

CHAPTER 2

DO I SHOOT, OR NOT?

At Tegel, the capital city's north-west airport recently renovated with some style and lots of money, the private NetJets flight is on time. Waiting in the VIP lounge Pierre G downloads the brief from ENN research. Plenty of information and many links to web sites. "Transnistrian people descend from Thracian and Scythian tribes, fierce fighters, the best gladiators in Rome."

A funny strip of land, between Ukraine and Moldova. Possibly the only place on earth I've never been.

He reads on. "The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 included Transnistria in Moldova. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the people rebelled and fought for independence. They got it *de facto*, but they are not recognized internationally. Today Russia considers Transnistria a strategic near abroad zone protected by the 14th Army, in the past headed by General Aleksandr Lebed."

I met that guy when he was governor of Krasnoyarsk in Siberia.

"With the annexation of Crimea, Russia has developed a series of strongholds all around the Black Sea, reaching the Caspian. Transnistria is its western base - a rogue territory where the Russian army, in violation of the 1994 agreement, retains a stockpile of ammunition and equipment sufficient to arm several divisions. According to Human Rights Watch, these weapons are sold to dictators and insurgents around the world."

Pierre G is now absorbed by the info.

"In fact, a quarter century after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Transnistria is a no man's land for black marketeers, a place where anybody can buy combat-ready weapons, artillery, tanks - and drugs, of course. Anything and everything. No questions asked."

An airport attendant from VIP services approaches. Private boarding is fast. *Finally a plane with wifi.* With a sigh the reporter continues to surf the net, a couple of *croissants* and a cup of coffee on the table.

It takes the Falcon 2000, CS-DNB, over one hour to get to Chisinau, capital of Moldova. He budgets an hour more to get to the Dniester river, the border of Transnistria. There he will enter the long and narrow shaft of land crammed between the river and Ukraine on the east.

At the wheel of a rented Audi Quattro, Pierre G reaches the border crossing point of Svaboda, between Moldova and Transnistria. A statue of Lenin in the main square welcomes him. A Red Star with the hammer and sickle, the Bolshevik contribution to the art of brand marketing, jumps off billboards, rooftops and store fronts.

A tribute to the power of myth? Like the rock columns at Stonehenge, things people continue to worship long after they've forgotten why.

A time warp.

A wormhole sucking the newsman back to East Berlin, 1989, a similar trip down the goddamned rabbit hole. Barbed wire and checkpoints, policemen and soldiers, Makarov handguns holstered, a motley assembly of uniforms.

It could be the border crossing between Mexico and the US at Juarez/El Paso. Why do these places always look the same? Multiple circles of hell, cops and whores, black markets, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, gossip, minute-by-minute updates, where to be, to go. Or not.

The security checks at the border take time, the militiamen concerned about the sophistication of his media gear. Eventually he is allowed to move on, thanks to the ten euro bills he leaves behind on the guards' desk.

The Russians are on the move. That leaves one big, get-it-right and maybe you-win-a-Pulitzer question: is there nuclear ordnance stashed away in...what's the name of that fucked-up place? Grigoriopol?

He's tired now. Nothing works. Car GPS, cell phones – *nada*. A fine beam of yellow light from his sat phone shows that the equipment is roaming without success. *So the Russians have*

neutralized even the 66 crossed-linked, low-orbit satellites of the Iridium network.

He looks in the mirror again. The man staring back looks worried. In his fifties, not forty-something. *Dark circles under my eyes? The makeup girl at ENN can fix it.* Perhaps. Frustrated, fighting off sleep, he picks up the iPod next to him on the car seat.

Pierre G's three passions: Martha, Europe and Beethoven.

At this tricky moment, he can only focus on the composer. Triple concerto in C major, Opus Opus 56 for piano, violin and cello.

Scale. Grandeur. Almost as good as the Third Symphony. Therapy.

He begins to hum the piece himself, but he can only remember parts of the first movement. Frustrated, he launches wildly into a few bars of Willy Nelson's 'On the Road Again'. His heart isn't in it either. Too upbeat.

He goes for a monologue, speaking out loud to an invisible audience wondering, as he himself is, what the hell he's doing there. "This is Pierre Giorgio Bosco, broadcasting from bumfuck, Transnistria, on air, on the screen, and on-line." He suspends the harangue as the road, pretty torn up so far, turns into something worse.

A war zone.

He waits, with the Audi engine idle, behind a truck. The vehicle in front rolls forward. He pushes down on the clutch and shifts into first.

No go.

A Russkie jeep, filled with beefy MPs, races in from the left, cutting him off. He yanks the steering wheel, rolls down the window to curse, but stops.

Not worth it. Stay focused. Remember where you are. Only the story counts.

The Audi's moving now. The radio's working. He flips it on, tunes into the morning news. Nobody mentions a rocket theft in Transnistria. Not even the BBC, and they've got sources everywhere.

He drives deeper into hell, spitting broadcast notes and ideas into his Sony recorder. Next stop Grigoriopol. Military convoys jam the roads. MPs, like cattle drivers, cursing *davai suka!* Pushing them forward. East.

The trucks overflow with Russian grunts - young, unshaven,

restless, ready to get the fuck out of this place. Pierre G tries to pass, the right side of his rental car almost sliding by the left rear of the troop transport. He stops. The soldiers, watching him, laugh. He's a diversion. An asshole.

They flash him the V sign for victory, laughing harder now.

The newsman is pissed. "Avete vinto, vero?" he shouts instinctively in Italian. "You won, right? In Crimea, where you've driven tanks over international borders."

Obscene graffiti everywhere. A fading sign along the side of the road, 'Russians Go Home', recalls the 'Yankee Go Home' slogan he grew up with in Italy, France, and Germany in the '70s and '80s.

One of the grunts leans forward, looks like he might leap onto the hood of the Audi. The MPs aren't far away. He retreats back into the truck. One soldier, older, shouts at Pierre G, then raises his fist, the V morphing into a U, the horn, the index and little finger upright and rigid. *Cuckold!*

The transport jerks forward, and Pierre G guns the Audi, scraping past his new-found enemies. He moves a few meters ahead before stopping again behind a giant Ural 345 troop transport.

No welcome wagon here either. A pair of clenched fists punches through the rear canvas, a communist salute. Then a middle finger shoots up. *Fuck you!*

"Figli di puttana!" Pierre G screams back. A stupid interchange, but at least it keeps the combatants awake. The sign language continues for a few minutes more, Pierre G proving his dexterity, shifting from V to U to the third-finger salute with polish and bravado.

After a slow haul with armored troops from the Russian 14th Army, Pierre G arrives, as Jerry would say, at ground zero. Grigoriopol. The scene, he hopes, of the crime.

He parks the Audi in the town square, shoves smart-phones and recorder into his pocket, places the duffel backpack on his right shoulder, and slips on his sunglasses. He needs help. Looks around for locals.

A fellow lounging on a bench a few feet away motions to him. "The Russians are leaving this rat hole and moving to Crimea," he whispers. "Think they're happy to be going?" He starts to laugh, then clamps a mottled hand over his mouth.

Pierre G shrugs. "Maybe not."

"You bet your ass they're not!" yells another man, sitting upright on the far end of the same bench. "This cold war frightens them: do I shoot, or not?" Johan Donau leaps to his feet and introduces himself as the local schoolmaster, now retired.

"Actually, they aren't leaving the region. They're replacing the obsolete weapons and crooked soldiers they had in Transnistria for a quarter of a century, with battle-ready troops expected to arrive in a few months time," he says, coughing up phlegm he spits out to the side of Pierre G's foot. "Not a good sign."

The fact that Donau is an educated man doesn't compensate for the bile he unloads on anyone who'll listen. He hates the pro-Russian activists who cost him his job when he spoke out for reintegration with Moldova in '98. His pursed mouth radiates deep lines up towards a long, narrow nose and out across sunken cheeks. He's suspicious, especially of strangers, but aggressive and abusive. He limps. A ragged gait that makes the right shoulder of his small, bent frame bob up and down when he moves.

Right now, Johan Donau is lonelier than usual, glad to run into this newcomer, a foreigner who might absorb the bitterness, as the villagers no longer do, that overflows from his dead heart.

Pierre G tells the old man he's an Italian antiques dealer.

"I hear there might be religious icons in the area, Ukrainian and Russian."

Herr Donau rises from his bench, his hand clamps onto the newsman's upper arm, a talon, sharp nails Pierre G feels through his jacket.

"Italy is a beautiful country," Johan says, inspecting the stranger in fits and starts, when he thinks Pierre G isn't aware. The younger man looks straight ahead.

"Maybe a hundred Germans left in Grigoriopol now. Dumped here by Stalin after the war," Donau tells him. He points to the chaos in the streets, the soldiers, the convoys.

"What a mess," the newsman says.

"*Fick mich!*" Johan snorts. "After World War II the Soviets stationed five army corps, 15 infantry divisions, half a million men, 3,000 tanks, 1,000 planes in Eastern Europe. For forty-five years. Then the wall comes down, the Russians leave Berlin

but stay in eastern Moldova, right here in Transnistria. Now in Crimea. Love it too much to leave, I guess.”

Pierre G looks at the man, raises an eyebrow.

Johan pauses, corrects himself. “Moscow mafia leaves a big army here to protect its interests.” He looks at Pierre G to see if he’s listening.

He is.

They’re on the other side of the square now. Pierre G scans the faces in the crowd. A different army has invaded Transnistria over the past few months, men wearing loose fitting jackets to hide shoulder holsters, dark characters with beards, tall, lean operatives with Ray-Bans and Yankee caps.

Pierre G knows they aren’t here to catch a game, at least not the kind that ends up on the sports channel. “For sixty years, we seldom saw a car with foreign plates,” Johan remarks. “Look how many now.”

“Foreign trucks?” Pierre G pushes, hoping the old man doesn’t think too hard about the question.

“Of course. Death draws scavengers. An army moves, vultures swoop in for leftovers. Look how they stuff themselves.”

Russian troops, waiting for orders, chew on fat sandwiches stuffed with *chiorny kolbasi*. Others smoke *chaika* cigarettes, foul things, with extra-long filters. They swill vodka from flasks with metal caps.

“They trade old military equipment to farmers for food,” Johan comments.

Conversation ripples through the crowd, mostly Russian, some broken English and a lot of German. Pierre G catches scraps of other languages. Hard to say where from.

“Watch out for the Tajiks,” warns Johan. “And the damned Armenians.”

This military souk in Grigoriopol is the right place to start, the newsman thinks, or the Pulitzer is lost!

Donau’s narrative about the Russian occupation no longer interests him. He has to leapfrog, somehow, over all this talk about criminal gangs to the real target. The Luna-M, 30 kilotons, a loose missile lumbering toward someplace whose citizens are still unable, at this point, to look up and wonder at the dark mushroom on the horizon.

“I am become death,” J. Robert Oppenheimer said after he witnessed the initial test of his A-bomb in the New Mexico desert. *And there’s more on the way*, thinks Pierre G.

They move on to a vacant lot, the site of an old church before the war. All that’s left is a section of the cemetery wall, a few graceful arches. Leaning against the wall are a few young soldiers, selling army uniforms.

“Ten euro.”

A hundred yards further, a crowd gathers around a nest of disassembled trucks. Chunks of chassis gone. Other parts also MIA, cannibalized for other vehicles. Others tossed off to the side.

“What kind of trucks are these? Ten... no, twelve pairs of drive wheels.” He reaches into his duffel bag for the Panasonic AC camcorder.

He needs videos. The schoolmaster grabs his arm.

“No,” Johan whispers. “Forget it! They smashed a camera some fool pulled out yesterday. Beat the shit out of him.”

Jerry knows what he’s talking about, Pierre G recalls his boss’ warning. *Maybe just an intuition. Alright, no obvious camera, I’ll spy-film.*

He waits for the right time to activate the pinhole lenses, through a side pocket of his bag. Neither he nor Johan speaks for a minute. Then, Pierre G casually asks: “These trucks, could they transport missiles? Aren’t they big enough?”

“Sure. That’s what’s left of a ZIL-135, and over there’s parts of a Ural-375,” Donau says. *This guy’s a moron. A moron with money*, the schoolteacher thinks. “The worse the road, the better they perform. The driver regulates the tire pressure directly from the cab. It’s a bad deal, tearing them apart like this.”

Pierre G keeps walking, spies a tractor-trailer: MDK-2M is written on the vehicle’ side. With a twist of his elbow he makes sure that Panasonic camcorder is in place and ready to film.

“Ever see anything like this?” Johan asks.

“Never.” Pierre G takes a closer look at the caterpillar tracks, as thick as his open hand, treads reinforced with steel studs. “What is it?” He speaks with his back turned towards Johan. In the meantime, simulating a sneeze and looking for tissues in a pocket of the bag, he activates the spy-lenses of his Panasonic.

“It’s for engineering jobs in combat conditions. Biggest, most

powerful motherfucker in any army. Levels ground, clears trees, digs trenches, bores tunnels, extracts land mines,” Johan whispers. “Fits onto a T54 tank chassis.”

Holding the backpack on his left hip to film the carrier, its spy-lenses focused straight, Pierre G tries to pry open a hatch with his other hand. Impossible. A soldier standing nearby shrugs. Even in this ugly condition, the MDK-2M is impressive. Length, Pierre G estimates, between 45 to 50 feet.

“What about those big fuel trucks over there?” He keeps filming, not sure about the quality of the furtive video.

“Russian tanks burn a liter of fuel for every kilometer, two miles to the gallon. That’s why Soviet Army manuals include the construction of 20 miles of gas pipeline per day. Service stations every six miles.”

“The Soviets planned to invade Europe and reach the Atlantic in two weeks,” the newsman says. “Now, it’s all going to the nearest junkyard.”

Johan nods and Pierre G invites him for a drink. *Alcohol might loosen this fellow’s tongue.*

“Why not?” says the old man. There’s a tavern in the square. As they approach its closed environment, Pierre G makes sure that the camcorder is still filming.

Tia, the owner of the *Krasnaia Besarabia Inn*, rushes up to Johan. “Welcome!” She shakes Pierre G’s hand, pushing her wrinkled face close to his. Her broad smile frames a set of Bolshevik dentures. Still, she’s friendly, and leads them to a corner table.

Donau waves to people he knows. An old man with a huge dog, a mutt, maybe part German shepherd, sits alone at a table near the door. The animal crouches underneath, a bowl of water between the table leg and the wall.

When Johan’s pals come over, Pierre G shakes hands, but the schoolmaster doesn’t introduce them. Most of the patrons are filthy. Some drunk. The bar’s crowded with uniforms.

The stink of cigarettes and sweat crawls off the customers and hangs in the air, circling the tables.

Tia sends a squat teenager in shabby wooden clogs to serve them. White wine and sandwiches.

Pierre G starts to be irritated. *No news about Luna-M.* He

reaches for his drink, shifting his backpack to make sure that the pin-hole lenses catch what's around him.

"On the wall there," Donau points to a place next to the window, "is a map of Transnistria." Pierre G shifts his bag once again, to train the spy-lenses on his companion. "If you want, I can show you where some of the Russian arms markets are," Donau says. "Actually, where they were. Not much is left."

"No religious icons?" asks PG.

Johan bites into his slab of buttered black bread with a thick slice of ham on top. "No. Better." With his left hand, he points to places on the map.

"To the south, near Slobodzeya," he explains, "the old barracks of the 11th Tank Division. There you buy armored personnel carriers..."

Pierre G tries to look shocked. Johan gets the message. "US spy satellites gone after 911, America looking for terrorists, the Russian military stays here. Good place to do bad business. No, the contrary, to do good business with bad people."

Pierre G nods.

"Bottom line, my friend - north of Tiraspol, a big tank market. If you have the cash, you can pick up or order T-80's. Some, though old by now, have radar targeting systems. You know what that means?"

Johan figures Pierre G for an ignoramus. He smugly waits to deliver the response and enjoy the surprise on that dumb Italian face.

Johan lowers his voice. "T-80 was built to deliver tactical nukes."

Pierre G eyes widen. It's what Johan expects.

"Nuclear, you said? Not close to here, I hope." Pierre G shifts the back-pack once again to film the speaker from another angle.

"Well," Johan leans in closer to Pierre G, "I hear Russkies are selling some dangerous stuff not more than an hour away, at Velykaya Pobeda." Pierre G keeps silent, trying not to look too eager. "It's a most special black market, hard to get into unless you are accompanied by a military higher-up, and show big bags of cash. Huge posters: 'No Trespassing. Russian High Command.'" He stretches out his arms to indicate the size of the signs.

"What kind of merchandise?" Pierre G asks.

“Well... let’s put it this way – anything bigger than a Kalashnikov.” Johan laughs, a brief sound that ends in a snort.

The old man near the door and his dog are leaving, as a group of grunts, in search of one last good time, shoves its way into Tia’s bar. The dog’s leash, wrapped around the table leg, turns into a trip-wire for a soldier who’s sick of Grigoriopol and already drunk on Stoli.

He stumbles across the dog, curses, draws his weapon, and fires one round into the animal, then a second, then aims again. His buddies pull the pistol out of his hand.

A tall Russian officer, late forties, moves from the bar to the door. *Yob tvaia mat!* Colonel Oleg Sergieievich Pavlov screams. He grabs the shooter’s weapon, pushes him into the corner between the door and the stone wall, then smashes his huge right fist into the non-com’s face. Blood spatters onto the wall, but the colonel doesn’t stop until the man’s unconscious, near the dead dog, in an eerily similar pose.

The Russian officer, a livid red scar creasing his face, screams at the grunts backed up behind the entryway to drag their pal out of the doorway. He gathers up the dog, patiently unraveling the leash from the table leg, and takes it outside, where the owner, an elderly Moldovan, sits on a bench, blanketing wet cheeks with shaking hands.

“*Glubokie sochustviya poteraï,*” the colonel tells the old man, laying the dog next to him. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Oleg Sergeievich walks back into the tavern, and up to the bar. His hand is bleeding. Tia brings him a clean rag. He orders a Stoli, wraps his hand and waves to Donau across the room.

What I’m looking for isn’t here, Pierre G thinks, his camcorder still filming. No evidence of nukes, but plenty of good shots of guns, tanks and little warlords. He decides to move on.

Pierre G reaches into his front pocket for a few bills to settle up. Good tips for Tia and the kid waitress. Not fast enough. Donau still has wine in his glass, and Colonel Pavlov, Commander of the VK79 MP-unit, three stars glistening on his burly chest, already has his hand, the left one, on the old schoolmaster’s shoulder.

“So, how’s business, comrade Donau?” he asks, before he straightens up and faces Pierre G. The Russian is tall and mus-

cular, broader in the shoulders than the newsman. He exudes a man's man blend of sweat, blood, and vodka. His hair is thick, blonde but graying. His eyes, arctic blue, level with the reporter's. They connect for a second before Pavlov turns to Tia at the bar and holds up his empty glass. A cigarette, two-thirds filter to one-third tobacco, moves erratically between his good left hand and his mouth.

"*Papiroska*," Oleg Segieievich says. "From Boolgaria. *Sehr gut!* Has more taste than shit *aus* Georgia," he adds. The scar that runs across his forehead suggests a story Pierre G guesses not many men have the balls to ask Pavlov to recount – "what the hell happened there?", but it doesn't spoil his looks.

Rakish? Is that a term people still use? Pierre G asks himself. *Is this gonna be a report about a rakish SOB in Grigoriopol who may be linked to...what?*

Not missiles. Simulating another sneeze, he checks whether the camcorder is still filming.

He orders more vodka for the colonel. Wine for himself, though he is determined not to touch it.

Oleg Sergieievich smiles when Tia brings the bottles. Grabs Pierre G's shoulder. Good guy. For sure. Johan's Italian friend.

Pierre G smiles back. Oleg's growing on him. Just a man, like Pierre G, trying to do his best in a bad situation.

"So many guns we sell now. So many tanks, *nicht wahr? Krasisivaia dela*, we make bloody good business, isn't it?" Oleg shouts at Donau.

If Pierre G overhears, it no longer makes a difference.

"Alles OK. NATO, German government leave us alone. *Ist OK, sehr gutes Deutschen*. Ukrainian government leaves us alone: *Nam vsieravbo*. Who busts our balls? I tell you who. Is fooking noosepapers. *The New York Times*. *Der Spiegel*. *The Economist*. Big story. Page the first. Fooking Russkies sell missiles in Schwartz Markt. *Financial Times*. Black market Ivan. *Le Figaro*. K ciortu, to hell!"

Oleg takes a deep puff from his *papiroska* and then heads for the toilet, unbuckling his belt as he goes.

Missiles. *Russkies sell missiles in Schwarz Markt*. Pierre G repeats to himself, trying not to look too excited, or too sober.

Donau looks worried. Oleg's getting sloppy.

“Let me tell you of the market in Komenka,” Johan says, one eye on the door to the toilet. “At the airport, the ASU-85.”

Donau turns to the table next to them, pulls at the sleeve of a soldier who wears no insignia but looks like an officer.

“Am I right?” Johan shouts over the noise. “Tell my friend here. The ASU-85 is the greatest goddamned thing on the market right now. Emergency fuel tanks - thousands of liters, it could bust nonstop through Afghanistan loaded with opium. Fucking Rambo couldn’t get that much dope that far that fast.”

The soldier smiles stupidly. He isn’t sure why Johan is making this pitch to him, or if he even knows who this guy is, but the Russian is impressed as hell by this testimonial.

“*Tovarish*,” the soldier shoots back at Johan, “right you are.” Oleg is back, and the soldier throws him a worried glance. “The ASU 85 tank can be thrown from an Antonov transport at 6,000 feet altitude. Land on its tracks ready to fire. It’s got APHE guns that cut through 100 mm armor like butter... from half a mile away.”

Oleg isn’t paying attention. He’s refilling his glass with Stoli.

Johan knows Pierre G isn’t here for icons. But he’s not here to buy arms either. *For what, then?* The schoolmaster needs more time to figure out what this handsome outsider wants and what he’s ready to pay. Johan points again to the middle of the map on the wall, raps on the table to get Pierre G’s attention.

“The Tenth Brigade was in the south, moved here from Poland in the early ‘90s. It’s gone now.”

A couple of women at a nearby table laugh. One starts to cry.

Johan ignores them. “There you find BTR-152, the amphibious vehicle...”

He can’t finish the sentence. Officer Oleg has leapt to his feet and almost rips the map off the wall. “Lies!” Oleg howls, shoving Johan toward the window. “Fooking, fooking lies, *blath!*”

“Amphibious *mein Arsch!*” Oleg spits. “Look you there, you see this fooking river? You know how many my boys buried under fooking Dniester? Dozens. *Blathtvaia math!* Dozens wonderful Russian boys! Motherfooker!”

“This BTR,” he says, “she never was no amphibious whatcha call it, *nein!* She a fooking coffin. Down, down she sinks and take my boys! Dead, all dead, my boys! *Kakaia smerth*, what fooking death... me, I hear them on radio, boys call out, help! help us, we

drown. They yells, they cries, they cusses. *Kriminali! Blath tvaya math!* Mother-fucker whores, all of you red commies.”

Oleg stares out at the river. Pierre wants to get up from the table, cross the room, stand next to him. These could be splendid shots, but the space between the newsman and the soldier is a sealed corridor. He thinks of Martha who, if she were here, would point to the river clogged with steel and the bodies of young Russian soldiers, and then back to the tavern, the bar, now silent, where 400 meters from the dead flow of the Dniester, every day is Fat Tuesday - men and women gorging, drinking, cursing their own slow slide toward the water.

Pierre G says nothing, waiting for the Russian to finish.

Oleg wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. The scar that runs just below his hairline flashes scarlet, as though it's ready to split open and bleed again. “We no foolish, us *Rooskie* officers. We know fooking NATO abandoned, how you say, amphibious tanks, years and years ago!”

“Too dangerous,” the other officer says, shaking his head.

“You betchal!” Oleg starts up again. “They sink like fooking stone. *Blath!* Fooking NATO tanks, they got so big ventilating ducts so soldier, he can escape. No NATO *Soldaten* croaks inside tank. What do we say, us the fooking great Russian Army? We say we got problem? Hell, no! We say no fooking risk, *nyet problema, tovarish!* So we got air ducts small like my hand, and our boys, they just die in fooking river!”

The wine and the vodka are pushing Oleg across a line no one there is going to tell him not to cross. The Russian Colonel turns to the officer behind him: “*papiroska dain mnie!*” Someone hands him a Marlboro, and in the instant it takes for Oleg to strike a match and hold it to the end of the cigarette, Pierre G feels a cold shiver up his spine.

“*Da*, I got me many friends in this zonbitch river,” Oleg says, almost matter-of-factly. “Many *rebyati*, they make fooking mutiny. My boys not want to die in river, so they rebel. You know how they dies, my boys, then?”

Oleg pulls on the Marlboro, his eyes closed, remembering. “Up against the wall, they die. Shot in the fooking belly! *Blath!* Deserters, bastard commissars called them. Traitors of mother-land, face martial court, shot the same day, poor sum-bitches!”

The Russian stumbles, walks back to the table, and drops into his chair. No one makes eye contact with him. Even the grunts ready to fight anybody for anything say nothing. The crying woman stares soundlessly at the wall.

Pierre G is touched. *A moment of silence for the Russian kids mired in the dark mud, still holding onto useless guns inside rusting tanks, the water current gradually effacing the red star on the turret.*

Johan clears his throat. "Another drink..."

The schoolmaster wants to get back to business. "Not far from the Dniester..."

Pierre G starts to run his fingers through his hair. Enough evidence on camera. Time to go.

"I've gotta pee, Johan."

"Wait... you know what you find in this place?" Johan rises with the newsman and points to the map as they pass it. "The mother of them all, the ACRV-2 mobile command post."

"What's that?" Pierre G pauses. "An on-land AWAC?"

"Something like that. An incredible track vehicle, with 14 wheels."

"Fourteen?"

"Yes, it has unsurpassed action range, fire power and technological prowess. It coordinates intelligence targeting from satellites and on the ground agents." Pierre G's face shows amazement, Donau continues. "Its state-of-the-art communication, encrypted internet and triple TV circuits are linked to Moscow's High Command. And other tralala... technologies too advanced for an old man like me."

Pierre G is not convinced that anything useful will come from this man. He reaches the toilet, adjusts the field of his camcorder and checks the battery: 35 minutes to go.

It's late, and he's 0 for 0. Pierre G suspects Donau is a middleman, pushing arms for the departing Russians. But the old man's keeping his cards close to his chest, playing with a desperate determination that tells the newsman the schoolmaster's options have pretty well run out. *How much will Donau give up to make a sale?*

Johan's waiting for him. Pierre G walks faster, back to Oleg who is leaning on the table, the bottle of Stoli lodged between his right cheek and the inside of his elbow. His hand has stopped bleeding.

"Listen to me!" Johan brings his hand down hard on the table.

“In the same place, not far... the BMP-SON troop transport...”

Oleg raises his head, and grabs Donau by the collar, pulling the old man’s face down, close to his. His knuckles open up again. The Russian’s eyes narrow.

“Good idea, *blathtvaya math!* Get rid of all bastard BMP-SON!”

Oleg turns to Pierre G. “Make deal, Italian. Two death-trap for price of one! Genuine Russian-made! Crap, true Russian crap – no made in fooking China...”

He lowers his voice and waves to the newsman to sit.

The Colonel is tired.

“BMP-SON, artillery reconnaissance vehicle, Soviets build in Kurgen, Rubtsovsk,” Donau says. “Big investment. . . “

“*Eto gavno!* This is shit... *kriminaly!*” Oleg shakes his head. “Those bastards think my boys at war on front line can shoot outta this fooking vehicle. *Sehen Sie?* Sit inside and shoot out!”

Oleg spits on the floor. “In bloody Afghanistan, we lose thousands of boys, and more in Chechnya. They burn up alive in goddam melting steel box. Mudjahn bastards pop them with missiles. Poof, they go, joost like that. In one battle, some shithole Afghan place called Mazar-e-Sharif, they killed hundreds, tak tak, hundreds of our best troops in BPN-SON armored transports. Even more in south, in Baluchistan. Inside each BMP, brave Roosian boys. Alles *kaputt!* All dead! *Dasfidania, rebyaty.* So long, boys.”

The Russian colonel shoves his chair back, tipping the table. The Stoli hits the stone floor, shatters. Oleg grabs what’s left of the wine and heads towards the door. Pierre G’s on his feet, back against the wall. It’s over. He has to get back to Chisinau, the airport, away from this bad craziness and Jerry’s delusion about missing nukes.

Pierre G starts to move out. Johan reaches for his arm.

“Look, old man. I’m not buying any weapons, and I don’t see any antiques...”

The newsman towers over the old German. He’s pissed now, angry at Jerry, at this Transnistrian hole, at the news-free zone called Grigoriopol, at drunken Russian troops, and at this little hustler who would sell anything to anyone for a stinking buck.

He pauses, turning to one side for a better spy-camera shot. One last chance. “The only thing I’m willing to pay money for at this point, Herr Donau, is information. And I don’t think you have what I’m looking for.”

“Try me, Italian...”

“Anthal. First name, last name...dunno. Who was this guy? Russian mafia?”

Johan savors the moment. A slow sinister smile spreads over his face.

“And how much you pay?”

Pierre G has no time to bargain. “Three hundred euro. More depending on the quality of the info.”

“Kerschen Anthal. Friend of mine. Another deported German, just like me.”

“Mafia?”

Donau laughs. “No! Retired postmaster in Grigoriopol. Simple guy. He asks me about best gun to buy. I tell him AK-47. Cheap. Never jams. No cleaning. Three days ago, Anthal takes off for Velykaya Pobeda – plenty of AKs there.”

Johan stops. “Three hundred?”

“Yeah, you got anything else?” The camcorder will soon run out of power. Impossible to change the battery right now.

“I’m supposed to meet Kerschen at black market. I go separately. Halfway down the road, an Iveco truck, Austrian plates, pulls over. Blond guy, blue eyes, scar on his chin. Second man, darker, central Asian, my guess. They ask directions to Theriak. GPS not working.”

Donau looks over his shoulder, then at the journalist’s bag. He is hesitating now, as if he can hear the camcorder filming. *Impossible*, Pierre G is sure.

“I tell them no such place. They look like arms dealers to me, so I say we go to Pobeda, guys there will know. Throw my gear onto the Iveco and we all go. Russian guards there know nothing about *Theriak*, but blonde guy is interested in an enormous 8-wheel drive gun. Russian soldier says it’s a modified version of a ship’s gun: it destroys targets 60 miles away. Then we see self-propelled howitzers, HH79. They can carry a nuclear payload. Half a kiloton.”

“So, you’re telling me there’re nukes in the neighborhood?”

“Nukes?” Johan looks puzzled. “No. Not there. Not at *Velykaya*. Too much western intelligence.”

“Is there a rest of the story, Johan?” Pierre G asks, wearily. Any minute the battery will die on him.

“That day I hitched a ride home with a friend. But, you know, the name Theriak keeps running through my head. Till it hits me – sit’s Zher-Haick they want.”

“Where is it?”

“About 35 miles from here. It was a Gestapo killing field for Ukrainians. Then the Red Army used it for German prisoners. . . “

“Can you get me in?”

“If I could, my Italian friend, it would cost you more than you have in your wallet right now. In any event, no, impossible. I hear the army’s turned the place into a fortress. Suicide to go there. They’re moving heavy stuff to and from Crimea. Further east as well. Don’t know where, but could find out, if you pay.”

Pierre G reaches into his pocket, pulls out a fistful of euros, and presses them into Donau’s hand. He’s through with the man.

Pierre G bolts out of the Krasnaia Besarabia Inn. A heavy hand grabs his. He turns, face to face with Oleg. The Russian’s eyebrows are raised, blue eyes smiling, even in the shadows, veiled in webs of broken capillaries. He begins whispering broken snatches of different languages.

Pierre G raises one hand, the other one holding firmly to his bag’s side pocket, with the spy-camera lenses, and stops Oleg mid-sentence.

“Missiles? Any missiles here in Grigoriopol?” he pushes hard. “Rockets?”

“*Racketi? Nyet raketov!*”

“*Nyet?* No rockets here? No missiles? Where are they?” These are critical shots: evidence on camera but Pierre G suspects the bastard is not telling the truth.

Oleg Sergeivich shakes his head again.

“No rockets, right? OK, so what about the LUNA-M? The stolen missile? C’mon, Oleg. You know what I’m talking about...”

“LUNA? *Raketa* LUNA? *Da!*”

“Luna yes, really? Who’s buying it?”

“Mafia. They have dollarov, big money.”

Pierre G tries to hide his satisfaction. *The smoking gun. The rocket is for real. Let’s hope the Panasonic recorded all this.*

The tavern door swings open from inside.

Johan.

The Russian colonel reaches for Pierre G's hand, a goodbye, as the schoolmaster looks on. Oleg lets go, and walks off into the dark square. Pierre G feels something in his palm. He closes his hand and shoves it into his pocket.

A message, Oleg gave me a message.

He steps away from the tavern and walks toward the rented Audi. His two hands hold the duffel bag with the camcorder as if it were a rare icon of Christ Pantocrator.

Pierre G is in a rush. It's just past 06:00 p.m. There'll be light for another hour max. On a sudden hunch, Pierre G decides to check out Zher-Haick, the trading place for heavy weapons Johan indicated. He sets off in the Audi on the same route that led Anthal to his death. After about twenty minutes of following Johan's directions, he reaches a crossroads: the right-hand road goes uphill to Glinnaja, the left down to Zher-Haick.

A big red sign flashes right at the crossroad. ALT!

A young officer, only his vivid blue eyes visible through the black face mask, approaches the car. *Russian?* Pierre G wonders but is not sure. No flag, no marking, no rank. The soldier removes his hands unhurriedly from the pockets of his black combat fatigues, then waves his hands across his chest.

"Military maneuvers. No go," he says in accented English.

Pierre G waves his ENN press card from the window.

The officer shakes his head. "Stop." His voice is now loud and clear.

"I'm a journalist. I have a right to information."

The officer waves his right arm. Two jeeps with no markings, no plates even, roll up from opposite sides to block the road. Four more soldiers move in on foot. On their berets is the tri-color badge of the Russian special forces. Perhaps original, perhaps purchased at the arms bazaar in town.

Pierre G would like to ask questions, but the way they point their guns tells him that a further exchange is not an option.