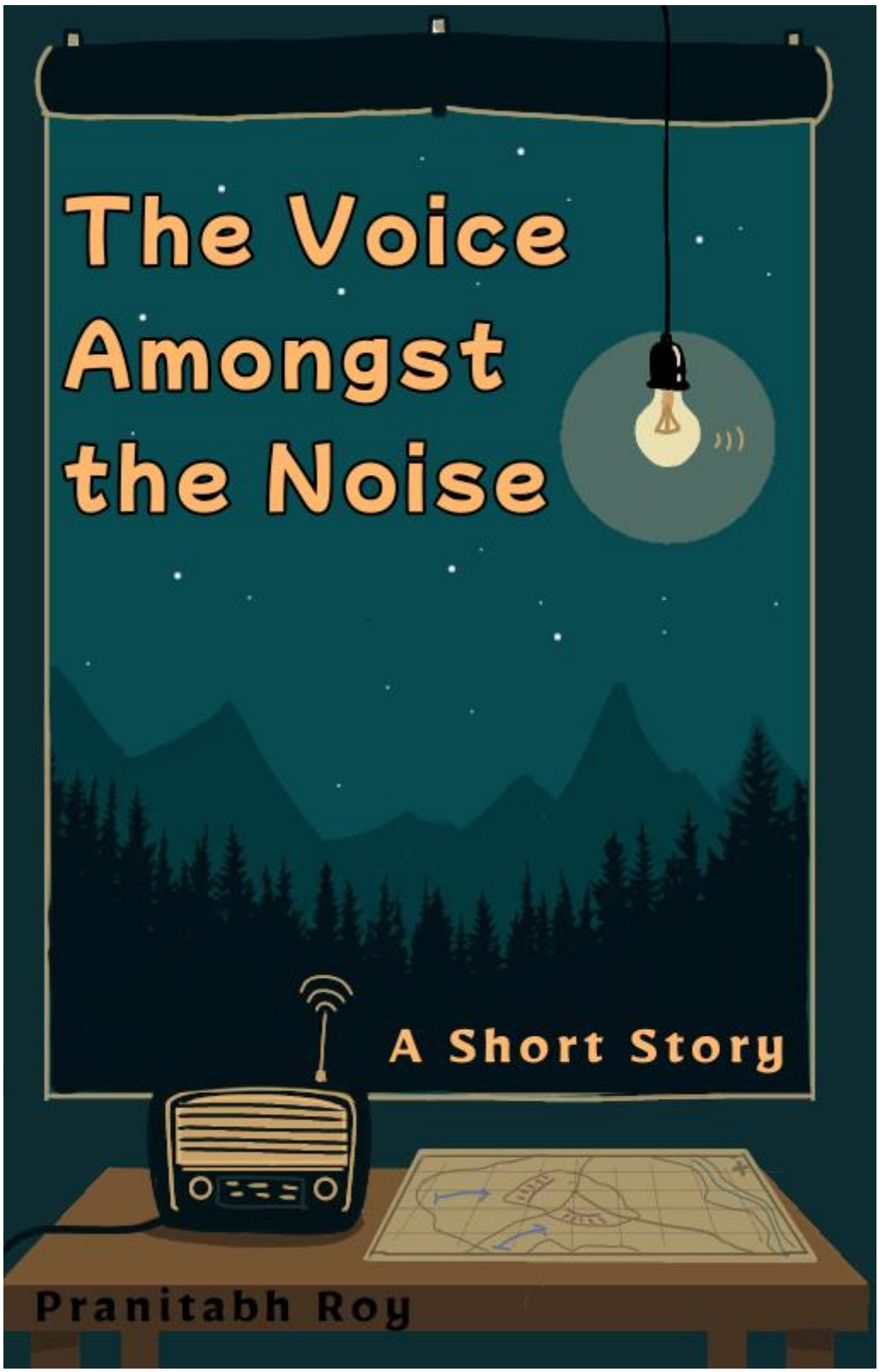
THE VOICE AMONGST THE NOISE

Tales of Hoot

A Short Story by Pranitabh Roy

The Buried Compass Series #4

Book Cover



About

War talks through things that shouldn't speak—radios, bulbs, wind, the hum that forgets it's a machine—and a major in the army decides whether to call that a miracle or a trap.

Every warning saves a step and sells a doubt; every choice buys a silence; choose—noise or voice.

What's signed at the end is simple: a name, a date, and whether the smoke agreed to clear.

Contents

001 – Dialed In

Outskirts of Basel, January 1945.

We landed at Cannes in August and pushed northeast in company columns and convoy stutters—the kind of advance that looks straight on a map and crooked underfoot—and by winter our trail had hardened into a routine no one admired but everyone trusted.

To the north, the Normandy boys were writing their own line east, slow and stubborn, and higher up the board the arrows promised our two lines would meet, because arrows are optimistic even when boots are not. Our colonel's battalion carries both teeth and echo. I am a major of C Company. My job is simple: keep my men breathing until someone says we can go home. The colonel, our commanding officer (CO), has four companies under him—three rifles, one heavy weapon—plus the artillery boys behind us with their 105s. Standard setup. Nothing fancy. Nothing I haven't seen before. The mission description is short: take ground, hold ground, return names—and the part in the middle is where most of the arguing happens.

Basel sits ahead with its coat buttoned—mills with too many windows, an orchard slipping into narrow lanes, a freight spur that pretends not to be important, roofs carrying the same thin frost as helmets at first light. We camp on the western side of town, where the woods begin. The men are tired in the standard way: eyes red, boots credible, jokes recycled; and the bond is the practical kind—shared rations, shared foxholes, shared silence that doesn't need a reason to exist. War trims the talk down to what holds weight, and among us that's names, ammo counts, and whether the mail found the right company this time.

Afternoon finds me in the company tent with the map board, grease pencil, and an SCR set that hisses like a winter field, and I watch the radio because sometimes it behaves and sometimes it remembers it was built

in a hurry. The noise tightens without warning and then—instead of dots and dashes—a line of English knocks through.

My English. Not German. Not French. Just four words, like someone's reading a grocery list:
"South," "check," "shed," "prints"—the words arriving clean, one by one, while everything else in the static drops away to make room. I run the knobs out of habit—gain, frequency, back again—but the set has said what it meant. I call over to the comms tent. "Sergeant, you copy anything on the radio just now?"
"Negative, sir. Just the usual snow." I check with battalion. Nothing. I check with regiment. Nothing. Our frequency's clean. No traffic. No intercepts. No friendly units in the area broadcasting anything that sounds like what I heard. Was it the news? Of course not; the SCR wasn't on that frequency. It was as if it dialed into something else.

One of the words did say shed, and there is a shed at the orchard edge—supply overflow, spare tools—and I walk there with a sergeant and a key. Inside is ordinary: crates, ledger boxes, oil, a floor that records nothing it didn't intend to, and we come away with an inventory that reads like a confession of normalcy. I do not brief the colonel on normalcy; officers don't spend other people's attention that way.

Night comes early in January: it offers stew in steel trays and a short meeting in a warmer tent, and the CO talks schedules while the men trade cigarettes and stories they've already heard, because repetition is another way of saying "still here." Back in my cot, the generator keeps its low, even note; the wind presses a palm against canvas; and for a breath the hum leans toward almost-words—not the radio now, the machine itself—and I log the sensation under "fatigue".

Morning brings a scout report from a corporal, quick enough to smoke in the cold, and the corporal reads the line that matters first: footprints a few meters into the woods—the boys checked—and it's found south of the shed, fresh, pausing near the break in the fence, then lost in scrub and drift. I stare at the report. Then at the radio. Then back at the report. The words line up in my head: South. Check. Shed. Prints. The radio sits

there looking innocent. The generator keeps its steady hum. Outside, Basel waits like it's been waiting for centuries.

Four words yesterday. Four words that led me to exactly what they said I'd find. The question isn't how. The question is who. And why they wanted me to know.

002 – Frequency Matched

The colonel called me in. “Explain the shed,” he said. Straight. No extra words. I kept it the same. “Fresh tracks near the shed, sir. Likely Nazi scouts checking our line. I recommend we push a patrol deeper into the trees. Also, put our artillery on alert in case they’re marking for guns.” He watched my face, then nodded. “Do it. Keep me informed.” That’s how we talk. That’s how we move.

I sent First Squad into the woods—quiet, spread, short radio checks every ten minutes. I told the Fire Direction Center to keep tubes warm and fuses ready. “Short-notice missions only,” I said. “Copy that, C Company,” they answered. Everyone stayed close to their jobs. That’s what keeps people upright out here. Then I went back to the tent and sat with the radio. Waiting for nothing, as if it might turn into something. That was new. Yesterday I listened to do my job. Today I listened because I wanted it to talk again. That’s not the same thing.

The radio behaved. The generator did not. Its hum shifted—one step off, like a zipper catching. The tone thinned, tightened, and focused. Not a voice, but wearing one. Four words with a clear sound—like its frequency matched: “Move south. Incoming shells.” I didn’t argue with it. I took it to the colonel without the weird part. “Sir, scouts report likely Nazi artillery ranging our grid. Recommend we shift the line farther south—more wood cover, better ground—before they start walking fire.” He frowned. “You seen impacts?”
“Not yet, sir. Probability’s high.” He held a breath, then gave it back. “All right. Limited movement. Artillery covers as we displace. Go.” Orders rolled. Trucks coughed awake. Men shouldered packs without commentary. That’s trust, the field version.

We were halfway to the new tree line when the shells landed where we’d slept—short, then closer to it, then on it. The usual Nazi ladder. Only the porch was empty now. A few branches down, one mirror cracked, zero casualties. I counted that as proof and didn’t say it out loud. The south

position was better. Woods on three sides. Ground that kept secrets. One abandoned shed with a door that still respected hinges. We dug in for real: foxholes, wire, range cards, a command post that didn't leak. By evening the camp felt like it had a spine.

That's when the light bulb in my tent started buzzing wrong. Not louder—nearer. Like it leaned down to talk. The filament sang one note, then the note put on words: "Skip wine." It was small and stupid. Also specific. I took the hint anyway.

The colonel opened a bottle to mark the new line. Officers gathered. Toasts. Laughter that sounded rented. I raised water. "Major, you on punishment?" someone joked. "On duty," I said. True enough. The stew was hot, the bread was bread, and the bottle kept moving clockwise without stopping at me. However, not many were in the mood for drinking—it wasn't victory, after all. Two officers gulped it down.

After dinner, back in the tent, a short burst of Nazi shelling probed far to the west. Our artillery answered once, then nobody insisted. The generator returned to being a machine. I tried to decide if I'd been smart or superstitious. The answer wouldn't sit still. But the next morning solved the dilemma for me. The corporal stuck his head in. "Sir, CO wants you." Inside, the colonel had a report on the desk. "Two officers down," he said. "Food poisoning. Wine went bad. They'll live, but they're out for today." He looked at my empty hands like he remembered last night. Then he let it pass. "What do your scouts have?"
"Working east, sir. Careful pace," I said. Plain. He nodded. "Keep it that way. And, Major—good call on the move." I saluted and stepped out.

Outside, the woods held their breath. The men laced boots. The radio waited. I told myself I'd shifted south because of tracks, terrain, and Nazi habits—not because a generator and a light bulb spoke English. Then I listened, just in case they decided to speak again.

003 – Transmitted

By noon, I was listening to anything that made noise—radio, generator, stove, even the wind through the guy lines. If sound had a door, I was holding the handle.

The radio broke the habit first. Not static. It was morse. Clean and short. I wrote as it tapped: “SCOUTS SOUTH, NOT WEST.” No extra letters. No drift. Then back to snow like it hadn’t said a thing. I stepped out and found Captain Doyle—the scout officer—by the map board. “Change of plan,” I said. “Shift your patrol axis. Take them south, not west.” “Yes, sir,” he said, already flipping grid squares with a pencil. “We’ll move in five.” Salute. Boots moving. Radios checked. Good officers don’t ask why until after it matters.

I went to the colonel next. He had coffee and a bad-news face. “Any changes for tonight, sir?” I asked. He shook his head. “No push until we see what the Krauts do with their guns. Word from the corps: Patton’s pushing hard to reach the Rhine river; he’ll want to be first across if he can bully a bridge out of it,” he said. “Montgomery’s got his own plan—bigger, slower, tidy—he’ll want the honor, too. And they both want the headline.” He looked at me. “We’re not in that fight. We take Basel. We do it when it makes sense.”
“Understood,” I said. It was the kind of talk that kept a battalion focused while the big names argued with rivers and pride.

Night built itself fast. Wind picked up, running fingers across canvas like it was checking for seams. On the way back to my tent, the gusts formed a sound that wasn’t a word until it was: “Check abandoned shed.” The message felt like it had dirt on it which had transmitted to me. I moved anyway because I trusted something that can save lives.

Two men came with me—Torres and Hale—both steady hands. Rifles, flashlights, rope. “Rules,” I said as we walked. “Inside, we communicate. No hero moves. If anything looks off, we back out and make it a problem

for someone else."
"Copy," they said together.

The shed sat where it had sat yesterday: small, stubborn, trying to look empty. Torres went in first, light low, beam careful. Dust, crates and tools hung in a way that said someone once had time. The smell was like an old oil and a new cold. Hale went to the other side, tapping boards with the toe of his boot. "Sir," he called softly. His light had found a seam in the floor—square, cut clean, with a recessed iron handle. Not obvious. Not friendly. I knelt to have a closer look. The wood around the handle had fresh scratches. Someone had opened it. Recently. My hand stopped an inch short. I wanted to lift it. I also wanted my hands tomorrow.
"Rope," I said. Hale looped a knot around the handle, backed out, and handed me the line. We stretched it long, stepped outside, and took cover in the dark beyond the wall.

"On you, sir," Torres said. I pulled the rope. The lid twitched up and then the night grabbed everything at once.

White flash. Explosion. My ears turned into a whistle. The shed lifted and forgot how to be a building. Boards went high. Nails explained themselves at speed. We ate dirt and splinters and a quiet that rang. We were lucky in the cheap way—bruises, cuts, nothing missing that couldn't be healed. The booby trap had been patient and precise and not meant for strangers. Which meant we were not strangers to whoever set it.

Back at the line, the medics cleaned us like we were knives. I wrote the report short: booby-trapped floor hatch; controlled open; total structure loss; no fatalities. I didn't add the part about wind giving orders. I didn't know how to write that in the Army. The next Morning brought the thing I didn't want. Captain Doyle's runner came pale and fast. "Sir—scouts." He didn't finish. He didn't need to. The paper he handed over did it for him: "Scouts made contact south of the town; ambush signs; radio silence; presumed captured."

The tent felt a size smaller. The map looked like it had been lying to me gently. Outside, the wind practiced being ordinary. Inside, the generator pretended it had never learned a single word.

004 – Received

The blast from the shed still rang in my bones. If the Nazis hadn't known where we were, they did now. If they had our scouts, they'd work them until something useful fell out. That was the math, and I hated it. The colonel called everyone in—company commanders, staff—and even Major Collins from the artillery came in from the west positions, mud up to the cuffs, map under his arm; he had the look of a man who sleeps by guns and hears in calibers. The colonel didn't waste time. "After today, we stop waiting. We are taking this town," he said. "You have one hour. Check the ground, check your people, bring me plans that work here, not on paper." We all nodded, because that's the only answer to that sentence.

Back in my tent: map board, pencils, three sets of arrows that had argued all day. Our dots south. Collins's guns west. Enemy marks like bad guesses that had started to look right. Then the camp started talking again—the radio's thin breath, the wind under the flap, the generator's throat, the bulb's dry buzz—and all of them together resolved into a single, simple order: "Attack head-on from south."
I looked at the map. I didn't like how quickly my hand wanted to obey a sentence that didn't have a sender. So I did the only smart thing left. Bulb off. Radio off. Generator out. Tent flaps zipped until the wind forgot my name. No noise. Just the town, the contours, the clock. I ran routes with my finger and kept only what made sense without a ghost telling me it did.

An hour later, we were back in the colonel's tent. Captain Doyle pitched first. "Hit from the west, sir. Straight push. Street by street. Artillery walks ahead of us. We keep it tight." Collins rubbed the map. "I can keep a steady barrage over the factories and rail spur. We'll have to be careful with timing on the lifts." The colonel grunted. "Risk?"
"Heavy. But honest," Doyle said.
Lieutenant Baker tried a split. "West does the pounding. We throw the main body from the south while they're stunned. Use the ground we like.

Keep artillery talking.” A few heads nodded. It sounded familiar, which is how traps sound right before you step into them.

“Major?” the colonel said to me.
“They booby-trapped that south shed because they expected us to sit down here,” I said. “They’ll be ready to eat a south push for breakfast. A west push is a straight line. They’ve drawn answers for that since September. We’ll pay for every block.”

Collins looked at me. “You’re telling me what not to do. So, what do we do?”
“North,” I said. The room paused. “We split. Two companies up north; one company stays south. Collins holds west with guns. At 2100, south hits first—loud and messy. When they commit to that front, south fires a green flare. On green, artillery hammers the northwest edge for two minutes—hard, accurate, short. As soon as you lift, the north companies go in fast. South eases pressure and wraps behind. We let them guess wrong twice before they can correct once.”

Collins traced the grid with a pencil. “I can put steel on these blocks, then these, then roll to the street line. Two minutes is tight.”
“Tight is the point,” I said. The colonel asked, “Signals?”
“Green means go. No green, no guns,” I said.
“Any contingency if we lose comms?”
“Red flare cancels. West holds fire,” I answered. He looked around the tent, weighing faces. “Anyone got a better bad idea?” No one did. “All right,” he said. “We do this. Doyle, you own south. Major, you take north. Collins, you sing when he waves.” Collins smiled like a man who liked his songbook.

Night settled like a lid. At 2058 hours, south stacked at the orchard lane—dark shapes breathing frost. “Two minutes,” Doyle said on the net.
“One.”
“Go.”
The south company hit hard. Rifles barked. Grenades rolled. A machine gun stitched the mill wall. The town woke and bit back. A green star climbed and popped. The signal was received. “Guns, guns, guns,” Collins

said, already moving. The west lit like someone tore daylight open. Shells stomped the northwest edge, then the spur, then the first streets. The ground thudded under our boots. Windows burst out like held breath. Searchlights died mid-sweep.
“Lift in thirty,” Collins counted.
“Lift in ten. Five. Lift.” The last shells walked off the edge and left us the street.

“North—move,” I said. We were up and in. Ladders to walls. Wire cut quick. First door kicked without complaint; second door argued; third door tried to be a friend and was lying. South kept firing to sell the story. West stayed ready to speak again if we asked. At the corner of the nameless alley, a shot cracked from a second floor and took a man out of our line like a word from a sentence. “Inside, sniper!” I yelled. My squads split—one through the door, one hugging the wall, one covering the window that had just confessed it was a gun.

The street ahead narrowed and climbed. The city decided it was stairs and crossfire now. Over the net, Doyle said, “Holding pressure. They’re still married to me.” Collins said, “Say the word.” I didn’t. Not yet. The next minute would decide if the north was ours or if we’d volunteered to just be statistics in history.

005 – Over and Out

North was stairs, corners, and doors that wanted to argue. We argued back. First Platoon took the left side of the street, Second took the right, Third floated where the holes opened. We moved by the book: someone watches, someone moves, someone breathes for the three of them. The city answered in short bursts from windows, one machine gun that thought it was king, grenades that sounded closer than they were. Our reply was simple: keep going, clear rooms, pull the next man along by his sleeve if he slows.

Basel looked smaller from inside. Streets like lines on a palm, courtyards that felt like breaths you could hold, a tram line bent and quiet, shredded posters on walls advertising a year that no longer existed. We found cellars with potatoes and fear, attics with radios that wouldn't admit they worked, one cat that refused to pick a side. We found our rhythm: bang, into the door, sweep left, sweep right, call clear, move the point forward. South kept the noise heavy. West held its breath, guns ready if we asked. We didn't. We turned corners until the town ran out of corners, and then there was a square that wanted to be called central. The machine gun finally choked. A white cloth appeared from a second floor, then a hand, then the men who'd had enough. We took them gently. You don't kick a man who just handed you his last choice.

By late afternoon, the shooting thinned to single sounds, the kind you hear when the rain slows down and it's just the single heavy drops falling from the edge of the roof. The colonel's voice came tight and soft on the net: "Hold where you are. South reports success. Casualties minimal." Not none. Few. We would learn the names later, and then we would not forget them.

When it was over in the practical sense, the town looked like towns look after decisions: smoke where rooftops used to be, glass doing its best to be sand again, doors open that never meant to be. My men walked the streets, slow and careful, touching nothing. One sat on a step and

laughed once-not because anything was funny, but because the body needs to make a sound that isn't orders or gunfire.

The colonel gathered us in what had been a municipal office and was now a room with a table that had survived on principle. "We took it clean," he said. "South will get credit for drawing teeth; North for pulling them. Report your wounded men, your ammo, and anything the town can't do without for forty-eight hours. Collins-good shooting." Collins shrugged like a man who hates compliments more than shells. Then the colonel looked at me. "Solid work, Major. Right plan for the ground." The other officers didn't clap. We don't clap. But the looks were there. Outside, my men passed me with that small, straight-backed salute that says more than it needs to.

There was a café with half a door and the smell of burned sugar. I sat inside, alone in the kind of quiet a city makes when it wants to apologize. I took out the photograph that traveled everywhere with me: wife, two kids, a porch that was always better in memory. "Good call," I told the me in the photograph. Not brave, not genius-just the simple, hard thing: decide with what's in front of you, not what the noise wants to be.

Night pulled the day away one street at a time. I made it back to the schoolhouse we were using as quarters and got halfway to sleep before a sergeant hit the door. "Sir-CO wants you." He looked excited and scared at the same time, which usually means good news arriving with bad timing.

The colonel had a fresh pot of coffee and an envelope. "You did well today," he said. "And someone noticed. You're promoted. You're also moving." He slid the envelope across the desk. "Third Army. Patton's people." The paper felt heavier than it looked.

I opened it.

"Headquarters, Third United States Army
Office of the Commanding General
APO 403, U.S. Army
1 February 1945

Subject: Orders - Reassignment and Promotion

Effective immediately upon receipt of these orders, you are promoted to the temporary grade of Lieutenant Colonel, Infantry. Follow the instructions listed:

1. You will proceed without delay to report to Headquarters, U.S. Third Army, and on arrival to the Commanding Officer, Infantry Division, for duty.
2. You are assigned to operational planning and execution for forthcoming river-crossing operations in the vicinity of Mainz, Germany.
3. Transportation and movement priority: Class I. Route and timings to be furnished by Corps G-3.

By command of General S. Patton, Jr.
[Signed]
Chief of Staff,
Third U.S. Army."

I read it twice, because paper that changes your life should get at least that much respect. Then I saluted the colonel. "Thank you for the trust, sir." He nodded. "You earned it. Make it count on the river. Over and Out, major" We shook hands like men who understood both parts of the sentence.

I packed fast. The photo on top. The generator in the yard hummed like it had never learned a word. I let it.

The world is full of signals that want to be believed-static with good timing, wind that acts like it knows the map, glass that remembers how to buzz into a sentence. They make you feel chosen and safe. They are neither. Information is a tool. Noise is a habit. The only thing that has to carry my name is the decision I sign.

As I rolled out, the town exhaled behind me, already becoming a story someone else would tell. I left the window cracked just enough to let in air, not advice.

For once, I didn't need a signal. For once, I answered myself, and the answer held. Next stop: Mainz. Different town. Same job: Choose the voice amongst the noise.

Author's Afterword

This story needed an older coat because of the radio istelf and World War II wears that better than most. Everything fell into the place, the light bulb and generators. History is generous with drama if someone promises to carry it carefully.

Basel, as written here, is fiction with its boots on, but the pressure and posture are borrowed from real operations under General S. Patton and Field Marshal Montgomery, including the very real argument and logistics of crossing the Rhine river. The set pieces are staged; the urgency is not. This takes place few months after the famous Doomsday landing at Normandy.

Under the uniform, the theme stays the same: noise versus voice. Static with good timing, loud advice from far away, orders that arrive without a signature—none of that becomes truth until someone signs it for themselves. The Major's trick isn't hearing better; it's deciding better, which is less cinematic and more useful in the real life where the world is full of unwanted noises. One has to select the right noise, which is indeed the voice of themselves.

Thanks to the earlier troublemakers—Tuesday's Left Shoe, So... what are we blaming today, and The Sidelined Shadow—for teaching this book to walk and leave a dent without raising its voice.

And the hint for what's warming on the next frequency?
A letter for the readers:

The Readers,
4th October 2024

***Field Post notice**: a parcel*
No manifest, no return address, just the weight of it.

Signed,
Author of course!

The Buried Compass Series

1. Tuesday's Left Shoe

2. So… What Are We Blaming Today?

3. The Sidelined Shadow

4. The Voice Amongst the Noise

5. TBD