

I

Snow covered the airfield.

It had come from the north, in the mist, driven by the night wind, smelling of the sea. There it would stay all Winter, threadbare on the grey earth, an icy, sharp dust; not thawing and freezing, but static like a year without seasons. The changing mist, like the smoke of war, would hang over it, swallow up now a hangar, now the radar hut, now the machines; release them piece by piece, drained of colour, black carrion on a white desert.

It was a scene of no depth, no recession and no shadows. The land was one with the sky; figures and buildings locked in the cold like bodies in an icefloe.

Beyond the airfield there was nothing; no house, no hill, no road; not even a fence, a tree; only the sky pressing on the dunes, the running fog that lifted on the muddy Baltic shore. Somewhere inland were the mountains.

A group of children in school caps had gathered at the long observation window, chatting in German. Some wore ski clothes. Taylor gazed dully past them, holding a glass in his gloved hand. A boy turned round and stared at him, blushed and whispered to the other children. They fell silent.

He looked at his watch, making a wide arc with his arm, partly to free the sleeve of his overcoat and partly because it

was his style; a military man, he wished you to say, decent regiment, decent club, knocked around in the war.

Ten to four. The plane was an hour late. They would have to announce the reason soon over the loudspeaker. He wondered what they would say: delayed by fog, perhaps; delayed take-off. They probably didn't even know – and they certainly would not admit – that she was two hundred miles off course, and south of Rostock. He finished his drink, turned to get rid of the empty glass. He had to admit that some of these foreign hooches, drunk in their own country, weren't at all bad. On the spot, with a couple of hours to kill and ten degrees of frost the other side of the window, you could do a lot worse than Steinhäger. He'd make them order it at the Alias Club when he got back. Cause quite a stir.

The loudspeaker was humming; it blared suddenly, faded out and began again, properly tuned. The children stared expectantly at it. First, the announcement in Finnish, then in Swedish, now in English. Northern Air Services regretted the delay to their charter flight two-nine-zero from Düsseldorf. No hint of how long, no hint of why. They probably didn't know themselves.

But Taylor knew. He wondered what would happen if he sauntered over to that pert little hostess in the glass box and told her: two-nine-zero will be a bit of time yet, my dear, she's been blown off course by heavy northerly gales over the Baltic, bearings all to Hades. The girl wouldn't believe him, of course, she'd think he was a crank. Later she'd know better. She'd realise he was something rather unusual, something rather special.

Outside it was already growing dark. Now the ground was lighter than the sky; the swept runways stood out against the snow like dykes, stained with the amber glow of marking

lights. In the nearest hangars neon tubes shed a weary pallor over men and aeroplanes; the foreground beneath him sprang briefly to life as a beam from the control tower flicked across it. A fire engine had pulled away from the workshops on the left and joined the three ambulances already parked short of the centre runway. Simultaneously they switched on their blue rotating lights, and stood in line patiently flashing out their warning. The children pointed at them, chattering excitedly.

The girl's voice began again on the loudspeaker, it could only have been a few minutes since the last announcement. Once more the children stopped talking and listened. The arrival of flight two-nine-zero would be delayed at least another hour. Further information would be given as soon as it became available. There was something in the girl's voice, midway between surprise and anxiety, which seemed to communicate itself to the half-dozen people sitting at the other end of the waiting-room. An old woman said something to her husband, stood up, took her handbag and joined the group of children. For a time she peered stupidly into the twilight. Finding no comfort there, she turned to Taylor and said in English, 'What is become of the Düsseldorf plane?' Her voice had the throaty, indignant lilt of a Dutchwoman. Taylor shook his head. 'Probably the snow,' he replied. He was a brisk man; it went with his military way.

Pushing open the swing door, Taylor made his way downstairs to the reception hall. Near to the main entrance he recognised the yellow pennant of the Northern Air Services. The girl at the desk was very pretty.

'What's happened to the Düsseldorf flight?' His style was confiding; they said he had a knack with little girls. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

'I expect it is the snow. We are often having delays in Autumn.'

'Why don't you ask the boss?' he suggested, indicating with a nod the telephone in front of her.

'They will tell it on the loudspeaker,' she said, 'as soon as they know.'

'Who's the skipper, dear?'

'Please?'

'Who's the skipper, the captain?'

'Captain Lansen.'

'Is he any good?'

The girl was shocked. 'Captain Lansen is a very experienced pilot.'

Taylor looked her over, grinned and said, 'He's a very *lucky* pilot anyway, my dear.' They said he knew a thing or two, old Taylor did. They said it at the Alias on Friday nights.

Lansen. It was odd to hear a name spoken out like that. In the outfit they simply never did it. They favoured circumlocution, cover names, anything but the original: Archie boy, our flying friend, our friend up north, the chappie who takes the snapshots; they would even use the tortuous collection of figures and letters by which he was known on paper; but never in any circumstances the name.

Lansen. Leclerc had shown him a photograph in London: a boyish thirty-five, fair and good-looking. He'd bet those hostesses went mad about him; that's all they were, anyway, cannon-fodder for the pilots. No one else got a look in. Taylor ran his right hand quickly over the outside of his overcoat pocket just to make sure the envelope was still there. He'd never carried this sort of money before. Five thousand dollars for one flight; seventeen hundred pounds, tax free, to lose your way over the Baltic. Mind you, Lansen didn't do that every day.

This was special, Leclerc had said so. He wondered what she would do if he leant across the counter and told her who he was; showed her the money in that envelope. He'd never had a girl like that, a real girl, tall and young.

He went upstairs again to the bar. The barman was getting to know him. Taylor pointed to the bottle of Steinhäger on the centre shelf and said, 'Give me another of those, d'you mind? That's it, the fellow just behind you; some of your local poison.'

'It's German,' the barman said.

He opened his wallet and took out a banknote. In the Celophane compartment there was a photograph of a girl, perhaps nine years old, wearing glasses and holding a doll. 'My daughter,' he explained to the barman, and the barman gave a watery smile.

His voice varied a lot, like the voice of a commercial traveller. His phoney drawl was more extravagant when he addressed his own class, when it was a matter of emphasising a distinction which did not exist; or as now, when he was nervous.

He had to admit: he was windy. It was an eerie situation for a man of his experience and age, going over from routine courier work to operational stuff. This was a job for those swine in the Circus, not for his outfit at all. A different kettle of fish altogether, this was, from the ordinary run-of-the-mill stuff he was used to; stuck out on a limb, miles from nowhere. It beat him how they ever came to put an airport in a place like this. He quite liked the foreign trips as a rule: a visit to old Jimmy Gorton in Hamburg, for instance, or a night on the tiles in Madrid. It did him good to get away from Joanie. He'd done the Turkish run a couple of times, though he didn't care for wogs. But even that was a piece of cake compared to this:

first-class travel and the bags on the seat beside him, a Nato pass in his pocket; a man had status, doing a job like that; good as the diplomatic boys, or nearly. But this was different, and he didn't like it.

Leclerc had said it was big, and Taylor believed him. They had got him a passport with another name. Malherbe. Pronounced Mallaby, they said. Christ alone knew who'd chosen it. Taylor couldn't even spell it; made a botch of the hotel register when he signed in that morning. The subsistence was fantastic, of course: fifteen quid a day operational expenses, no vouchers asked for. He'd heard the Circus gave seventeen. He could make a good bit on that, buy something for Joanie. She'd probably rather have the money.

He'd told her, of course: he wasn't supposed to, but Leclerc didn't know Joanie. He lit a cigarette, drew from it and held it in the palm of his hand like a sentry smoking on duty. How the hell was he supposed to push off to Scandinavia without telling his wife?

He wondered what those kids were doing, glued to the window all this time. Amazing the way they managed the foreign language. He looked at his watch again, scarcely noticing the time, touched the envelope in his pocket. Better not have another drink; he must keep a clear head. He tried to guess what Joanie was doing now. Probably having a sit-down with a gin and something. A pity she had to work all day.

He suddenly realised that everything had gone silent. The barman was standing still, listening. The old people at the table were listening too, their silly faces turned towards the observation window. Then he heard it quite distinctly, the sound of an aircraft, still far away, but approaching the airfield. He made quickly for the window, was halfway there when the loudspeaker began; after the first few words of German the children, like

a flock of pigeons, fluttered away to the reception lounge. The party at the table had stood up; the women were reaching for their gloves, the men for their coats and briefcases. At last the announcer gave the English. Lansen was coming in to land.

Taylor stared into the night. There was no sign of the plane. He waited, his anxiety mounting. It's like the end of the world, he thought, the end of the bloody world out there. Supposing Lansen crashed; supposing they found the cameras. He wished someone else were handling it. Woodford, why hadn't Woodford taken it over, or sent that clever college boy Avery? The wind was stronger; he could swear it was far stronger; he could tell from the way it stirred the snow, flinging it over the runway; the way it tore at the flares; the way it made white columns on the horizon, dashing them vehemently away like a hated creation. A gust struck suddenly at the windows in front of him, making him recoil, and there followed the rattle of ice grains and the short grunt of the wooden frame. Again he looked at his watch; it had become a habit with Taylor. It seemed to help, knowing the time.

Lansen will never make it in this, never.

His heart stood still. Softly at first, then rising swiftly to a wail, he heard the klaxons, all four together, moaning out over that godforsaken airfield like the howl of starving animals. Fire . . . the plane must be on fire. He's on fire and he's going to try and land . . . he turned frantically, looking for someone who could tell him.

The barman was standing beside him, polishing a glass, looking through the window.

'What's going on?' Taylor shouted. 'Why are the sirens going?'

'They always make the sirens in bad weather,' he replied. 'It is the law.'

‘Why are they letting him land?’ Taylor insisted. ‘Why don’t they route him farther south? It’s too small, this place; why don’t they send him somewhere bigger?’

The barman shook his head indifferently. ‘It’s not so bad,’ he said indicating the airfield. ‘Besides, he is very late. Maybe he has no petrol.’

They saw the plane low over the airfield, her lights alternating above the flares; her spotlights scanned the runway. She was down, safely down, and they heard the roar of her throttle as she began the long taxi to the reception point.

The bar had emptied. He was alone. Taylor ordered a drink. He knew his drill: stay put in the bar, Leclerc had said, Lansen will meet you in the bar. He’ll take a bit of time; got to cope with his flight documents, clear his cameras. Taylor heard the children singing downstairs, and a woman leading them. Why the hell did he have to be surrounded by kids and women? He was doing a man’s job, wasn’t he, with five thousand dollars in his pocket and a phoney passport?

‘There are no more flights today,’ the barman said. ‘They have forbidden all flying now.’

Taylor nodded. ‘I know. It’s bloody shocking out there, shocking.’

The barman was putting away bottles. ‘There was no danger,’ he added soothingly. ‘Captain Lansen is a very good pilot.’ He hesitated, not knowing whether to put away the Steinhäger.

‘Of course there wasn’t any danger,’ Taylor snapped. ‘Who said anything about danger?’

‘Another drink?’ the barman said.

‘No, but you have one. Go on, have one yourself.’

The barman reluctantly gave himself a drink, locked the bottle away.

'All the same, how do they do it?' Taylor asked. His voice was conciliatory, putting it right with the barman. 'They can't see a thing in weather like this, not a damn thing.' He smiled knowingly. 'You sit there in the nose and you might just as well have your eyes shut for all the good they do. I've seen it,' Taylor added, his hands loosely cupped in front of him as though he were at the controls. 'I know what I'm talking about . . . and they're the first to catch it, those boys, if something *does* go wrong.' He shook his head. 'They can keep it,' he declared. 'They're entitled to every penny they earn. Specially in a kite that size. They're held together with string, those things; string.'

The barman nodded distantly, finished his drink, washed up the empty glass, dried it and put it on the shelf under the counter. He unbuttoned his white jacket.

Taylor made no move.

'Well,' said the barman with a mirthless smile, 'we have to go home now.'

'What do you mean *we*?' Taylor asked, opening his eyes wide and tilting back his head. 'What do you mean?' He'd take on anyone now; Lansen had landed.

'I have to close the bar.'

'Go home indeed. Give us another drink, come on. You can go home if you like. I happen to live in London.' His tone was challenging, half playful, half resentful, gathering volume. 'And since your aircraft companies are unable to *get* me to London, or any other damn place until tomorrow morning, it's a bit silly of you to tell me to go there, isn't it, old boy?' He was still smiling, but it was the short, angry smile of a nervous man losing his temper. 'And next time you accept a drink from me, chum, I'll trouble you to have the courtesy . . .'

The door opened and Lansen came in.

★

This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen; this wasn't the way they'd described it at all. Stay in the bar, Leclerc had said, sit at the corner table, have a drink, put your hat and coat on the other chair as if you're waiting for someone. Lansen always has a beer when he clocks in. He likes the public lounge, it's Lansen's style. There'll be people milling about, Leclerc said. It's a small place but there's always something going on at these airports. He'll look around for somewhere to sit – quite open and above board – then he'll come over and ask you if anyone's using the chair. You'll say you kept it free for a friend but the friend hadn't turned up: Lansen will ask if he can sit there. He'll order a beer, then say, 'Boy friend or girl friend?' You'll tell him not to be indelicate, and you'll both laugh a bit and get talking. Ask the two questions: height and airspeed. Research Section must know the height and airspeed. Leave the money in your overcoat pocket. He'll pick up your coat, hang his own beside it and help himself quietly, without any fuss, taking the envelope and dropping the film into your coat pocket. You finish your drinks, shake hands, and Bob's your uncle. In the morning you fly home. Leclerc had made it sound so simple.

Lansen strode across the empty room towards them, a tall, strong figure in a blue mackintosh and cap. He looked briefly at Taylor and spoke past him to the barman: 'Jens, give me a beer.' Turning to Taylor he said, 'What's yours?'

Taylor smiled thinly. 'Some of your local stuff.'

'Give him whatever he wants. A double.'

The barman briskly buttoned up his jacket, unlocked the cupboard and poured out a large Steinhäger. He gave Lansen a beer from the cooler.

'Are you from Leclerc?' Lansen inquired shortly. Anyone could have heard.

‘Yes.’ He added tamely, far too late, ‘Leclerc and Company, London.’

Lansen picked up his beer and took it to the nearest table. His hand was shaking. They sat down.

‘Then you tell me,’ he said fiercely, ‘which damn fool gave me those instructions?’

‘I don’t know.’ Taylor was taken aback. ‘I don’t even know what your instructions were. It’s not my fault. I was sent to collect the film, that’s all. It’s not even my job, this kind of thing. I’m on the overt side – courier.’

Lansen leant forward, his hand on Taylor’s arm. Taylor could feel him trembling. ‘I was on the overt side too. Until today. There were kids on that plane. Twenty-five German schoolchildren on Winter holidays. A whole load of kids.’

‘Yes.’ Taylor forced a smile. ‘Yes, we had the reception committee in the waiting-room.’

Lansen burst out, ‘What were we *looking* for, that’s what I don’t understand. What’s so exciting about Rostock?’

‘I tell you I’m nothing to do with it.’ He added inconsistently: ‘Leclerc said it wasn’t Rostock but the area south.’

‘The triangle south: Kalkstadt, Langdorn, Wolken. You don’t have to tell me the area.’

Taylor looked anxiously towards the barman.

‘I don’t think we should talk so loud,’ he said. ‘That fellow’s a bit anti.’ He drank some Steinhäger.

Lansen made a gesture with his hand as if he were brushing something from in front of his face. ‘It’s finished,’ he said. ‘I don’t want any more. It’s finished. It was OK when we just stayed on course photographing whatever there was; but this is too damn much, see? Just too damn, damn much altogether.’ His accent was thick and clumsy, like an impediment.

‘Did you get any pictures?’ Taylor asked. He must get the film and go.

Lansen shrugged, put his hand in his raincoat pocket and, to Taylor’s horror, extracted a zinc container for thirty-five-millimetre film, handing it to him across the table.

‘What was it?’ Lansen asked again. ‘What were they after in such a place? I went under the cloud, circled the whole area. I didn’t see any atom bombs.’

‘Something important, that’s all they told me. Something big. It’s got to be done, don’t you see? You can’t make illegal flights over an area like that.’ Taylor was repeating what someone had said. ‘It has to be an airline, a registered airline, or nothing. There’s no other way.’

‘Listen. They picked us up as soon as we got into the place. Two MIGs. Where did they come from, that’s what I want to know? As soon as I saw them I turned into cloud; they followed me. I put out a signal, asking for bearings. When we came out of the cloud, there they were again. I thought they’d force me down, order me to land. I tried to jettison the camera but it was stuck. The kids were all crowding the windows, waving at the MIGs. They flew alongside for a time, then peeled off. They came close, very close. It was bloody dangerous for the kids.’ He hadn’t touched his beer. ‘What the hell did they want?’ he asked. ‘Why didn’t they order me down?’

‘I told you: it’s not my fault. This isn’t my kind of work. But whatever London are looking for, they know what they’re doing.’ He seemed to be convincing himself; he needed to believe in London. ‘They don’t waste their time. Or yours, old boy. They know what they’re up to.’ He frowned, to indicate conviction, but Lansen might not have heard.

‘They don’t believe in unnecessary risks either,’ Taylor said. ‘You’ve done a good job, Lansen. We all have to do our bit . . .

take risks. We all do. I did in the war, you know. You're too young to remember the war. This is the same job; we're fighting for the same thing.' He suddenly remembered the two questions. 'What height were you doing when you took the pictures?'

'It varied. We were down to six thousand feet over Kalkstadt.'

'It was Kalkstadt they wanted most,' Taylor said with appreciation. 'That's first-class, Lansen, first-class. What was your airspeed?'

'Two hundred . . . two forty. Something like this. There was nothing there, I'm telling you, nothing.' He lit a cigarette.

'It's the end now,' Lansen repeated. 'However big the target is.' He stood up. Taylor got up too; he put his right hand in his overcoat pocket. Suddenly his throat went dry: the money, where was the money?

'Try the other pocket,' Lansen suggested.

Taylor handed him the envelope. 'Will there be trouble about this? About the MIGs, I mean?'

Lansen shrugged. 'I doubt it, it hasn't happened to me before. They'll believe me once; they'll believe it was the weather. I went off course about halfway. There could have been a fault in the ground control. In the hand-over.'

'What about the navigator? What about the rest of the crew? What do they think?'

'That's my business,' said Lansen sourly. 'You can tell London it's the end.'

Taylor looked at him anxiously. 'You're just upset,' he said, 'after the tension.'

'Go to hell,' said Lansen softly. 'Go to bloody hell.' He turned away, put a coin on the counter and strode out of the bar, stuffing carelessly into his raincoat pocket the long buff envelope which contained the money.

After a moment Taylor followed him. The barman watched him push his way through the door and disappear down the stairs. A very distasteful man, he reflected; but then he never had liked the English.

Taylor thought at first that he would not take a taxi to the hotel. He could walk it in ten minutes and save a bit on subsistence. The airline girl nodded to him as he passed her on his way to the main entrance. The reception hall was done in teak; blasts of warm air rose from the floor. Taylor stepped outside. Like the thrust of a sword the cold cut through his clothes; like the numbness of an encroaching poison it spread swiftly over his naked face, feeling its way into his neck and shoulders. Changing his mind, he looked round hastily for a taxi. He was drunk. He suddenly realised: the fresh air had made him drunk. The rank was empty. An old Citroën was parked fifty yards up the road, its engine running. He's got the heater on, lucky devil, thought Taylor and hurried back through the swing doors.

'I want a cab,' he said to the girl. 'Where can I get one, d'you know?' He hoped to God he looked all right. He was mad to have drunk so much. He shouldn't have accepted that drink from Lanssen.

She shook her head. 'They have taken the children,' she said. 'Six in each car. That was the last flight today. We don't have many taxis in Winter.' She smiled. 'It's a very *little* airport.'

'What's that up the road, that old car? Not a cab, is it?' His voice was indistinct.

She went to the doorway and looked out. She had a careful balancing walk, artless and provocative.

'I don't see any car,' she said.

Taylor looked past her. 'There was an old Citroën. Lights

on. Must have gone. I just wondered.' Christ, it went past and he'd never heard it.

'The taxis are all Volvos,' the girl remarked. 'Perhaps one will come back after he has dropped the children. Why don't you go and have a drink?'

'Bar's closed,' Taylor snapped. 'Barman's gone home.'

'Are you staying at the airport hotel?'

'The Regina, yes. I'm in a hurry, as a matter of fact.' It was easier now. 'I'm expecting a phone call from London.'

She looked doubtfully at his coat; it was of rainproof material in a pebble weave. 'You could walk,' she suggested. 'It is ten minutes, straight down the road. They can send your luggage later.'

Taylor looked at his watch, the same wide gesture. 'Luggage is already at the hotel. I arrived this morning.'

He had that kind of crumpled, worried face which is only a hair's breadth from the music halls and yet is infinitely sad; a face in which the eyes are paler than their environment, and the contours converge upon the nostrils. Aware of this, perhaps, Taylor had grown a trivial moustache, like a scrawl on a photograph, which made a muddle of his face without concealing its shortcomings. The effect was to inspire disbelief, not because he was a rogue but because he had no talent for deception. Similarly he had tricks of movement crudely copied from some lost original, such as an irritating habit which soldiers have of arching his back suddenly, as if he had discovered himself in an unseemly posture, or he would affect an agitation about the knees and elbows which feebly caricatured an association with horses. Yet the whole was dignified by pain, as if he were holding his little body stiff against a cruel wind.

'If you walk quickly,' she said, 'it takes less than ten minutes.'