

Chapter 1: Crossing

Light from the distant city reflected off the overcast clouds, illuminating the river. Not wide, but wide enough. Outlines of skeletal branches stood out black against the pewter sky and reflected on the mirror-smooth water. Somewhere, a goose honked, then again.

Alec pulled his jacket zipper higher and adjusted his grip on the paddle. The chill air smelled of water, mud, mouldering leaves and, somewhere, a farm. Tiny ripples in consecutive vees chased each other across the river's surface, fading before they reached any destination. Alec looked to see Irina push the canoe into the river without a sound. Also without sound, and astonishingly without getting wet, she stepped into the little craft. She pushed a paddle blade down below the water surface to hold the canoe steady. "Well, Lumber Man," she said in a voice soft as a cat's purr, "What are you waiting for? Get in."

"It's lumber jack," Alec retorted, stepping into the canoe just as nimbly. "And I've never felled a tree in my life." He pushed off from the shore.

"Quiet, Lumber Man." The canoe glided into the main stream. Alec pulled his paddle back silently, little whirlpools spinning in opposite directions away from the blade. To his right, he heard the softest movement of water as another canoe slipped into the water: their escort, Sergeant Ladik and Private Hnatyshyn, paddled just as silently.

They glided silently across the river, the moist air sliding over Alec's face. Once, he heard a soft splash as Irina's hand slipped too far down the paddle and broke the surface of the river. Once the shore had sunk into the blackness of the night, the sounds of crickets and frogs faded from his ears, also.

Alec raised his paddle every twenty strokes to check the compass on his watch, but Irina kept them on a true heading. Thirty minutes later, the darkness ahead became blacker. Ten minutes after that, the black had an indistinct border overhead, an irregular, ragged edge against the grey sky. He was looking at the tops of the trees that hung over the edge of the river.

They both raised their paddles and glided to the far shore. The bottom of the boat made a soft, scraping shushing as it dragged over the muddy bottom, and Alec ensured they hit the shore softly by fending off a tangle of branches with his extended paddle.

Only soft sloshes betrayed them as they got out of their canoe and stepped onto the far shore. Alec pulled the craft over the dead branches and living roots along the water's edge, and secured it in the undergrowth. Finding it again in the dark would be a challenge, so he broke a branch on a tree overhanging it. But how much good would that do?

He jumped when Irina breathed in his ear, "Come on, Lumber Man."

Pulling his night vision scope over his eyes, Alec followed her through the darkness, stepping in her footprints. Somehow, he was aware of Sergeant Ladik and Private Hnatyshn, silent behind him.

They stopped where the trees did, peering across a dim field of some kind of tall grass. Alec looked at his watch; right on time. He counted down sixty seconds, his breath coming faster with every one.

The flash came a barely perceptible moment before the noise, and the air pressure was less than a second after that. Alec's eyes never left his watch. Precisely on time.

About a klick downriver, bombs exploded, followed by tight bursts of sub machine gun fire. Alec heard shouts in Russian and saw the glow of searchlights reflecting off the river's surface

"That's our diversion, Lumber Man," Irina said between explosions.

"No duh," Alec responded. He hitched the backpack higher on his shoulders and followed Irina under the trees. He glanced back once to see Hnatyshyn and Ladik following silently. He winced when his foot made a tiny noise, even though he knew it would be drowned out by the uproar of shells and gunfire ahead. Still, he touched his sidearm and relaxed a little to feel it on his thigh.

For two minutes, they crouch-walked through the trees, the noise of war louder with every step. The forest ended suddenly, and they dashed across a cleared area to a chain-link fence. Irina squatted before it, careful not to touch it. Ladik squatted beside her, pulling wires and a boxy device from his pack. Then he pulled on thick rubber gloves and attached the leads to two separate places on the fence.

Gunfire chattered somewhere in the darkness beyond the fence. Alec wondered how many young men were dying in the diversion.

Irina pulled the box in front of her, right hand hovering over it as she peered at the watch on her wrist — even though Alec knew her night-vision goggles displayed a countdown timer.

“Now!” she whispered, jabbing a finger onto the box. An especially loud explosion detonated and flashed closer than any others, at precisely the same moment that sparks flared up, hissing, along the metal of the fence. In a second, the four of them looked through a hole that each could easily pass through.

Hnatyshyn’s automatic rifle went through the hole first, the private following a split second later. Then Irina and Alec. Sergeant Ladik remained outside the fence.

Alec pulled his night-vision system down to his chest as followed Irina and Hnatyshyn in a run toward a hulking shadow. There was no more need for stealth, and explosions provided all the light he needed for now. In seconds, they crouched behind a tank. Hnatyshyn led the way again, climbing up to check whether any Russian soldiers might be inside.

“Nema!” he rasped from the turret. “No one here!”

Alec pulled off his backpack as he scrambled up the tank. He dropped through the open hatch and pulled two devices and a wire from his pack.

The access port was exactly where it had been on the wrecked tank he had tested his technology on, back in Poland. This unique port had been designed to be different from all commercial standards to protect against exactly what Alec was about to do.

Not that it mattered, when Alec had all the time he needed with so many Russian tanks wrecked in two years against an enemy with a fraction of its military.

Alec plugged in his device. Sweat tickled his forehead as he waited for his device to, first, power on the quiet tank’s electronic controls, then establish communication.

Ten seconds felt like ten hours, especially when an explosion nearby made the tank’s shell hum.

“Pospishysha!” Hnatyshyn hissed from the tank’s deck. “Hurry! Russian kotsap — he called Russians “goats” like Alec’s grandfather had — “fifty metres away.”

Alec stared at his device, waiting for a red LED to turn green. Seconds passed. They heard more machine-gun chatter, and then another explosion, farther away.

“Is it working?” Irina whispered. She was so close in the cramped tank that Alec could feel her warmth on his face. He did not answer, but pulled his phone from his pocket.

“What are you doing with that?” Irina hissed, reaching for it.

He moved it as far from her as he could in the restrictive space. “Don’t worry, it’s not casting a signal that will penetrate the armour.” He held it close to the other device. Now he

could feel sweat pooling around his waist as his thumb tapped on the phone's screen. "This isn't just a mobile phone. I've made a lot of modifications."

When the phone displayed the image he wanted, he waited. Seconds meant nothing to him now. All he could count were his pounding heartbeat.

Three. Four. Five. A symbol spun on his phone's screen.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve. The symbols stopped. The screen displayed "Connecting."

Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two.

The light on the other device turned green.

Alec pulled the wire out of the port with one hand and shoved his phone into his pocket with the other. "Done. Let's get out of here." He wished he had come up with a catchier phrase than that, but there was no time to waste. He dropped the device into his pack, shouldered it and said to Irina, "Go!"

"After you, Lumber Man. Protocol."

Shaking his head, Alec climbed out of the tank and joined Hnatyshyn on the ground. Irina dropped beside him a second later. As he put his night-vision goggles back in place, he wished his hands would stop shaking.

Without a word, the private led the way back to the break in the fence. Behind them, Alec could hear the sounds of battle wane. No more explosions. The machine guns fire receded.

Sergeant Ladik beckoned them from beyond the fence and they scurried through. But as they prepared to dash across the open ground, they heard "Chekai! Wait!" — in Ukrainian.

Ukrainian! Alec thought. What the hell?

Behind them, just inside the broken fence, a man in a Russian private's uniform, holding a piece of white cloth. "Take me with you," he pleaded, still in Ukrainian.

Hnatyshyn and Ladik had their rifles pointed at him from the word "Chekai," but Irina was faster. She sprang to the fence and was whispering to the interloper before Alec realized she was holding a long knife to his throat. "Xto te? Who are you?"

"My name is Bodak," he whispered. Alec was astounded by how cool the man appeared to be. No tremble in his voice, no trembling in his body. "I am Ukrainian. I want to surrender. I want to go home with you."

"Move over, Captain," Hnatyshyn whispered. "I have a suppressor. I'll kill him before he alerts anyone."

“Not yet, Private,” Irina murmured without taking her eyes from the defector, nor taking the knife from his throat.

“Hurry, Captain,” said Sergeant Ladik, tapping on his wrist. “We’re running out of time.”

As if to underscore his statement, shouts in Russian came closer.

The man named Bodak gasped and Alec realized that she had nicked his throat. “That is a scratch. A warning,” she whispered. “If you make one more sound before I tell you, I will cut out your guts and show them to you before I push this blade into your brain. Rozumeyeh? Understand?”

Bodak wrapped a hand around his throat and nodded, fast. Irina reached through the hole in the fence and pulled her prisoner through. They dashed across the open ground as fast as they could move their legs. Ladik led, followed by the prisoner with Irina holding the long knife close to his back; then Alec and Hnatyshyn bringing up the rear.

They reached the trees and Alec paused long enough to look back at the Russian encampment. Searchlights swept around, particularly toward the river, but so far, none toward their access point. He turned and dashed after the others. They would not wait for him at the river bank. Those were their orders.

His orders were, if he were left behind, to swim, or swallow the cyanide tablets in his pocket.

He nearly prayed thanks when they reached the river and found the canoe where they had left them. Irina quickly ordered a change in the arrangements: “Private, you come with me. Sit in the bow, facing back. Keep your rifle on this asshole until I tell you not to. Sergeant, you and Lumber Man in the other canoe. Kotsap — goat, you get into the middle of the canoe behind Private Hnatyshyn, also facing backward. I want to see your face as I paddle. Go!”

It only took seconds to comply, but those were too long for Alec. They glided out onto the calm water as quietly as they had come, Alec dreading the sound of Russian shouts and orders.

But none came. They had completed their mission and were now out of danger.

Almost.

Alec shook his head. Concentrate. He focused on paddling as silently, looking only at his compass or toward the vague shadow of Ladik in the bow, or the vaguer shadow of the far shore.

With another man in the boats, who did not contribute to paddling, it took longer to cross the river than before. I really need to pee, Alec thought when he finally heard the bottom scraping mud.

He was just beginning to release the tension in his shoulders as the prisoner, Bodak, tried to get out of the canoe. He slipped and tumbled into the river with a splash Alec was sure the Russians would hear on the other side. Holding his rifle above the water in his left hand, Ladik hauled the blubbling, floundering man onto dry ground.

Irina had her knife at the man's belly as he gasped and spat out river water. "Shut up, you moron. What do you want?"

Bodak struggled to sit up. "I want to go home. I am Ukrainian —"

"Then why are you in a Russian uniform, in a Russian forward base?"

"I was captured! I did not want to serve in the Russian Army, but it was that or ... be killed by a sledgehammer to the head. Or worse. Please, my family is in Poland. I think. They were going there last year. I volunteered for the militia and was captured in Mariupol. I was in a concentration camp for months. Do you know what that is like? No, you cannot know. You will never know unless you go there, yourself.

"Then they said, 'You will serve the Motherland. You will protect Russia against the Nazis. And they gave me a rotten uniform and an obsolete rifle and sent me to the front line. But I never fired a single bullet toward Ukraine. I was the worst soldier they ever saw. I would never betray my country.'"

"It's a good story, Captain," Ladik said, his rifle steady on the prisoner. "I can tie rocks to his body to send it to the bottom of the river for a few days, at least."

"Not yet," Irina said. "How do I know you're Ukrainian?"

Bodak spoke at high speed. "I was born in Berdians'ke. I went to university in Mariupol! My parents lived in Mariupol until 2022, then they went west. My wife and children went to Poland!"

"Where is the university in Mariupol?" Irina growled.

"Uh, uh, on uh ... Budivelnykiv Avenue ... I think."

"I don't like the way he pronounced 'Budivelnikiv,' Captain," Ladik said, raising his rifle.

"Budivelnykiw?" Bodak whined.

“Who’s the best Ukrainian football player?” Hnatyshyn demanded.

“Football? Um, Shevchenko?”

“That’s gotta be the most common Ukrainian name there is,” Alec could not prevent himself from saying.

“Denys Shevchenko!” Bodak protested. “Midfield for Kryvbas Kryvyi Riiv!”

“Shevchenko is a shit player,” Hnatyshyn said, stepping closer to the prisoner. “Let me kill him, Captain.”

“Okay, uh ... Yevhen Konoplyanka. On the national team.”

“Everybody knows Konoplyanka,” the sergeant said. “Let’s kill him, Captain.”

“Just a minute.” Irina stepped back from her prisoner, keeping her wicked, serrated battle blade at the man’s torso.

“Can I kill him, Captain?” Hnatyshyn said. “Fucking lying Russian.”

“Not yet,” Irina said. “Okay, soldier. What’s your favourite cheese bread?”

“Cheese bread?” The man looked more confused than afraid for the first time. “You mean ... palyanytsya?”

Irina squinted at him. “Who made palyanytsya for you?”

“My Baba. Of course. Who made palyanytsya in your family?”

“We’re not worried about my family now,” said Irina, but she relaxed the arm holding the knife.

“Captain, we’re burning nighttime,” the sergeant said. “We have to get moving. Let us kill him and get back to base.”

“No. We’ll want to interrogate him. He might know something useful. Although it’s doubtful. He’s so stupid. We take him with us back to base, where we can turn him over to Intelligence.”

Alec put his hand on Irina’s shoulder. “This is way beyond our orders for this operation,” he said. “Get into the tank, do the deed, get out. Remember?”

“I know the orders,” Irina growled, rising to a standing position. She nodded at Hnatyshyn, who pulled the wet man to his feet. “I also know exactly how much discretion I have in this. Lumber Man, keep your sidearm pointed at his waist. If he makes a single sound, shoot him. Sergeant Ladik, lead the way back to base.”

They set out along what was barely a road, just two ruts in soft, grassy ground under scattered shrubs. At this rate, Alec estimated, they would not reach base before sunrise.

Irina was walking beside him, knife still in her hand. Behind them, Hnatyshyn walked, not bothering to take care about being silent now.

“Why are you doing this?” Alec asked.

“First, he’s Ukrainian. He speaks with a real small-town eastern accent. And second, even if he’s a spy, he may have some useful information. He did spend some time in a Russian unit, after all. He can at least confirm a few things about disposition.”

“What was that bit about cheese bread?”

“Palyanytsya. Russians have a hard time pronouncing it like a Ukrainian. It’s like a, what do you call it, a shibboleth.”

“Huh. I’ve never had palyanytsya. Not even my Baba made it. But if this Bodak is a spy, is he going to tell you anything you can trust?”

“If he turns out to be a spy, I will take great pleasure in killing him slowly.”

“You’re a spy too, Irina.”

“So are you, Lumber Man.”