance I could ask you to put the Browning away and cut me loose?’

‘Again, that all depends,’ Maddox replied, condensation rising from his lips on the chill air. ‘Are you going to offer me a reason for why you’re here?’

The pistol remained firmly in Maddox’s palm, though he did at least stop pointing it directly at Lyle.

‘I have a mission,’ Lyle said. ‘I’d like you to come with me.’

The wind trembled the branches above; loosened droplets from the early morning rain spattered heavily on the ground around them. Maddox shook his head. He returned his gun to its holster and began to walk away.

‘Oh, come on,’ Lyle said. ‘You haven’t heard what it is yet.’

‘I heard enough,’ the Englishman replied. ‘I asked a question – you gave the wrong answer.’

Lyle glanced at his foot again. With a single leg caught, his balance kept shifting every time he moved. Maddox’s boots crunched on the frozen leaf litter with every step he took away.

‘I have news from the interrogation of General Townsend,’ Lyle called out.

Maddox stopped walking.

‘Way to bury the lead,’ he said. ‘Go on...’

‘Not until you cut me down,’ Lyle replied.

‘You’re not exactly in the strongest negotiating position,’ Maddox chuckled.

‘Neither are you, if you want the names of the cabal members we got from Townsend.’

Maddox stroked the two-day old stubble around his mouth and chin.

He shouldn’t be unshaven.

It was slovenly.

And when had he last spoken to another human being?

Maddox closed his eyes and cleared his mind of these disquieting thoughts.

‘If you have names,’ he said, ‘those people would already be under arrest. Knowing them would serve me no purpose.’

‘Ah, but you can’t be sure of that unless you cut me free,’ Lyle replied. ‘I have five names. Two have been picked up. The others haven’t for political reasons. I’m willing to share them with you in exchange for your coming with me.’

‘And releasing you from my trap?’

‘Obviously.’

Maddox pulled his Fairbairn-Sykes commando knife from the scabbard in the small of his back. He tapped the blade against his fingers.

‘No sneaky double or triple crosses?’

‘No,’ Lyle said. ‘No more of that.’

‘No selling me out to the Germans, or the Italians or the Russians or to anyone else?’

‘Absolutely not,’ Lyle replied. ‘Trust me: this mission is one you’ll want to do. So what do you say you’ll let me down?’

‘Do it your-bloody-self with the Bowie you’ve got strapped to your inside left leg,’ Maddox smiled.

‘And meet me in the house when you’ve decided to stop dicking about in my garden.’

General König despised visits to these outlying scientific facilities.

The Reich had been so full of them, these last few years. Thousands of scientists championed the pet projects and a capricious Führer had pandered to the wildest claims that each one might bend the war in Germany's favour.

'What a waste of money,' he muttered.

His staff car twisted away from the back road they'd travelled along and began winding down a crudely marked dirt track. In the distance, he could already see the collapsed gothic arches and ruined tower of the abandoned monastery.

Totenkopf.

Here was a prime example.

He turned to the lieutenant beside him.

'Any time I'm given a new posting, Hans,' he said, 'it's the same old problem. Find out what little secret projects have been hidden away on your budget by vested interests – parasitizing your funds while you have no idea they even exist.'

'Totenkopf has been totally insulated from oversight,' Lieutenant Faber nodded obediently. 'It's amazing it came to light at all.'

The two motorcycles with side-cars escorting the general slowed as they approached a wide chain-link fence. At the gate, a soldier came out from behind a sand-bagged emplacement and hurried across to the driver's window of the staff car.

As he ran, the private fiddled with the straps of his helmet, trying to thread the buckle, as though he'd been awakened in his sleep.

The youth peered like an aged blind man into the car, past the chauffeur. A flash of fear. He saw the general and immediately offered a starch-straight arm in salute.

'Heil Hitler.'

König wound down his window and leaned out.

'Yes, yes,' the General snapped. 'Now shut up, you imbecile, and open the gate.'

'My apologies, Herr General. We were not told to expect visitors.'

'Good,' he replied. 'We didn't tell you we were coming. You know who I am?'

The private's back straightened so much he almost arched backward, taking the appearance of a longbow pulled to full tension and ready to fire.

‘Governor for Reichsgau Wartheland,’ the soldier said.

‘Open the gate,’ König said with deliberate patience.

‘I’m sorry sir,’ the private said. ‘You’ll have to wait here. I have strict orders.’

‘Open the damn gate!’

A second soldier appeared from behind the sandbags. He waved a sharp signal to the private.

‘Certainly, sir.’

The young man scuttled like a crab across to the barrier blocking the road. Pushing with his full weight on one end, the striped pole rose into the air and the general’s convoy continued along the track.

‘For goodness’ sake,’ König muttered as he brought his head back inside the car, ‘I realise this part of the Reich has been a long way from the frontlines until now, but is there really any excuse for this sort of lax security?’

‘A single fence and a small collection of napping soldiers?’ Faber agreed. ‘Disgraceful.’

The staff car lifted over a small rise and curled past the derelict colonnades of the old cloister, its masonry choked with vines. In the middle of the courtyard a wizened tree, branches stripped of leaves in preparation for a harsh winter, cast eerie shadows in the moonlight.

There was a bump from beneath and a change of tone from the staff car’s tyres shifted as the dirt track abruptly converted to a hastily laid tarmac strip.

‘We’re nearing the entrance, Herr General,’ the chauffeur called back from the driver’s seat.

The road dipped sharply.

They found themselves driving down toward a brilliant light – a garage, large as an aircraft hangar and bustling with activity – a hidden entrance to a massive subterranean compound. Armoured cars and camouflaged trucks, rows deep, lay parked and ready.

‘Saints preserve us,’ König said, his lips apart with surprise. ‘How big is this place?’

Soldiers, ants pouring from a kicked-over mound, ran from entrances around the hangar bay, lining up as though preparing for drill practice.

‘There must be two hundred men stationed here,’ Faber turned nervously to look over his shoulder as the car drove past them.

In front of the staff car, a sergeant was waving the chauffeur to park in a visitor’s bay. The motorcyclists obediently followed his instructions to dismount in a nearby zone. Once the car had stopped, the sergeant stepped forward and opened the door.

Another rigid salute.

‘General König, it is an honour,’ the sergeant said. ‘Colonel Traub was not expecting you. He will be here shortly with the Professor.’

‘Professor?’ König asked, getting out and admiring the cavernous space.

If the sergeant answered his question, König didn’t hear him. He was staring upward. The vaulted

ceiling was like no other piece of architecture he'd seen in the last 20 years. There was none of the rigid austerity or neo-classical homage to a romanticized Greece or Rome.

This was Teutonic.

A reckoning of a modern gothic masterpiece – crude, hewn from military materials – yet awe-inspiring and belittling in scope. A truly Nazi vision of architecture.

On the far wall, fluttering gently behind the rows of soldiers awaiting inspection, two Nazi flags were unfurled length ways – but between them... that was new...

‘Hans,’ König said. ‘What’s the symbol over there?’

On a white background, the middle flag showed a faded red labyrinth pattern. Stamped across it was the black swastika of the National Socialist Party.

‘I’ve not seen it before,’ the lieutenant shrugged. ‘And underneath it, the writing...?’

König read the motto emblazoned on the wall aloud.

‘Tod aus dem Himmel?’

‘General,’ a booming baritone called out. ‘I am Colonel Traub. Welcome to Totenkopf. It is an unexpected pleasure.’

‘Unexpected because we weren’t aware that the facility was here,’ König replied.

‘I can explain,’ the Colonel said, placing a hand on König’s shoulder. ‘Walk with me this way – I’ll give you a tour. Your men will be shown by the staff sergeant to the canteen, where they can await your return.’

The Colonel guided his two guests through a side exit, into a series of corridors. The brilliant scale and pomp of the main garage rapidly gave way to the standard, dismal sameness of any bunker complex König had visited along the Atlantic Wall.

At least these passages had been painted.

‘The project here started in 1941,’ the Colonel said, taking them to a stairwell and descending to the next floor. ‘Currently we have space for 250 members of the Wehrmacht along with a team of scientists and auxiliary personnel.’

He walked them along a new corridor, ignoring the many exits on either side, continuing to point out details about the structure.

‘The design follows those from the Normandy battlements,’ the Colonel continued. ‘It allows us to defend the facility from any potential attackers. In addition to the area you’ve already seen, there is a secondary garage, containing anti-aircraft equipment should the need arise.’

‘It is very impressive,’ König said. ‘But you’ve neglected the most important detail.’

‘Which is?’ the Colonel asked.

‘What exactly is the purpose of this facility?’

‘I was just getting to that,’ the Colonel said and gestured towards a room to the left.

They entered a tennis court sized laboratory.

Beakers of liquid bubbled and frothed. Two men in white coats moved between benches, carrying syringes full of different mixtures. They were overseen by a third man – lithe and wiry; red bow tie matching braces hidden underneath a crisply ironed double-breasted lab jacket.

In a different environment, were it not for his thinness, he might have been mistaken for a chef.

‘Good evening, gentlemen,’ he said, flashing them a crooked half-smile. ‘I am Dr Lichmann, the senior scientist here.’

König tapped his foot impatiently and stared at Traub and Lichmann.

‘But what exactly do you do?’

‘Research,’ Lichmann replied. ‘We work on projects that even now could turn the war. Take for instance this...’

He walked past the array of equipment with surprising pace and gestured to a glass wall that separated the end of the laboratory into an annex. In front of the partition, a row of consoles filled with dials and buttons and microphones brooded.

It reminded König of the bewildering arrangement of technical equipment he’d once seen on at a V test facility.

Lichmann leaned over the banks of electronics and rapped his knuckles on the glass partition. There was a dull clang, like a suppressed ceramic bell, to each tap.

‘Ballistic glass,’ he said. ‘Our own design. Please...’

The doctor indicated to an open doorway for König and his lieutenant to step into the annex and to close it for themselves.

‘It is resistant to even the strongest of pistol fire,’ Lichmann said.

König and Faber entered the annexe.

It was bare except for a shelf bed, built into the concrete. There was an odd smell to the air.

Ozone?

In the ceiling, there were extractor fans, heavy set and large as ocean liner propellers. Around them were embedded two sets of lights. The first were currently on, illuminating everyone in a sepia glow. The second appeared to be behind purple glass.

Black lights?

‘The nature of the glass is impressive,’ König said, ‘if true. However, it seems rather a prosaic development for a facility of this size. No-one seems aware that Totenkopf is even here. I spoke with Himmler about it yesterday, thinking this was some fiefdom of the SS, hidden from even me as part of their paranoid delusion that even loyal generals are not to be trusted.’

‘Indeed,’ Lichmann said. ‘Which brings me to some questions I have for you.’

He nodded toward Colonel Traub, who stretched over and hit a switch on the console. With a swift ‘shush’, a panel of glass slid across the entrance. It clicked into place and closed.

A second button.

A rubber airtight seal inflated around its edges.

Faber had his pistol in his hand. He fired three shots at the door. With a deadened 'pat' each bullet caused the glass to crack, inching spider cobwebs through the glass. Lichmann raised his eyes to heaven and shook his head.

'Colonel, would you like to do the honours?' he asked.

'Thank you, doctor,' Traub replied.

As Traub straightened one of the microphones and leaned in to speak.

'What is the meaning of this?' König raged.

'If you don't mind, general,' Traub said, 'I think I'll ask the next few questions. How did you find this facility?'

'Let me out of here!'

Lichmann fiddled with a collection of levers. A small hatch in the concrete wall slid open inside the annex.

'Who was your source?' Traub asked.

'I will answer nothing until I am released!'

A metal cylinder, similar to a diver's oxygen tank, extended through on an arm. The doctor waved Colonel Traub silent and pulled across another microphone.

'Gentlemen,' Dr Lichmann said. 'I'm afraid in a few moments you will be begging to answer our questions.'

Lichmann depressed an innocuous button hidden among many others on the top row of the console.

There was a light click.

The gas cylinder in the room with König and Faber began to spray a fine mist into the air.

Steam was rising from the spout of the kettle on Maddox's wood stove when Lyle knocked on the front door.

'You can come in,' Maddox said. 'It's not wired.'

The Englishman picked up a damp tea cloth and clasped it around the kettle's handle. Its base was blackened and dented from heavy use on open camp fires. He poured boiling water into two cups.

'I half expected to find a hand grenade strapped to the inside,' Lyle said as he entered and checked cautiously around the door.

'Grenades are déclassé, this season,' Maddox said, pointing to the side of his lounge. 'It was getting too expensive replacing the furniture every time one went off.'

Lyle's eyes followed Maddox's finger to a delicate tripwire that was waiting to be attached to the handle in an emergency. The cord linked through a set of tiny pulleys to a bracket, upon which a crossbow sat primed with a heavy quarrel.

Lyle whistled as he touched his finger on the arrow head.

It was an antique, built to punch through plate metal armour.

It would make a nasty mess of anyone coming into the house uninvited.

There was a clank as the kettle was placed back on the stove.

'What are we drinking?' Lyle asked.

'I managed to get some black tea from a spiv in town last week,' Maddox said. 'There's milk too, if you want it – goat, not cow, unfortunately.'

'Nice,' Lyle replied. 'It'll make a change from the latest boarding house I've been farmed to. They've run out of nearly everything except for some left over rose hips from the spring. It tastes like I'm drinking my grandmother's perfume.'

Lyle took a seat near Maddox's fireplace. The worn-out springs coughed under his weight. From the inside of his jacket he removed a foolscap folder, the front of which was marked only with a date and a single phrase – Codename Tantalus.

'Unusual,' Maddox observed, handing a mug of tea across. 'No confidentiality stamp?'

'It's U3,' Lyle said.

'Three grades above Top Secret?' Maddox replied. 'Does even Churchill have clearance that high?'

'It means this is the only copy of the file in existence,' Lyle said. 'That's one of the reasons I've come directly to you. The Vice President will speak with Churchill later today. But the speed will

which we have to act on this information, and its importance, means that I need someone in the European theatre who I totally trust. They have to be fast, trained and good. And I need them now.'

'That's it?' Maddox said. 'That's your pitch?'

'Read the file.'

'No wine? No flowers? What kind of a cheap date do you think I am?'

'Just read the file.'

Maddox examined the dossier. Crisp and new. Amazing that such an innocent thing potentially contained instructions that could lead to his death. Lyle popped it onto the small table between them and took a sip of his tea.

Maddox did not pick it up.

'What about the names Townsend gave you?' he asked.

'Like I said, there are five,' Lyle replied. 'Ordinarily they would remain classified and known solely to US intelligence. But I want you on the team. Now, that doesn't mean I'm an idiot. I know that they hold terrific value so I'm willing to make you an offer. I'll give you one name for every mission you work with me.'

'Five missions?' Maddox raised his eyebrows. 'Are you insane? I don't even want to do one.'

'I don't want to sound like a one-string banjo, but seriously, read the brief,' Lyle sipped his tea and winked.

Maddox didn't understand.

Lyle had to believe he had an unassailably good position to be making such a ludicrous offer.

He couldn't possibly expect Maddox to accept...

Curiosity got the better of him and he picked up the dossier, flicking open the front page. There was a map of western Poland, focused on the region around Poznan. Interesting. Poznan was a major site for the German chemical and biological weapons programs.

Thirty miles outside the city an 'X' had been marked in red pen and a name scrawled underneath: 'Totenkopf.'

'Death's Head?' Maddox sneered. 'You've got to hand it to the Germans: they know how to name their facilities.'

'It's not their name,' Lyle replied. 'It's a ruined monastery from the thirteen hundreds. It was abandoned after a particularly virulent outbreak of pneumonic plague.'

'The Black Death?' Maddox asked.

'A strain of it,' Lyle said. 'The traditional Bubonic Plague is spread by bites from fleas on rats and attacks the lymph nodes of victims. You know how that ended up – one third of Europe's population died. Pneumonic plague is different.'

'How?'

'In addition to the risk of infection from vermin,' Lyle replied, 'it's also airborne. It can be passed

on by coughs, sneezes or simply breathing in the same room as someone who's already got it.'

'Jesus,' Maddox whispered.

He turned through the other pages of the folder. The Germans had uncovered reports of a mass grave at Totenkopf and exhumed the corpses for research.

Maddox examined photo after photo of dead bodies.

These weren't the skeletons of long-dead medieval peasants – these were massacres of hundreds of men, women and children from the last few years. The Nazis had used Polish prisoners from Fort VII, a concentration camp in Poznan, as guinea pigs to create a weaponized strain of the disease.

'Any person exposed who contracts this strain can be treated with antibiotics,' Lyle said. 'But only if you catch it inside the first twenty-four hours. After that, progression is impossible to halt and the mortality rate approaches 100%. With the ease of transmission, there aren't enough antibiotics in the world to contain an outbreak if it happened in a major population centre.'

Maddox ran his fingers across the final sheet of the document. It offered as much of an outline for the Nazi plan as the Allies had uncovered.

The target was the Port of London.

'If this thing broke out in Britain,' Maddox said, 'it wouldn't matter that we're holding the German counter-offensive in the West at bay. The UK would implode. It would be a civilian catastrophe. The industry would collapse – you'd have to place a quarantine on the entire island – supplies to the front line would cease. We'd be within inches of crushing the Nazis on their home turf and yet, we'd crumble to dust.'

'Exactly,' Lyle replied. 'From a position of near defeat, the Nazis would, with this one attack, totally obliterate any opposition in the West. Plus, from the Port of London – or any other maritime or air base, even if you managed to contain the threat there – there's the risk of the disease being transported to everywhere with trade links to the United Kingdom. You can understand why that's making us in the States nervous.'

Maddox stood and paced across his lounge.

The potential ramifications were enormous.

'Hitler has restrained himself from using chemical and biological weapons until now,' he said. 'We can argue about why – whether he's avoided chemicals because of his own experience being gassed in the trenches during the Great War or whether it's because of his fear we'd retaliate with the same but a biological agent of this virulence: he's got to know there's a risk that it could crush his own forces just as easily as our own.'

Lyle nodded.

He gestured towards the back wall of Maddox's house. In the corner, set up like a dartboard was a scrappy piece of paper, affixed by a combat knife through the top and bottom. The page showed a faded circular maze in red ink. Printed across the top of it was a swastika design.

‘We don’t think this is coming from Hitler,’ Lyle said. ‘Our intelligence suggests it’s coming from a group that you and I have already crossed paths with unknowingly. They’re called Labyrinth.’

Maddox looked at the patterned design. He’d drawn it based on a lapel pin he’d found on an intruder who’d tried to kill him barely a few weeks earlier. He’d also seen it cropping up with increasing frequency elsewhere. Most notably, it had been on the decorative butt of a knife handle that belonged to an assassin called Nachtschwärmer.

‘The Nazis have always loved their esoteric secret societies,’ Maddox said. ‘There have been rumours as Germany disintegrates, that fresh ones are cropping up all over the place – whether it’s ‘underground railroads’ to smuggle Reich officials out to South America once the country falls, or embedded terror cells designed to mimic the French Resistance and harass our occupying armies once the war is finally over.’

‘Exactly,’ Lyle said. ‘Labyrinth is an off-shoot of the Black Orchestra that fervently believes the war can be won if they up the stakes. They feel Hitler is incompetent and too soft – hence the assassination attempt on him that we interrupted. They also financed and provided logistics for the incident at Schloss Bieste. We think they’re behind this plan too.’

‘Why not just bomb the facility at Totenkopf?’ Maddox asked. ‘Take a heavy air raid and pound the thing out of existence.’

‘You can guarantee that such an attack would destroy the laboratory and every last drop of the weapon?’ Lyle said.

‘Good point,’ Maddox said. ‘You need eyes on the ground.’

‘Precisely,’ Lyle replied. ‘Plus, a bombing raid might inadvertently aerosolise and release the disease on the Eastern front. It’s no better for us if this pneumonic plague cuts a swathe through Russian forces.’

Maddox stopped pacing and clasped a hand across his own mouth, his own subconscious trying to clamp away the words that would take him back into the fray. He knew Lyle was right, this threat had to be stopped, but he’d had his fill. He didn’t want anything more to do with the war.

His eyes dipped to the floor.

Silence.

Could he really say ‘no’ when the danger was so obvious?

‘I want Townsend’s five names,’ Maddox said, lifting his palm from his lips.

‘You can have one per mission,’ Lyle replied. ‘If this Labyrinth is bold enough to try all these tricks, it isn’t going to stop here.’

‘And that’s the problem,’ Maddox said. ‘I swore to myself I was never going behind enemy lines again. I’m sick of being screwed over by politics high above my head. You’ve got plenty of people as trained – or better – than me that you could take.’

‘Cards on the table,’ Lyle said. ‘If there’s a biological hazard that can only be cured with antibiotics

can you name an operative better suited to the task than one with your personal attributes? You've already beaten Bilharzia. You've an immune system that chews iron girders for breakfast. I know, I've seen you in action.'

'That's what's in it for you,' Maddox said. 'Not what I get for being jerked about when I'm sold down the river again.'

'No-one is going to sell you out. Five missions, five names.'

'One mission, five names,' Maddox countered.

Lyle rubbed his forehead. He suddenly appeared very tired. Like Maddox, he'd barely had time to recover from their last ordeal and he was preparing once more to leap into the lion's maw.

The American sighed.

'Two missions,' he said. 'Final offer.'

'Two?'

'You'll be seconded to the OSS,' Lyle confirmed. 'I'll be in charge of the operations.'

'And you expect me to agree to that?'

'You can name some conditions of your own if you like.'

Maddox thought briefly.

'I pick the team,' he said.

'Sure,' Lyle said. 'Provided I get a veto on any individual member I'm not comfortable with.'

'Four or eight men is standard protocol for the SOE,' Maddox said. 'For an action like this I suggest we go small and light – so, four.'

'You got anyone in mind?'

'I want an explosives expert,' Maddox said. 'I don't care what the biological agent is, it's not going to like fire. I recommend 'Sledge' McKlenna. Australian. Good with bombs, excellent with a knife. I worked with him a few months back.'

'I'm happy with that,' Lyle said. 'Who else?'

'I don't want to get caught short again,' Maddox replied. 'I want a pilot. And not just someone who can fly a plane. He's got to have bollocks the size of Bristol – and he's going to have to have something else too. Ideally, I'd want someone who's both a pilot and knows their way around a boat.'

'That extra little bit we always find we need?' Lyle smiled. 'I presume you're thinking of an e-boat?'

'Yes.'

Lyle considered the requirements. He took a final gulp from his tea and placed the mug on the table next to the opened photos of the plague victims.

'Taylor,' he said. 'There's a Canadian called 'Dickie' Taylor. He's in the RAF. Natural athlete – and an expert marksman. I don't know if he can operate an e-boat but I seem to recall he has mechanic skills. We could have a car sent to pick him up from his base and deliver him to the SOE on Oxford'

Street. You could give him the once over and see if he's got what you want.'

'Done,' Maddox said.

'Any other conditions?'

'If you're willing to guarantee that this isn't some elaborate ruse to screw me,' Maddox said, 'then all that remains is to remind you of the bargain I made last time we went to the Fatherland. We either both make it back, or neither of us do.'

'If I ever lost you on a mission, I guarantee I'd expect to find a land mine in my cereal the next morning,' Lyle grinned.

'Quaint,' Maddox replied. 'You think I'd wait until breakfast...'

Colonel Traub brooded with his hands behind his back.

‘This is very troubling,’ he said. ‘I’ve stalled König’s escorting men and chauffer by saying that the general is electing to remain here for the next few days.’

‘Then what’s the problem?’

‘There is a leak,’ Traub replied. ‘We need to find out who it is.’

‘Yes,’ Lichmann said. ‘But 48 hours from now it won’t really matter. The Persephone strain – P57 – is ready. The delivery mechanism is fully operational. The night after tomorrow, the attack will be unstoppable.’

‘What if there are more delays?’ Traub asked. ‘What if we need the facility after this attack is over?’

‘I’m not saying we don’t need to find whoever smuggled information out,’ Lichmann said. ‘That, I will leave in your capable hands while I continue with the science. However, I really don’t think it is so much to be worried about: the Führer’s aversion to chemical and biological weapons will evaporate once we bring England to its knees.’

‘Or we’ll be captured and shot,’ Traub said.

‘Labyrinth won’t allow that to happen,’ Lichmann replied. ‘Our work is too valuable. With the other methods of turning the war foundering, using the Persephone Plague is the only logical next course of action.’

‘You’ve run the simulations on your attack?’

‘Of course,’ Lichmann replied.

‘What do you see as the mortality rate?’

‘It depends on the length of time you want to examine,’ Lichmann said. ‘The spread is exponential naturally. Assuming the British are vigorously capable of clamping down on Persephone’s outbreak and set in place draconian quarantine measures, which I think is a safe postulation, then by the end of week four I estimate there will be twelve million dead.’

The aircraft hangar’s corrugated iron walls stretched over the top of the Siebel Si 204 as though they had been made specially to fit its chunky frame. The building’s outside had been painted in camouflage green, then had a net covered in leaf shaped pieces of cloth stretched across the surface.

‘It’s good that they kept her,’ Lyle said, walking underneath the fuselage and patting the undercarriage.

‘I’d imagine they were over the moon to have another captured aircraft,’ Maddox said. ‘The SC will be in pain, seeing her risked on a mission so quickly.’

Maddox was pleased they’d stored the Siebel at RAF Northolt. It was one of the main bases for Polish fighter pilots, making it easy to find two men willing to fly them out to Poznan on a raid. What Maddox and Lyle were asking of the pilots was no small feat – it required exceptional talent to sneak almost all the way to the Eastern Front from Britain without an escort. And the pilots had to be extraordinarily brave to do it while knowing nothing of the mission details, except that it would provide the Nazis with a crippling blow.

Maddox supposed that the Poles had agreed not only because it provided a rare opportunity to perform an operation to help their motherland, but also out of revenge. It was openly known how the civilians of Poznan had been treated under the German occupation.

A car pulled up to the hangar entrance.

The first two out were in British uniforms. Their parade-ground stomping of feet and overbearing demeanour instantly told Maddox everything he needed to know, even if he hadn’t seen their insignia. Red Caps.

The two members of the Corps of Military Police saluted as Sergeant Majors McKlenna and Taylor exited the car, somewhat dazed for the swiftness with which they’d been dragged from their beds and herded to RAF Northolt in the middle of the night.

‘Maddox!’

‘Sledge’ McKlenna called out. ‘I was worried my previous indiscretions had caught up with me when these two bastards pitched up at my barracks.’

A glint of anger in the eyes of one of the Red Caps.

Maddox didn’t envy these military policemen. It can’t have been easy to complete the long car ride to Northolt and suck up all of McKlenna’s abuse along the way, whilst saying nothing of the reason he’d been picked up.

Maddox went to shake McKlenna’s hand. The Australian reached straight past the outstretched arm and picked Maddox up in an enormous bear hug.

Maddox laughed and wheezed at the same time as he was crushed in his friend’s python-like embrace.

He slapped Sledge on the back repeatedly, wrestler signalling defeat.

‘Good to see you too,’ he said. ‘I take it you introduced yourself in the car to ‘Dickie’ Taylor?’

‘Yes,’ Taylor said, ‘but I had no idea why we were being brought out here to the backend of Middlesex either.’

‘Dickie,’ Maddox again offered his hand in greeting and this time was thankful not to receive

another rib-crushing hug. 'I'm Major Maddox of the SOE. And over there, kicking the chocks beneath the Siebel, is Major George Lyle.'

'I know Lyle,' Taylor said, offering a nod 'hello' in his direction. 'But I'm sorry, I missed your first name?'

'Major,' Maddox replied curtly. 'Now, you two, please come with me. We're tight on time and this mission was born in the pits of hell.'

He escorted them through to a back room, where two orderlies had set up a chalkboard, table and chairs. On a sideboard, some pathetic looking paste sandwiches glistened with malevolent intent towards Maddox's tongue.

He raised an eyebrow and smiled sardonically.

He decided against it and instead opted for a mug of coffee. Sipping it, Maddox pulled a face and wondered if he'd made the wrong decision.

'Sledge, Taylor, please examine these,' Lyle said. 'This is the mission as we have it.'

The American neatly placed a series of photographs and maps across the table.

He tapped his finger on one of the pictures of the mass graves. Maddox caught a glance at the picture. A child of no more than seven, face covered in scabs and blisters, mouth locked in eternal agony as eyes stared blankly skyward.

Maddox turned his head away in disgust.

'What the hell is this?' Taylor asked.

'Gentlemen,' Lyle said, 'this is the future of London, unless the four of us are successful.'

Sledge and Taylor listened intently as the American outlined the threat from the German bioweapon programme and its intended target. Taylor kept staring at the painful images of brutality in each of the photographs, his lips apart in horror. Sledge's eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. Every so often, as Lyle continued with his descriptions, he slowly shook his head as if disbelieving such an attack could even be contemplated by the Germans.

After he'd finished the outline, Lyle tugged on a plan of the facility and laid it across the top of the pictures, mercifully hiding their grotesque imagery from view. He then explained the broad brushstrokes of the plan, just as he had debated them with Maddox.

'It was assumed,' Lyle said. 'That Totenkopf was no more than another of the death camps run by the Nazis. Vile, yes, but of no strategic importance in ending the war. Frankly, it's amazing the Poles have clubbed together as much information as they have in this short amount of time.'

'Do we know how soon until this toxin is complete?' Taylor asked.

'No,' Lyle replied. 'But it's believed to be imminent. Which is why this mission is being cobbled together so hastily.'

The facility was a buried bunker with three entrances. The main route in housed a large garage with vehicles ranging from motorbikes to troop carriers. The second ran up through a series of stairwells

the only part of the complex above ground – assumed to be two laboratories, not far from the ruins of the monastery. The third was a secondary garage, much smaller in size at the opposite end to the first. It was believed to house limited anti-aircraft weaponry.

‘I note there’s a lot of use of qualifying words,’ Sledge McKlenna said. ‘Things like ‘believe’ and ‘assume’ don’t inspire confidence.’

‘The Polish resistance weren’t even fully aware of Totenkopf’s importance until a few weeks ago,’ Lyle replied. ‘You have to remember that any local going near the facility was executed in the most gruesome fashion.’

‘Who’s the Nazi responsible for this horror house?’ Sledge asked.

‘Totenkopf is run by Colonel Traub,’ Lyle said. ‘We’ve recently learned that he is part of a fanatical group of German officers called ‘Labyrinth’, who will go to any lengths to see Germany win the war.’

Lyle touched the plans indicating the main routes for attack.

‘The facility is lightly defended at the perimeter,’ he said. ‘Hoping its secret nature is its best protection. That’s really good for us – it makes getting in relatively trouble free. The problem is lack of certified information on the inside layout and the guards on the inside.’

‘So what do we know about the inside?’ Sledge rubbed his chin in deep thought.

‘It has three levels,’ Lyle replied. ‘Although we think these two rooms near the surface are laboratories, they’re probably used for no more than storage of bodies excavated from the plague pits. The real work goes on further down.’

Maddox shifted across. He wanted to examine the blueprints once again for any signs that a better plan could be devised than the one he and Lyle had concocted.

‘Beneath the surface layer, on the same floor as the garages, are the barracks and guardhouse. Although the outer walls and surrounding landscape are not well guarded, the inside of the complex is. We estimate there could be as many as 500 men stationed at Totenkopf, though many of those will likely be scientists and ancillary staff.’

‘What’s your guess on soldiers?’ Taylor asked.

Lyle took a sharp intake of breath through gritted teeth.

‘Two hundred,’ he said. ‘Perhaps 250, if soldiers from the Eastern frontlines are being pulled back to use the base as a hospital.’

Taylor gave Lyle a sceptical glance.

‘And there’s just four of us?’ he asked.

‘That’s nothing,’ Sledge said. ‘Once you’ve seen Maddox in action you’ll wonder why they’re bothering to bring take us along for the ride. I once saw him wrestle...’

‘Let’s focus on the mission in hand, Sledge,’ Maddox smiled. ‘We can reminisce on the plane flight over.’

‘Right,’ Lyle agreed. ‘The lower level to Totenkopf is the one we’ll be interested in. Laboratories’

with the plague, which the Germans have codenamed 'Persephone' or 'P57' for short, are believed to be here and here.'

Sledge examined the plans from different angles.

'So, we're attacking through the above ground research lab?' he asked.

'Exactly,' Lyle replied. 'We reckon that's the least guarded entrance in. We could take the reserve garage but since we don't know what's on the other side of the door, can't take the risk.'

'Then its explosives all around the lowest level,' Sledge said. 'I'd recommend each laboratory individually, just to be sure. Then a final set of charges here: the generator room.'

Taylor traced his fingers down the stairwell into the ground floor.

'What's the escape plan?' he asked.

'Stealth in, stealth out,' Lyle replied. 'We fly in and meet with the Polish resistance. They escort us to the base and supply a distraction. If it's possible to make it back to the airfield, escape route one to take the same plane we took in back out.'

'If it's possible?' Taylor asked. 'You're planning to fail?'

'No,' Maddox said. 'We're planning to succeed. This mission is so vital we want multiple redundancies. If we can't get back to be airlifted out, we're heading for Pila.'

'Yes,' Lyle continued. 'It's an important railway hub for the main line from Poznan. The Poles have mechanisms to get us out from there.'

Taylor pulled the plans towards him, to get a better lay of the topography. The movement revealed once more the photos underneath of Polish civilians, murdered with the P57. Maddox shuddered at the thought of the disease being released in through the dockside quays into his home city.

He thought of his son, Matthew.

'I'm going to make a call, if that's okay,' Maddox said.

'I think that's a good idea,' Lyle closed his eyes and nodded. 'No details, though.'

'Obviously,' Maddox said.

The door clicked gently back into place and Colonel Traub pulled the blood stained gloves from his hands. He was panting heavily. His brow and hair was wet with the sweat of heavy exertion.

'You're getting old,' Lichmann said, glancing up from his clipboard.

Traub tossed the gloves in a medical waste bin and ran his fingers across his scalp to straighten his parting.

'No,' he replied. 'Just enjoying the exercise. There's precious little of it when you sit behind a desk all day.'

'Did he talk?'

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