

**NATURAL PREDATORS OF MAN by Ed Bowie**

Copyright © Ed Bowie, 2019 Ed Bowie has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work. This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Three hunters in the snow — three tiny pinpricks in a barren wilderness. Moving warily, watchfully, their hearts pounding — breathing heavily, sucking in icy air that burned the backs of their throats, then holding it a moment longer than they would in normal life to warm it and stop their lungs from freezing.

Plumes of steam issued from their mouths and bodies, bodies almost unrecognisable as human — wrapped and bundled, stuffed with layer upon layer of damp and lousy rags under threadbare, tattered greatcoats.

They struggled on, creaking and crunching as they forced their way through thick, clinging snow, all the time their eyes fixed on the hilltop ahead and the tracks they were following: animal tracks, but not wolf or bear — their quarry had no fangs or claws, but they knew from bitter experience it could be a hundred times more dangerous.

Koliev slowed to check his rifle, to make sure it hadn't frozen — but ahead of him Uri Laska had already reached the hilltop, driven by a fierce hatred that burned within him. He could sense they were close now — very close.

‘Slow down Uri!’ Koliev cried. ‘Don’t get too far ahead!’

Laska ignored him. He could see them now, down in the valley below: three stragglers cut off from the retreating fascist army, wallowing desperately in the snow, struggling to reach the dense woodland on the far side. Laska stopped, breathed out and crouched over his rifle, taking careful aim. Koliev saw his shoulder jerk back, followed a moment later by a sharp crack. In the distance a fascist threw out its hands and slumped into the snow — an insect, a target, not human.

Laska fired again. Another insect went down, then struggled to its feet. It stumbled, then tried to crawl away. Laska smiled grimly — that one was going nowhere. He took aim at the third. It was in his sights. He squeezed his trigger — the firing pin clanked on an empty chamber.

He muttered a string of curses, feeling frantically around his greatcoat, then gestured to the other two, urgently.

‘Ammo!’ he cried. ‘Give me ammo!’

Badanov laughed and rummaged about in his pocket. He pulled out a small, heavy, waxed paper packet and tossed it across to him. Laska’s frozen fingers fumbled the packet. There was a dull clunk as it hit the side of sniper’s helmet, splitting and scattering bullets into the snow. Laska

stooped to gather up the precious ammunition. At the same time Koliev and Badanov raised their rifles and fired down into the valley — but their marksmanship was no match for their comrade's — the fascist escaped into the mists that clung about the distant woodland.

Uri Laska raced ahead, pulling out a long knife as he descended on the wounded soldier, who started to scream and struggle madly. Koliev averted his eyes. He knew only too well what Laska was doing. There was a time when he used to try and stop him: taking trophies was officially forbidden — officially — but he didn't know a single commander in the field who still bothered to enforce the rule. There was a thriving black market in the army for all manner of parts. But Laska didn't trade, he kept his trophies to himself — God only knew what he did with them.

Koliev was certain that Laska was insane — and with good reason: as they'd rolled the fascists back to the Polish border, it had fallen to them to 'liberate' Laska's own village, though there'd been no-one left alive to liberate. The fascists had shown no mercy — as far as they were concerned Russian slaves didn't count as real human beings.

Uri had changed after that. He'd always been a good soldier: a deadly sniper who never missed a target; fiercely loyal, tireless and uncomplaining — and a good killer. Insanity had made him an even better killer. But it had also made him moody and difficult to control. Nowadays Koliev only reined him in when he had to — and this wasn't one of those times.

'I wish he wouldn't do that,' he muttered, half to himself. 'It makes me feel sick.'

Badanov grinned. 'Ah, it keeps him happy,' he said, then hollered down the valley: 'Hey! Uri! The captain says he's gonna puke!'

Koliev watched as Badanov launched himself down the snowy hillside, sliding and tumbling, laughing as he went. He was crazy too — of course he was, they all were — Badanov's particular insanity was to turn everything into a joke. He often said the only things he cared about were his next meal, his next bottle and his next woman — though not necessarily in that order. But, underneath the bravado, Gregor Badanov was a good and loyal friend. He knew Gregor would lay down his life for him if he had to — and that he would do the same for his friend when the time came.

He wished he could be more like him. They all had their defence mechanisms, ways of blotting out the things they'd seen, the things they had done. For Alexei Koliev it was the Red Army Handbook — it guided him, comforted him. Over the years he'd managed to convince himself that if

he could just manage to adhere to it until all this madness was over, he would surely be absolved of all his actions, all his crimes.

The fascist's screams became more frantic as Laska's knife made a broad slash across his body and he stuffed something furtively into his knapsack.

Badanov trudged toward them slowly, fixing the bayonet onto his rifle. The fascist was crying, whimpering, a scarlet stain spreading into the snow around his lower quarters.

Laska licked the blood from his blade.

'You'll cut your tongue doing that,' Badanov warned his friend as he surveyed the sobbing, terrified soldier, flicking off his helmet with the tip of his bayonet.

'My God, will you look at that,' he observed, dispassionately. 'The kid's not even old enough to shave.'

'Huh,' Laska muttered. 'My boy wasn't old enough to talk.'

'Ah well, can't be helped,' he shrugged and placed his bayonet-point over the young man's heart. Ignoring his pleas for mercy, he pushed down hard on his rifle butt, twisting it as though he was turning a stop-cock.

Koliev stared down at the trail of the third man. There was blood in the snow. 'He's wounded!' he cried, setting off into the mists at the woods edge. 'Come on!'

Laska was already up and following his captain, like a hunting dog. Badanov stared down at the body of the young man, then dragged his bayonet out and wiped it clean on his victim's greatcoat.

'I'm sorry, son — it's nothing personal,' he whispered, patting the boy gently on the cheek, then scampered after his comrades.

As he reached the woods he was alarmed at just how thick the fog was. Up ahead, the others were just indistinct grey smudges, even though they were only a few paces away. He sped up and joined Koliev who was bent over, intently following a broadening trail of blood seeping into the snow.

'Alyosha?'

'Uh-huh?' the captain replied, not taking his eyes off the trail.

'Can't we just go back?'

'But why?'

‘Well, isn’t it a bit of a waste of time? I mean, this one’s got to be dead when we find him.’

‘Yeah,’ Laska chuckled. ‘He bleeds like a pig.’

Koliev thought for a moment. ‘Not yet,’ he replied, still staring at the blood. ‘Just a bit further.’

They trudged on blindly, their boots creaking in the snow. Badanov peered anxiously into the thickening fog: there were grey shadows out there — he was sure of it. Moving parallel with them, stalking them, just on the edge of his vision.

Suddenly he realised Koliev wasn’t with them any more.

‘Aly!’ he hollered into the fog. ‘I think it’s time we got out of here.’

But there was no reply.

‘Captain?’ Laska bellowed, anxiously.

Silence.

‘Oh, come on Aly – stop fucking about!’

Suddenly Badanov felt himself falling as the snow beneath his feet gave way to water. Blinded by the fog, he fell in, splashing and lurching around. Struggling to keep his footing, he stumbled over something heavy and massive.

‘Oh, shit!’ he muttered, frantically. ‘It’s a body. Aly... Oh, God! Aly!’

Kneeling down in the freezing water he scabbled about, desperately trying to turn it over.

‘For God’s sake...’ he grumbled as the body finally rolled, its face already grey and lifeless, drained and staring.

‘Not the captain,’ Laska chuckled, peering over his shoulder. ‘That’s a German...’

‘Well, of course it is!’ Badanov rebuked him, suddenly embarrassed.

‘Alyosha!’ he cried. ‘Where the hell are you?!’

Koliev’s voice replied, from a long way ahead: ‘Here! I’m over here!’

Badanov shook his head and sighed with relief. ‘Come on Uri, we’d better make sure he doesn’t get in any more trouble.’

They struggled on, crossing snowdrifts and wider stretches of marshy water — and as they went there was an eerie, hissing chattering noise, all around them.

‘Huh,’ Laska muttered, raising his rifle and peering into the gloom for something to shoot at. ‘Damn fog laughs at us!’ He fired a shot, then another. For a moment all was quiet — then the chattering came back, even louder.

‘Captain!’ Laska cried urgently, suddenly spooked. ‘Captain?! Captain!’

They struggled up a snow-covered hillock. Almost at once the fog started to clear — and at last they heard Koliev’s voice:

‘I’m here,’ he said softly.

Getting to the top of the hill, it seemed they had climbed above the cloud. The sky was a pale, watery blue. They found Koliev sitting atop a sand dune, staring out over a scene that none of them had ever witnessed before.

‘What’s that...?’ Laska muttered.

‘It’s the sea,’ Badanov replied, uncertainly. ‘It is – isn’t it?’

‘I’ve never seen it before,’ Koliev said. ‘Have you, Gregor?’

Badanov shrugged. ‘Me? How would I? I’m from Surgut — the nearest water’s two thousand kilometres away.’

They laughed and sat down beside their captain, listening to the waves breaking on the silver sands below, transfixed by the simple beauty of it all.

Koliev sighed. ‘You know, I can’t remember feeling so... I don’t know what it is...’

‘...Peaceful?’ Badanov suggested.

‘Mmm.’

Suddenly Laska brought them back to earth.

‘Look...’ he muttered, pointing along the shore.

The others followed his gaze. On the far side of a wide bay, a dark, half-ruined castle hunched uneasily on the water’s edge.

‘What do you think, captain?’ he asked, scowling at it, pushing himself up with the butt of his sniper’s rifle.

Koliev rose quickly to his feet. ‘Well, I suppose there’s only one way to find out,’ he replied, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and jogging down the sand dune with Laska following close behind.

‘Oh, thank you, Uri-fucking-Laska, thank you very much...’ Badanov grumbled, batting the sand off his heavy, sodden greatcoat. ‘...Here I am freezing cold, piss wet through – and I’ll bet you a Rouble to a fucking Kopek that place is teeming with bloody Germans...’

Grudgingly, and still grumbling, he stomped off after them.

He hadn’t gone far though, before he noticed that his companions up ahead had stopped. They were staring at a dense copse of tall, primitively-carved totems, set all along the water’s edge and facing out to sea.

‘What the hell is all this lot?’ Badanov laughed and shook one of the reed ropes that stretched between them.

Immediately there was a clapping and clattering from hundreds of wooden clappers that hung from them. The noise spread alarmingly in the breeze as clappers started sounding all along the shoreline.

‘I don’t like that,’ Koliev muttered as the clattering spread back into the mist. ‘It sounds like a warning. What do you think they’re here for?’

‘Bugged if I know — but they’re ugly looking sods, that’s for sure,’ Badanov joked, staring up at their cold, hard, impenetrable faces.

‘Scarecrows...’ Laska muttered.

‘Well, they’re not doing a very good job,’ Badanov muttered, uprooting the nearest one and tossing it into the sea.

But, as the totem floated, rising and falling with each wave, its jet-black, bulbous eyes stared back at him, malevolently.

\*

On the far side of the bay the open shore gave way to a network of small dunes interlaced with narrow gullies that twisted and turned like a maze. It meant that they could keep out of sight of the castle, but each time it came back into view it was alarmingly closer. Koliev put his finger to his lips and they fell silent, communicating only with signals.

Finally, they emerged from behind a dune and realised they were far too near to the castle — and within easy range of the battlements. Scuttling back they scrambled up a dune and hid behind a clump of reeds.

‘Phew, that was a close one,’ Badanov chuckled as Koliev took out his binoculars and scanned the castle walls.

‘It’s cut off from the shore ... there’s a drawbridge...’ he murmured. ‘...The gate’s closed...’

‘Hold on,’ Badanov exclaimed, pointing to a high tower at the far side of the castle. ‘What’s that?’

Koliev looked at it more closely. ‘I can’t see anything...’

‘There’s a girl — up to the left,’ he said, pointing more urgently. ‘Waving a yellow cloth — there.’

‘Do you think she’s seen us?’ Laska asked.

‘She must have,’ Koliev replied, passing his binoculars to Badanov. ‘She’s waving — look.’

‘Oh, she’s only little...’ Badanov waved back to her. ‘...Not much more than seven or eight, I’d say...’ He stopped as he saw her looking over her shoulder, seemingly terrified, and an unseen hand dragged her away from the window. ‘...What the fuck’s going on?’

‘Come on,’ Koliev muttered, sliding back down the dune. ‘We’d better get over there.’

Running, crouched over, using the snow-topped dunes for cover, they managed to get to within a hundred metres of the castle when they were stopped by a shot that hissed as it slapped into the damp sand just ahead of them.

‘Damn,’ Koliev cursed as they threw themselves behind a clump of reeds. ‘Where did that come from?’

‘Roof...’ Laska muttered, peering up at the battlement. ‘On the right. Standard issue – not a sniper.’

‘Can you get him?’

Laska nodded, taking aim: ‘Next time he shows himself...’

‘Hold on,’ Badanov cried, putting his hand across Laska’s rifle sight. ‘Look...’

They stared in amazement as two hands appeared above the battlement, followed by the figure of a German soldier. Unkempt and unshaven, with his uniform in tatters, he started to shout and wave at them, frantically.

‘What the hell does he think he’s doing?’ Koliev muttered.

‘What’s up?’ Badanov yelled, pulling himself to his feet and walking toward the castle, gesturing enquiringly. At once the German bent down and grabbed his rifle. He managed to fire two shots, which spattered the sand at Badanov’s feet, before he slumped forward, clutching his throat, and tumbled from the battlement.

Laska ejected a smoking shell from the chamber of his rifle.

This triggered a hail of gunfire from every part of the castle. Badanov hurled himself back into the reeds as bullets skittered and whizzed all around him, kicking up clouds of sand as they buried themselves in the dune. The Russians scurried back the way they’d come, not stopping until they were out of range.

‘Too many for us,’ Koliev said, breathing heavily. ‘Uri, you stay here, and keep an eye on things. We’ll get the others. Just watch, don’t do anything stupid — alright?’

Laska nodded and started to survey the castle through his rifle sight. Koliev patted him on the shoulder then scuttled down the sandbank, with Badanov close behind.

\*

They made their way inland, weaving around the dunes, all the time keeping out of sight of the castle. After a while they found themselves in a landscape of small, sparse, snow-covered fields.

‘What do you think that was all about?’ Badanov asked.

‘Damned if I know,’ Koliev shrugged.

‘Well, I was thinking. They’ve been finding a lot of weird things the up and down the line — terrible things.’

‘What do you mean?’ the captain asked, warily.

‘You know — camps — experiments...’

‘Who’s been telling you that?’

‘Oh, come on Alyosha. You’ve heard — you know — everybody knows...’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ he declared, resolutely. ‘And I don’t want to know — and nor should you.’

They trudged on in silence, back into the thickening fog. Koliev felt suddenly embarrassed that he’d been so abrupt with his friend, spouting the party line at him. Gregor was right, ever since they’d crossed the Polish

frontier the army had encountered all manner of camps — some small, some the size of towns — practically on a daily basis. And there were whispered rumours of experiments performed on the inmates — including children — rumours that became more gory and outlandish with each retelling. Propaganda crews followed close on the heels of the front line troops, filming everything — but the official party line was still to deny their existence. Koliev couldn't think why — but that was the party line, even if it didn't make any sense...

‘Ah, this is stupid...’ Badanov muttered, almost to himself. ‘...Really fucking stupid.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What do I mean? Well, for starters, what are we even doing here? We're front line troops — shock troops — we shouldn't be stuck here behind the lines, mopping up stragglers. It's wanker's work.’

‘It's Colonel Gurov's orders. We...’ He stopped and peered into the fog, pointing to a group of low, rounded objects, no more than smudges on the skyline. ‘What do you think they are?’

‘If I was at home I'd say they were little haystacks...’

‘No, look — there's smoke. They're huts. It must be a village.’

‘Shouldn't we go round it?’

Koliev surveyed the terrain; on either side of them it was all marshland, criss-crossed with collapsed drainage channels. ‘Looks like the only way is straight through,’ he muttered, sliding the bolt on his rifle back and forth, bringing a round into the chamber. ‘Let's be careful — and not take any chances...’

Badanov dropped a few paces behind his captain as they passed warily through the shabby, run-down scattering of hovels. He shivered involuntarily, sensing the hostility all around them. Glancing to either side he could see shadowy figures, cowering behind rough wooden shutters — white nervous faces watching their every move.

They were almost through the village when an old man rushed out from one of the huts and shambled toward Koliev, brandishing a long, gnarled wooden staff.

‘Weg da!’ he cried. ‘Hör auf! Go! Go from here!’

Koliev spun round — but he seemed momentarily transfixed, uncertain what to do. Badanov didn't hesitate, though. In a reflex action he raised

his rifle and fired three shots. The old man lurched forward and fell to his knees, staring at Koliev with a look of profound incomprehension.

Suddenly, a young woman dashed out from one of the huts and fell to her knees, cradling the old man's head in her arms and screaming a litany of curses at the Russians.

Badanov stared down at them as he walked past, still pointing his rifle at the old man, who lay choking and dying in the young woman's arms. The old man glowered at him and, summoning his last ounce of energy, lifted his staff and shook it at him. It was carved in the shape of one of the totems on the shore, with the same cold, hard, implacable face.

'Hör auf!' he wheezed, his voice weakening as blood seeped into his lungs. 'Go...'

\*

Smoky oil lamps cast uneven bars of light around what had once been a cowshed and was now the headquarters of the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Guards Division. Colonel Evgeny Gurov gnawed a crust of bread as he brooded over a campaign map, all the time listening intently to a younger man as he delivered his report.

Suddenly, Gurov jabbed his crust angrily at the map.

‘Alright, Tolya,’ he muttered. ‘I understand that. But what I want to know is, what’s going on right here. What’ve they got? More importantly, what’ve we got?’

‘It’s a panzergrenadier formation, sir,’ the lieutenant replied. ‘They’re trying to break through our line. We have two infantry companies — they’re both falling back in good order, and...’

An older man with a pale, pouchy, clean-shaven face and oiled, slicked-back hair insinuated himself into the conversation.

‘Falling back!’ he declared indignantly. ‘Why are we falling back? All along the front the fascists are running — terrified in the face of the unstoppable might of the Peoples’ Army. So, why not here? Who is in command?’

Gurov shot an angry look at him, struggling to master his irritation with the political officer. Ignoring him, he turned his attention back to the young officer.

‘Lieutenant, please. Finish your report.’

Tolya nodded and outlined his plan, emphasising each movement with sweeps of his hand over the map. ‘We have twenty T34s here and a mobile regiment, waiting until they pass the point of no return — which we’ve determined to be... just here.’

‘And what time will that be?’ the colonel asked.

‘We’ll attack at sunrise.’

‘Any risks?’

‘Nothing much. They’ve two old Mark II Panzers and they’re advancing into marshland, so the tanks will be useless after a kilometre or so...’ He grinned at his commander. ‘...They’ll all be dead or captured before sunset.’

‘Thank you, Tolya,’ Gurov replied, well pleased with the plan, then turned to the political officer.

‘You see, Major Orianen, in war it’s best not to make hasty judgements — not until you’ve seen the full picture.’

Vladimir Orianen lit a papirossa and held it, skewered by a hatpin as he inhaled the thick pungent smoke. ‘Indeed, colonel,’ he conceded with bad grace. ‘But my concern, as ever, is the mental well-being of the troops. Retreat is bad for the soul...’

‘Tut, tut, Vladimir Fedorovitch,’ Gurov mocked. ‘The party tells us we no longer have souls.’

‘My mistake Colonel – I meant bad for morale. I was about to...’

He was interrupted by a commotion at the door. Koliev blundered into the shed, stood to attention and saluted smartly. Gregor Badanov shambled in behind and touched his finger to his cap.

‘Colonel Gurov, sir,’ Koliev began, still standing to attention. ‘I beg to report an organised pocket of fascist resistance.’

‘What!’ Gurov growled, irritated by this new development. ‘Where is it? And for God’s sake, Alyosha — stand at ease!’

Koliev leant over the map and pointed. ‘It’s here, sir.’

Gurov glowered at it. ‘Sod it, Aly — that’s fifteen kilometres behind our line!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘This is turning into a bad day, gentlemen...’ the colonel muttered, gloomily. ‘...A very bad day indeed. First I find Fritzzy’s on a suicide charge down my right flank — and now you tell me he’s dug in right up my arse! What the hell’s he doing there?’

‘I don’t know,’ Koliev replied, uneasily. ‘There’s a castle.’

‘It’s not on the map.’

‘It’s there, sir. On the edge of the marshes.’

‘Oh, just call up an air assault, colonel!’ Orianen declared, dismissively. ‘We should not be distracted from the glorious...’

‘There’s a problem, sir,’ Koliev interrupted, stopping the political officer before he could launch into one of his prepared homilies.

‘Mmm?’ Gurov’s ears pricked up. ‘What problem?’

‘We think — that is to say, we know — there are children in the castle. We saw a girl, she was signalling to us from a window. Then she was dragged back inside.’

‘Oh, please, captain!’ Orianen scoffed. ‘We cannot hold up the destruction of the people’s enemy out of consideration for a few children! They will understand the sacrifice they are making to rid the world of the fascist menace...’

‘Not if they’re dead they won’t,’ Badanov quipped, under his breath.

Orianen shot him an angry glance. Sensing the tension, Koliev carried on hastily.

‘I understand that, sir. It’s just that... Well, I think it might be one of those places we’ve heard about...’ He glanced uneasily at Badanov. ‘Experiments, sir. We think that maybe... I mean we don’t know for sure but...’

‘Well! Well!’ Orianen declared, eagerly. ‘That is a different matter altogether, captain. Evidence of enemy atrocities is important for the morale of the...’ He paused: without a pre-prepared statement endorsed by the Central Committee, the political officer was momentarily lost for words. ‘...For morale!’ he huffed. ‘For morale!’

‘I think we all understand the Party’s position on atrocities, major,’ Gurov observed, drily. ‘Alright, Alyosha. Flush them out. Small arms only. Keep it clean...’

Orianen placed his hand on the captain’s shoulder and stared into his eyes as if to impart the significance of what he was about to tell him:

‘Report directly to me as soon as you have liberated the children, captain. They must be saved at all costs! Do you understand — at all costs!’

Koliev nodded. ‘Yes sir,’ he replied, flatly. ‘I understand.’

Outside the cowshed, Koliev closed the door behind him — then smacked his sergeant sharply across the back of the head.

‘Ow!’ Badanov squealed. ‘What’s that for?’

‘Idiot! You know what Orianen’s like!’

‘Sorry, Alyosha,’ he shrugged, apologetically. ‘It’s all that Party bullshit — it gets me every time.’

‘It’ll get you killed, more like. You need to be more careful, Gregor — watch what you’re saying. I mean how do you know I’m not an informer....?’

‘An informer — you?’ The sergeant laughed. ‘Oh, come on, Aly, I know there’s supposed to be one in every company. But you? God, if you’re an informer — what hope is there for the rest of us...?’

‘Yeah, well,’ Koliev blustered. ‘Just you be more careful — that’s all.

\*

Gregor Badanov watched as the stiffening breeze skimmed plumes of snow from moonlit dunes, sending them drifting out into the black nothingness beyond. The chill wind that beat on his face brought the familiar clatter of distant machine gun fire. Staccato flashes flickered from the windows and battlements of the castle that was now less than a kilometre away.

The sights and sounds oppressed him. Everything seemed to oppress him nowadays, every day he was finding it harder and harder to maintain the jovial pretence that kept him from stepping out into a hail of bullets and ending it all. Night-time was the worst: the war had turned them into creatures of darkness — of endless bitter night raids and sorties, of battles joined in the dark, under screaming artillery barrages that buffeted your ears and threw you flattened to the ground as they passed over.

And then there were nights like this — assaults launched in the darkness before the dawn, so you couldn't see how many of your comrades were falling around you; running ahead, all alone in the carnage, half-hoping to survive the hail of bullets — half-hoping for the one that would end it all.

Next to him Uri Laska stared anxiously, impotently — shivering with a combination of rage and intense cold. Koliev crawled up beside them. Dimly, in the background, Badanov heard the rest of their company moving up and taking positions all around.

‘What’s going on?’ the captain asked.

‘They’ve been at it since sunset!’ Uri replied, his voice thick with disgust.

‘Getting rid of the evidence,’ Badanov muttered.

‘We’d better get in there, then.’

Koliev signalled to the troops on either side. Instantly the air was filled with the stutter of their own machine guns. Lines of tracer bullets arced across the night sky and down onto the battlements. Almost immediately the castle fell into silent darkness and Koliev signalled for his gunners to cease fire.

Badanov glanced across at his captain and grinned: ‘Oh, well, at least now they know we’re here,’ he joked — his irreverent mask restored.

Koliev didn't reply. Instead he got to his feet and waved for the rest of the company to follow. They moved forward in silence, weaving from dune to dune until they were practically beneath the looming castle walls.

'Look,' he whispered, pointing to the gate. 'The drawbridge is down.'

'Well, that's stupid,' Badanov muttered.

Laska pointed at two unequal lengths of chain hanging from the castle walls. 'It's been broken — see?'

'We need to get in quickly,' Koliev said, peering up at the battlements for any sign of life. 'Could you bring down the gate with a couple of anti-tank grenades?'

Laska nodded. 'Have to get close. They roll back, they blow up the bridge. It all goes to shit.'

'Alright. We'll cover you. Ready?'

Laska checked the fuses on the big, unwieldy grenades, then crouched down ready to run. Koliev signalled to the others to open fire on the castle as Laska sprinted out from cover and started weaving toward the gate.

He hadn't gone more than a dozen paces when it swung open and a small clutch of children came running out of the castle, screaming frantically. They rushed up to Laska, surrounding him, clinging to him, crying pitifully. The soldier looked down at them, completely confused.

'Here!' Koliev yelled, waving to him, frantically. 'Get them over here!'

Laska dropped his heavy grenades and herded the children back to the cover of the dunes, grabbing a few under his arms and shepherding the rest to safety. The children latched onto him as they huddled together, shaken, freezing and crying, talking softly to each other in some unintelligible language and staring wide-eyed at the soldiers, listening intently to their talk, following their every move.

The soldiers stared back at the children: their clothes were ragged and their faces grimy, but they were all engagingly beautiful. Badanov pointed to a little girl, snuggled up under Laska's arm.

'You — you're the one who waved to us...'

She nodded and smiled nervously — then turned back to her friends. Immediately they started to chatter excitedly to one another.

'Well?' Badanov said, staring up at the castle, dark and ominously silent. 'The gate's open — what do we do now?'

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

