

again,” sighed Trofimov.

“Not in this life. But maybe ... maybe in the next.”

“I don’t know anything about that, but it would be nice.”

“Farewell and God bless you.” The old man hugged Trofimov and made the sign of the cross over him.

“Farewell, Vladimir Semyonovich. I hope things won’t turn out too badly for you here.”

As he walked out, Trofimov looked back for one final glance at the old man’s face with its sad but proud expression.

A couple of days later, just as Yatta had forecast, in the early morning it began to snow. It was not a blizzard that could quickly bury a man, but a moderately heavy fall, steady and continuous. Yatta predicted it would continue for another couple of days. It was therefore a perfect time for them to make a start, and it would be unreasonable to miss the opportunity.

In the interval between reveille and breakfast, Trofimov, Bondarenko, Goldberg and Timoshkin went to the latrine to meet and discuss their final arrangements. Immediately after breakfast, they had a brief meeting with Yatta, and Bondarenko reminded him of the location of their logging site.

The workday went on as usual. They laboured without pause. They could not carry out their plan until after the lunch break, otherwise their absence and the screw’s body would be discovered in the middle of the day. The best time was soon after the lunch break, after which they would have the remaining six hours of the workday and another hour for the journey back in which to make their getaway. Since many foremen kept their teams working after normal hours in order to complete the day’s work plan, they would have a further hour before any search was mounted, plus another three quarters of an hour at least before anyone reached their work site and established that they had escaped. The five of them thus had at least eight hours and forty-five minutes at their disposal.

Corporal Vassily Panteleyev slowly stumped around on his skis, keeping an eye on the men at work and smoking yet another in his endless chain of shag cigars. It was ten to four in the

afternoon according to his watch, which meant six hours more—an eternity— before he could lead the prisoners back to the compound and himself return to the warmth of his barracks, to a game of cards and his evening drink. For all those hours he would sit shivering in the biting wind and even envy the convicts who were kept warm by their hard work. How sick and tired he was of this Arctic region with its short cold summers and long frozen winters. Why, even in the fall your spittle froze as you spat! Then there was the constant canned beef for breakfast, dinner and supper, his only pleasure the nocturnal masturbation on his cot, while he dreamed of some girl with a nice pair of tits and a nice round bum. He had more than a year to go before he could return to his native town in central Russia. On the other hand, what sort of life awaited him there? Slaving away in the local ore mine, lining up for hours outside the food stores, and an endless series of trade union, Young Communist League and other goddamned meetings. Meanwhile he would be forced to see the girl he had hankered after but who had chosen another. He had gone off to do his military service without even having been kissed!

Timoshkin raised his axe and struck Trofimov on the shoulder. Cursing, Trofimov dropped his axe, launched himself at Timoshkin and punched him in the face.

“Hey!” Panteleyev yelled, “What the fuck’s going on? Back to work, you filthy shitasses. Settle your scores in the evening, not now.”

Trofimov and Timoshkin took no notice and continued struggling.

“You scumbags,” Panteleyev shouted angrily. “I’ll teach you a lesson.” He removed the Kalashnikov from his shoulder, rushed at the fighting men and beat both of them with the butt of his gun. As he did so, Bondarenko leapt behind him with his axe. He brought the blade down on the screw’s head and his skull shattered. His lifeless body fell onto Trofimov and Timoshkin, pushing them into the snow.

“Captain. Zakharych.” Bondarenko urged. “Get up. He’s finished.”

Trofimov and Timoshkin scrambled to their feet. Goldberg

turned away and raised his eyes to heaven.

“There we are, guys.” Timoshkin glanced at his friends and at Panteleyev’s dead body. “We’re free!” He hugged Trofimov and Bondarenko. “We’re really free.” He walked around ecstatically, his nose bleeding and his right eye starting to bruise.

“Don’t tempt fate, Zakharych,” Trofimov said quietly. “That’s only the first step.” He looked around. “Mikhail, get into his uniform. Luckily there’s no blood on it.”

Bondarenko dragged Panteleyev’s body towards the fire and stripped off his clothes.

“Poor bastard,” Goldberg sighed. “He’s so young, twenty at most. And now ...”

“I don’t know how many more we’ll have to kill,” Trofimov said.

“But we’ll definitely have to, perhaps even today. If Yatta comes along with an escort, then ... What time is it now?”

Bondarenko, who had finished putting on Panteleyev’s uniform with a warm sweater underneath, looked at the dead man’s watch. “Four o’clock,” he said.

“Yatta’s due here within half an hour,” Trofimov reminded them. He looked at Bondarenko. “Why, Mikhail,” he said, “You look like a real soldier.”

“Not a bad trophy,” Timoshkin agreed.

“Will you hear when they come, Mikhail?” Trofimov asked.

“Sure.”

“Then give us the signal.” Trofimov turned to the others. “The rest of us will hide.”

Bondarenko searched the pockets of his new army greatcoat and produced a flask. “Look, liquor.”

Trofimov looked in his direction. “Have a sip and give us some.”

“To our liberation.” Bondarenko raised the flask and drank.

Trofimov echoed. “To our long-awaited freedom.”