

# Excerpt

## Prologue

January 1918, Dinaric Alps, Bosnian region of Austro-Hungarian Empire

The man who was about to take the fate of the world into his hands stopped suddenly and dropped into a crouch beside a fallen tree. He raised his fist, signaling a halt. Behind him, his three squad leaders simultaneously dropped to their bellies in the snow, using hand signals to disperse the rest of the men into the underbrush alongside the trail.

Simon Root closed his eyes and listened. In the distance an owl hooted, then went quiet. Then, faintly, he heard voices muttering in German. Ahead, the trail sloped upward and disappeared into the trees. Root glanced back and gave a second signal: Enemy ahead.

Though dusk was still an hour away, the alpine forest was dim and hushed, the freshly fallen snow absorbing even the chirping of the birds. Root could feel the cold seeping through his woolen pants, chilling him. Swirling around him wisps of ice frost blended with the snow to create ghostly shapes that floated among the trees.

He pulled his scarf closer over his mouth and forced himself to breath evenly. Wouldn't do to let your own breath give you away, he thought. With only fourteen men on his team, any enemy they encountered would likely outnumber them. Surprise was the key; if they got that, Root knew his boys could handle anything.

As the term "commando" had not yet been coined, Root and his team had been dubbed "irregular troops" by the Allied higher-ups—specifically General Blackjack Pershing.

Under orders from Pershing, Root had arrived in France in mid-February 1917, a full two weeks before the U.S. declared war on Germany and four months before the American Expeditionary Force was to come ashore in Saint Nazaire and join the war in earnest. His orders, though dicey in execution, were straightforward: Assemble a multinational squad of soldiers to slip behind enemy lines, conduct reconnaissance, and as Pershing put it, "wreak hell and havoc with the Huns and their ilk."

For the past ten months Root and his "Havocs" had done just that, fighting at Messines, Passchendaele, Cambrai, and a dozen other equally bloody skirmishes about which history books would never know. The day after Christmas they'd been ordered into the Dinaric Alps on a two-fold mission: One, scout the way for a possible Allied landing in Albania/ and two, hunt down Bulgarian irregulars rumored to be lurking in the area, destroying depots and rail heads. We'll give them something to think about, Root thought.

His squad leaders were the best he'd ever had: Villejohn, the Frenchman; Pappas, a Greek; and Frenc, the Hungarian partisan and his second-in-command. The most skilled fighter of the lot, Frenc claimed his family was not only the most renowned breeders of Komondor dogs in Hungary, but that his grandfather had fought alongside Lajos Kossuth's Magyar rebels during the Revolution of 1848.

For all his ferocity, however, Frenc was also the most lighthearted of them all, a trait which Root found both endearing and unnerving. At Passchendaele, Frenc had picked up the severed head of a German soldier, proclaimed it was in dire need of a haircut, then punted it out of the trench and laughed like a jackal. "...Need a haircut...get it? Ha!"

We might be needing some levity soon, Root thought. He had a bad feeling about this job. These Dinarics, with their towering limestone peaks, thick pine forests, and dizzying gorges, were a devilish place. With only a handful of men under his command, if they got into trouble here, this is where they would die.

Root turned and signaled for their scout. A few seconds later the boy appeared. Anton was all of fourteen, lanky and tough, and grave beyond his years. Above all, he was fiercely loyal to Root. They'd been together since the beginning and the boy adored Root as though they were blood. "Yes, sir?"

"Enemy ahead, Anton," Root whispered.

"Yes, sir, I heard them."

"What, didn't smell them this time?"

"Too much snow, sir."

"Think you can find them?"

Anton grinned. "I know so."

"Good boy. Be quick and quiet. Off you go."

Anton stripped off all his gear, gave a choppy salute, then crawled off the trail and disappeared, burrowing through the underbrush like a hare. Good lad, Root thought. He often worried he'd no business bringing the boy into this; though Anton claimed to be eighteen, Root knew better.

Anton hadn't even seen his first whiskers. Old enough to kill and be killed, though.

Root turned and signaled Frenc and the others: Scout out; relax at the ready; full quiet.

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Thirty minutes later Anton returned, emerging like a ghost from the trees alongside the trail. He crawled up beside Root and took a gulp from the proffered canteen. He wiped his sleeve across his forehead. "Bunker, sir."

“Bunker or cave?” Of the many surprises the Dinarics had shown them, the most troublesome had been the hundreds of caves and sinkholes that pocked the landscape. You never knew if your next step would send you to the center of the earth.

“Bunker,” Anton replied. “Half a kilometer up the trail, built into the side of the hill at the mouth of a ravine. Good camouflage, too. I didn’t spot it until I was almost on top of it.”

“Signs of life?”

“Eight soldiers guarding the entrance and both ends of the ravine.”

“What kind?”

“German regular army, standard uniforms. Very good—quiet, no smoking.”

Disciplined fellows. What were Germans doing here? Root wondered. The Balkans were lost to them. The closest thing Bosnia had seen to a Hun in six months was some scattered

Austro-Hungarian troops. What were they doing guarding a bunker here, this late in the war?

“Very mysterious, eh?”

Anton smiled. “Maybe they’ve got treasure.”

Root smiled back. “If so, it’s all yours.” Root turned and signaled Frenech forward.

“Huns, Simon?” the Hungarian whispered in guttural English.

“Indeed.” Root recounted what Anton had found then said, “Here’s the plan: Have Pappas and Villejohn each take a Lewis team—put one on the slope overlooking the ravine, the other at the outlet.” The Lewis Gun was a tripod-mounted .303-caliber machine gun. Manned by a trigger man and a feeder, the Lewis’s rate of fire would provide cover if things went sour. The rest of the team was armed with bolt-action Enfields and German Mausers. “No shooting unless absolutely necessary,” Root finished.

Frenech grinned. “Knives and wires?”

“Right. If any of them makes a peep, who knows how many Huns’ll come running out of that bunker. We go slow and quiet. With any luck, we can get inside and surprise them.”

As was his habit when going face-to-face with the enemy, Root ordered Anton to stay behind. All the boy could do was watch helplessly as Simon and the others disappeared into trees, their trench knives and garrotes held at the ready. Twilight was falling now. Full darkness was only minutes away.

I could help them, Anton thought, I know I could. Of course, that didn’t matter. What mattered was that his commanding officer had given him an order. Anton loved Root with all his heart. Having lost his mother, father, and sisters two years earlier, he’d come to see Simon, Frenech, and the team as his family.

Anton closed his eyes and listened, waiting for the birdcalls that would mean Root and the others were in place and ready. The fifth call would be the go signal. Anton coiled his legs beneath him, waiting. Orders or not, if even one shot rang out, he'd be at Simon's side.

Careful, Simon, please be careful...

Ten long minutes passed.

Hoot-hoot... Then, three more calls: hazel grouse, wood pigeon, rock dove—Frenec, Pappas, and Villejohn in place and ready for action.

Anton closed his eyes, imagining what was happening below: As one, Root and the others rising from the underbrush...each man slipping like a ghost toward the German soldier...knife or garrote coming up and finding its mark...the dead man crumpling...

Ten seconds passed. Twenty. No shots came.

Come on, Simon...

Hoot-hoot. The all-clear signal.

Anton leapt up, sprinted up the trail and skidded to a halt at the crest of the slope. In the ravine below, Simon Root stood over a soldier's body. He gave Anton a wave and smile, then signaled him to come down.

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Just as Anton had described, Root found the bunker disguised as part of the hillside, complete with overhanging sod and foliage sprouting from holes in the concrete facade. They put some effort into this one, Time to find out. Root thought, and again wondered what could be so important.

He put his ear to the steel door. After a few seconds he heard the scuff of a boot and a murmured German voice. Just one, sounds like. That meant the door itself was probably locked from the inside. We'll have to wrangle an invitation.

Root signaled to Frenec, who nodded then began stripping off his clothes, as Villejohn and Pappas began doing the same to one of the German bodies. A minute later Frenec was wearing a greatcoat and wool pants. He placed a coal scuttle helmet on his head and pulled it low over his eyes. In his right fist, tucked out of sight against his pant leg, was his trench knife.

"Let's pray there's no password, eh?" Frenec whispered to Root.

"If so, improvise. Try 'I love the Kaiser.'"

Frenec grinned. "An you know I do."

Root and the rest of the team spread themselves along the hillside, knives and wires at the ready. Frenec stepped to the door and pounded on the steel. "Offen Sie! Ich muss scheisse!" Root smiled to himself. Nothing said "open up" like urgent bowels.

There was a metal clank-clank as the door's latches were thrown. The door swung open. Frenc stood bent at the waist, adjusting his boot strap.

"Gekommen auf," the guard said. Come on.

"Ja, ja..." Frenc muttered. Helmet still shielding his face, he lifted his head slightly, checking for other guards inside. "Warten Sie eine minute—"

Frenc's hand shot up, grabbed the guard's coat, and jerked hard. The guard stumbled forward.

Frenc's knife shot upward. There was an explosive grunt and the man crumpled forward.

Frenc hefted him over his shoulder, then waddled off into the trees. He reappeared moments later, wiping the knife on his pant leg. He grinned. "One less ugly in the world."

Root pointed to Villejohn. "Your team's on point, Reni. Room by room, knives and wires."

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The bunker's interior was dim, the passageways lit only by sputtering oil lamps. Shadows danced off the walls and Root could smell mildew in the chill air. Lining each side of the main passage were two doors; at the far end lay a T-turn. Somewhere in the distance Root could hear voices singing in German:

Underneath the lantern

By the barrack gate,

Darling, I remember

The way you used to wait...

"What is it?" Frenc whispered.

"Lili Marlene."

"Happy bastards, aren't they? I'll give them another mouth to smile out of."

"You're an angry fellow, Frenc, anyone ever tell you that?"

"Only you."

Ahead, Villejohn and Pappas each had his team waiting beside a door. Frenc took the third and Root, with Anton taking up the rear, the fourth. Once everyone was ready, Root gave the signal. As one, each team slipped through its door.

Root found himself face-to-face with a German soldier. Dressed in woolen long underwear and a gray T-shirt, the man froze, and a steaming mug lifted halfway to his mouth. His eyes went wide. Root stabbed the tip of his knife into the hollow of his throat, bundled him in a bear hug, and dragged him to the floor. Root's other men rushed past him and dispatched the other three soldiers where they lay in their bunks.

"Stash them," Root ordered, rising to his feet. "Tidy up. Anton, you okay?"

"Yes, sir."

Root stepped back into the passageway. Freneq, Pappas, and Villejohn were already there. Each gave a thumbs-up. Root nodded and pointed at Freneq: Next passage.

Fifteen minutes later they were done, having cleared the remaining rooms. The bunker was shaped like a T, with the main entrance at the base. At each end of the T's crossbar they found a pair of wide ladders leading downward. Strains of "Lili Marlene" continued to echo up the shafts.

In all, there'd been thirty soldiers, all fit, well fed, and well equipped—if a little green. Root knew they would've had a harder time with seasoned troops. Of course, that didn't change the facts: The Huns had stuck a lot of men in a bunker that was not only strategically obsolete, but hundreds of miles away from the nearest German units.

He and his squad leaders gathered in the main passage and crouched in a circle. Freneq puffed on a red hussar. The backs of his hands were slick with blood. Pappas coughed once, then stifled a sneeze. "Bloody weather's giving me the grippe," he grumbled.

"Doc, heal thyself," Villejohn said with a smile. Pappas was the team's corpsman.

"Root asked, "Documents?"

Each man shook his head. "Just bunk rooms, a crapper, and a kitchen." Freneq said. "Most of the idiots were asleep—probably just got off watch."

Makes sense, Root thought. Germans had a habit of changing watches at dusk and dawn.

"Uniforms?"

Pappas shook his head. "They're all stripped—no unit insignias, patches, ribbons—nothing."

"ID disks?"

"Gone."

A genuine mystery, Root thought again. What was so damned important about this place?

Though he didn't have that answer, he had an idea where he might find it.

"Okay, then," he said. "Down we go. If there're any secrets to be had, that's where we'll find them. Freneq and I'll go first and have a look."

Root and Freneq stood up, handed their rifles to the other two, then walked to the head of the ladder. A gust of air blew up the shaft; Root shivered. He drew his Webley pistol—he'd give up his Colt after it jammed three times at Messines—checked the cylinder, reholstered it. He looked at Villejohn and Pappas and the rest of the men arrayed behind them. He gave them a smile, clapped Anton on the shoulder, then said, "Mystery awaits, boys."

Root placed his foot on the rung and started downward, unaware he was stepping into a nightmare that would consume the remainder of his life.

Einach, Austria, 1993

Istvan was wondering if he'd made a mistake. So certain of his decision just hours before, now, in the quiet shadows of his berth, the words of his friend echoes in his mind. The rhythmic clacking of the train's steel wheels lulled him into drowsiness. Moonlight streamed through the window, casting shadows against the wall as the train started its climb into the foothills of the Steiermark Alps.

A heavy snow had begun falling outside Salzburg, and now the landscape was a pristine white, the trees bushy with powder. In the distance Istvan could see the twinkling lights of Paal.

Better to leave it be, my friend...It's worked well for us all these years...In a few years perhaps, but let's wait and see...

Should he have listened? Istvan wondered. There had been times over the years when it could have easily been lost, but still it remained safe and hidden from the world. Through wars and upheaval, Tirol had been good to them.

He looked up at the luggage rack and the case strapped there. It vibrated with the train's motion, the catches ticking like an old-fashioned telegraph machine. Istvan smiled ruefully: Sending me a message, are you, old friend?

What have I done? he thought. I've been stupid, that's what. And suddenly he found himself decided. That's it, then. It wasn't too late.

He would get off at Graz, catch the next train back to Innsbruck, and by morning the case would be back where it belonged. Yes, good. He felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

He took a deep breath, then rolled over and drifted off to sleep.

He was jolted awake by the grinding of steel on steel. The train's whistle shrieked once, then twice more. The car lurched. Istvan tumbled from his bunk, rolled across the floor, and slammed into the wall. Pain flashed behind his eyes. He shook his head clear, crawled to the window, pulled himself up to the pane.

"Oh my God...," he gasped.

Outside the window, the ballast slope gave way to a partially frozen lake, the ice shimmering dully in the moonlight. As he watched, the water seemed to rise toward the window.

We're rocking! he thought. The walls shuddered as the car slammed back onto the tracks, then tipped in the opposite direction. The entire train was rocking from side to side as though it were being swatted by giant, unseen hands. The case! He glanced up. He saw the glimmer of the case's steel side, still strapped in place.

From the passageway he heard an explosive crash, followed by more grinding, followed by the whoosh of air. His door began rattling wildly. Voices screamed in the distance, "Mein gott...mein

gott! Istvan dropped to his belly, scrambled toward the door, grabbed the latch, and jerked it open.

The wall across the passageway was gone, a jagged floor-to-ceiling hole in its place. Through it he could see rocks and trees flashing past. Snow streamed through the opening, creating a small blizzard in the passage. The emergency lights on the walls flickered yellow.

“Mutter...Mutter wo sind Sie!” a child screamed. Mother, where are you!

“Gott, helfen...!”

God can't help us, Istvan thought, staring transfixed at the cliff face.

The car lurched again. He felt himself stumbling backward. He crashed into the window. The glass shattered. Cold air rushed in. He felt himself falling. He grabbed the pane first with one hand, then the other, then heaved himself back into the compartment. He dropped to his knees and glanced over his shoulder.

Oh, no, oh please no ...

The lake's surface loomed before the window. Instinctively, he knew the angle was too great. The train wouldn't right itself this time. He threw himself toward the bunk, grabbed the frame. Jaw set against the pull of gravity, he dragged himself to his feet. He stretched his fingers toward the case.

As his fingertips touched the handle, he heard a roar. He turned around. A wall of icy water rushed toward him.