

A Scrap of Hope

Jakub peered through the frosted glass of the door, searching for signs of movement. Seeing none, he turned back to the notice board, scribbled a few more words, ground out an emphatic full stop and put the pencil in the top pocket of his striped tunic.

‘Good, aren’t they?’

The silky voice made him jump. Yet again, its owner seemed to have floated up from the factory floor and through the office wall.

Jakub’s heart thumped in his emaciated ribcage. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, then lowered the clipboard and turned toward the chief of production.

‘Pardon, Herr Rudolf?’

Flicking non-existent dirt from the sleeve of his white lab coat, the diminutive German walked over and stood behind an imposing desk with a green leather top. He ran a critical eye over the placement of its lamp, blotter, inkwell and pen.

‘The production figures - good?’ he challenged, moving the pen a millimetre to the right.

Jakub’s nose twitched at a whiff of expensive cologne. ‘Yes, Herr Rudolf. You must be pleased?’

This time, there was no reply. The German took keys from his lab coat pocket, opened a drawer, lifted out a red file and took his time positioning it in exactly the right place on the blotter. Only then did he sit, click on the lamp, push his horn-rimmed glasses up to his receding black hair, open the file and begin to read.

It was as if Jakub had ceased to exist. How different from his previous life?

Shrivalled beyond his 55 years, he shuffled across the wooden floor to the corner of the room beneath a window of dimpled glass. There, he eased behind a small desk cluttered with piles of loose paper, sank into his chair and washed his hands over the rough stubble covering his head, cheeks and chin. Even after all these weeks, among the many things he mourned was the loss of his long silver hair and luxuriant beard.

His stomach growled. He searched among the sheets of paper for a small green plate, pressed a finger into its few remaining crumbs and lifted them to his lips. Every little helped.

Before settling down to his filing duties, he risked another look at the two A3 sheets on the notice board, their corners secured by brightly-coloured pins.

He’d always known that the extent of the shaded area on the map of Europe depended on the progress of the black line snaking upwards from the bottom left of the adjacent graph. And although the line had always climbed, its gradient had been erratic enough for him to hope for a reverse, or at least a prolonged period of slow progress, enough to push the need for action far into the future.

But the recent leap in production had shattered such complacency. The world must be told, and soon.

He looked down at the clipboard.

Did the note written in his hurried scrawl convey the necessary information, the urgency?

It had to. It was their only hope.

Hand trembling, Jakub tugged the scrap of paper free of the board’s shiny metal clip, which snapped with a noise like a thunderclap. He winced and glanced across the office.

The chief of production’s head stayed down, his lips soundlessly mouthing the words on the page beneath his gaze.

Jakub sighed, took a few moments to compose himself, then slid the note off the desk and into the trouser pocket of his pyjama-like uniform.

Jakub had just settled himself on the lower bunk when the others began to file into the wooden hut. As they passed, each man shot him a resentful glance.

Who could blame them?

While he received the odd extra morsel, they were starving, eyes sunk into skeletal faces yellowed with jaundice, stick-like limbs protruding from shabby uniforms that had once been a snug fit. While he was relatively clean, they were caked from head to toe in grey mud and dust, and emitted a smell of stale sweat that assailed his nostrils, rivalling the stench from the toilet buckets in the far corner.

Long before they reached their tightly packed bunks, many of the shambling figures dissolved into fits of coughing. Several just sank to the rough wooden floor, lacking the strength to go on.

A sharp rap on the back of his head made Jakub flinch.

It was Gabrjel. 'Get the fuck up there,' he rasped, his voice like a death rattle.

So thin was the other man that Jakub could have swatted him to the ground like a fly. But he roused himself and climbed into the upper bunk without so much as a look of reproach. His only emotion was sympathy. If he'd been the civil engineer, and Gabrjel the factory manager, their roles would have been reversed.

He leaned over and watched his fellow Pole ease himself onto the bare wooden lattice, stubby face drawn into a painful grimace.

'Is there anything I can get you?' Jakub asked, although they both knew he could provide nothing beyond a ladle of water from the communal butt by the door. There'd be no food for another hour, and then only for those strong enough to queue for the meagre ration of thin gruel and stale bread.

'I don't need anything from you,' Gabrjel spat through teeth hanging like tombstones from sunken gums.

He seemed about to slump back, but then shifted himself onto one bony elbow and looked up. Jakub braced himself for words he'd heard about once a week since they'd arrived, two months earlier.

'Except, isn't it about time we swopped jobs?' the poor man growled, eyes blazing. 'That way, you could supervise this lot,' - he hitched a thumb at the men lying in and around the rows of bunks - 'take 'em out to the quarries, watch 'em work till they drop, watch the guards beat and set dogs on 'em. Yeh, you could do that, and I could do your job, swan about a warm office, drinking tea and eating biscuits.'

Jakub thought back to the plate on his desk. He closed his eyes, ashamed, but also grateful for the disparity in their treatment.

'Until then,' the harsh voice began again. 'There's nothing you can do for me. Nothing!'

Jakub soaked up the other man's hatred. What else could he do?

He lay back, defeated, and stared at the corrugated iron roof. By day, its jagged holes were the only source of light. Now, they let in a biting wind that made the few bare bulbs sway on their lengths of cord. Jakub shivered and wrapped himself in his one coarse blanket.

After a few moments, he put a hand into his pocket and fingered the scrap of paper. He longed to tell them. Perhaps then they'd show him some respect, some understanding.

But such thoughts were stupid, dangerous.

He took his hand away, turned onto his side and settled down to wait.

Ahead of Jakub, the queue snaked into the yellow rectangle of light that marked the cookhouse doorway. Behind him, the line stretched back over the dusty earth, lit by lamps spaced every few metres along the tall wire fence to their right.

Gabrjel had managed to rouse himself, leading his fellow slave labourers into the wooden building, while Jakub brought up the rear, shunned by all those preceding him. Even the supervisor of the next hut left a gap, absolving him of the need to speak.

For once, Jakub was glad of the isolation. His mind whirled, full of alternative scenarios, full of choices.

When he was within about 20 men of the cookhouse, he noticed two guards, standing in the gloom outside the building, rifles over their shoulders. Inside, another would be on the look-out for anyone trying to smuggle food out for those too weak to queue.

Five more skeletal figures had entered the doorway before the guards stepped forward and pulled the sixth to one side. They frisked him, thrusting hands deep into his pockets, before pushing him back into line.

Jakub fought the urge to turn and run.

Nearing the door, he sensed suspicious eyes on him. His legs threatened to buckle, but he forced himself toward the light. There, the muzzle of a gun thrust out beyond the right hand doorpost, and the head of a mop appeared and disappeared in a regular rhythm. After what seemed an age, he stepped inside, avoiding the eyes of both the guard and the cleaner.

Suddenly, there was a kerfuffle behind him. He had no idea what it was, but the guard swung up his gun and dashed out into the dark.

Jakub looked at the cleaner. The man looked back with an enigmatic stare.

It seemed to say, 'Are you the one?'

Jakub closed his eyes. Was he the one? Could he afford to be the one? His pulse raced so fast he thought he'd faint.

Behind him, angry voices, but no shots yet.

Everyone but the cleaner was looking through him toward the hidden disturbance. He stumbled forward. The cleaner dropped the mop and grasped his outstretched hand to arrest his fall.

'Thank you,' Jakub said, and stepped back into line.

Jakub listened to the tick of the wall clock with the white face and Roman numerals. The working day had lengthened lately. He rarely made it back to the hut before midnight. Tonight would be no different. The ornate black hands had already crept past 11.55pm.

Chair legs scraped. The chief of production was standing, looking from the file in his hands to the notice board, smiling and nodding like a man who'd found a long-lost jigsaw piece. He made to speak, but as if seeing the yellow star on Jakub's uniform for the first time, settled for a disdainful snort, before dashing out of the door and down the wooden stairs.

Jakub thumped his desk.

It had been three months since the encounter with the cleaner. He'd seen the man almost every day since, hoping for a sign, a flicker of recognition. But there'd been nothing. As the weeks passed, his fear of betrayal had subsided, but his fear of failure had increased.

The stakes were so high.

He rubbed his hand and looked at the map.

So far, the shaded area still stopped at the Channel coast. But when, in the next few days, the scientists took the final components to the mobile launch sites, the terror weapons would begin to rain down on Britain. Then, the forces of the Third Reich were sure to follow, snuffing out all hope for those, like Jakub, who suffered under their tyranny.

He turned and opened the window. Even at this time of night, the mid-August breeze was still warm. In the light of a full moon, the road running away to the distant test centre shone like a silver ribbon. Halfway along it, on opposite sides of the tarmac, the roofs of the scientists' apartments and slave labourers' huts reflected the same cold light.

Jakub sighed, a weary, defeated, sigh. Head bent, he was in the act of turning away when sirens began to wail and searchlight beams flicked on, probing the night sky.

They often had practices, but rarely so late. He felt his heartbeat quicken and his cheeks flush.

Could this be it? Please, God, let it be.

He leaned from the window, ears straining. Yes! An aircraft engine - engines. And in the distance, high in the sky, a red light blossomed. It hung for a moment, then fluttered down among the searchlight beams. More red and white flares appeared. Anti-aircraft fire arced

into the sky. As the flares disappeared below the tree line, the flash of a distant explosion lit the horizon. It was followed by tens of others.

By the time the echoing booms reached Jakub, he was bobbing up and down and clapping, rejoicing at the thought of the V2 rockets toppling from their launch pads.

He'd been watching, rapt, for a couple of minutes when, much closer, a yellow flare ignited. It floated down over the slave labourers' huts.

Surely it was a mistake? It must be.

And yet, even as the bombs began to explode among the flimsy structures, he found himself able to rationalize what he saw. Hardly any of those with whom he'd arrived had survived, not even Gabrjel. For those arriving since, the bombardment could provide blessed release from further pain and suffering.

Anyway, whatever the rights and wrongs, and his contribution, he could do nothing about it.

The next line of yellow flares blossomed over the scientists' quarters. This time, there was no soul-searching. Months of anxiety gave way to elation as the bombs fell. One by one, the shining roofs fractured into glistening fragments, then disappeared.

A sudden movement below the window caught Jakub's eye. The chief of production had run into the cobbled courtyard. He stopped as a green flare ignited 500 metres ahead, right above the road. It was followed by several others, each closer than the last. One landed no more than 20 metres away, and others floated overhead, giving his white lab coat a sickly hue.

Slowly, the German sank to his knees and put his hands to his head. The background noise was deafening, but Jakub sensed him screaming, railing against the destruction of his life's work.

Throughout, Jakub had known that he could run down to one of the shelters. Perhaps he still could. But he preferred to stay and see the fruits of his handiwork, of that scrappy little note he'd been so scared to write, to smuggle out of the office, to pass on to the cleaner.

A vivid orange flash lit up the road near the first green flare. More explosions followed, leap-frogging ever closer to the two men. Each blast caused the ground to shake, sending out pressure waves that bent the trees and made Jakub's ears pop before the thunderous roar reached him.

The chief of production was blown onto his back by a blast that also shattered the window. Its dimpled glass tore into Jakub's face and body. He ignored the pain, looking first at the man clambering to his feet and wiping dirt from his sleeves, then across to the far side of the courtyard.

Every day, he'd walked through those wrought iron gates with their elaborate arch of interweaving metalwork bearing the name, Peenemünde. They'd become the abiding symbol of his servitude, a constant reminder of the loss of his family and friends, transported in cattle trucks to who-knew-where, and who-knew-what. Now, the hated ironwork disappeared in a ball of smoke and flame.

In the few moments remaining, Jakub looked down into the terror-filled eyes of the chief of production. He too feared death. But unlike the German, he was prepared to meet it, buoyed by a sense of hope, triumph even; which is why the heat and blast of the final explosion met cheeks washed with tears of joy.