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**THE CRONUS
EQUATION
(SAMPLE CHAPTER 1)**

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The lonely glow of a cigarette was barely visible through the freezing fog, that tiny incandescence in the December darkness providing the only clue that the skulking truck was occupied.

Inside the cab, George Tooley used his sleeve to clear a sparkling sheen of condensation from the windscreen before rolling down his window to let the smoke escape. Ever vigilant, he peered into the night and surveyed the silent cobbled street once again. He'd waited for half an hour and seen no movement outside, not that he'd expected to in this ruined part of the city.

Finally satisfied that he was alone, Tooley quietly opened the door and clambered out of the truck, throwing his cigarette into the darkness. His army boots crunched and clinked on broken glass as he surveyed the skeletons of ruined warehouses stretching away into the misty darkness. The blackout had been partially lifted since September, but that made little difference here in Silvertown. Hit hard by the Luftwaffe, some of the more badly damaged areas had been abandoned altogether, leaving a gangrenous hole at the very heart of the Empire. Perhaps someday, life might bustle among the docks and warehouses once more, but Tooley doubted it. He was one of the few who truly understood that this wasn't just another war, but the beginning of a new era. With a little luck, nothing would ever be quite the same again.

He paused briefly to check his shadowy reflection in the truck's side mirror, adjusting his beret and buttoning his top pocket. The Royal Engineer's uniform and unexploded bomb story never failed to keep nosy parkers away, but Tooley knew he still had to be cautious. After all, he wasn't the only man doing business behind the cloak of officialdom. Coppers and soldiers had gotten a lot more suspicious over the last couple of years, so it paid to be extra careful.

Glancing around one final time, Tooley took a deep breath and strode purposefully towards the back of his drab green Bedford truck, an invaluable asset which deflected awkward questions about petrol rations and unauthorised journeys. He quickly lowered the tailgate and hauled out a heavy canvas bundle tied with ropes. It hit the rubble-strewn cobbles with a heavy thud and immediately began thrashing and yelling muffled obscenities.

Ignoring the half-audible shouts and threats issuing from the tightly bound parcel, Tooley grabbed a handful of rope near the man's feet and began dragging his victim across the slippery cobblestones. It was hard work and he wished he had some help, but there were some jobs you just had to do on your own. Big Frank would've been useful in a situation like this, but Tooley knew better than to involve his much larger and simpler sibling in such affairs. It wasn't that Frank couldn't be trusted, quite the reverse. It was just that the lad didn't really understand the subtleties of politics, and probably never would.

A final heave over a half-demolished wall and Tooley let go of his struggling bundle, panting with the exertion and glad to feel the freezing drizzle on his face. He tensed as he heard a clatter of rubble nearby, his hand darting to his coat and quickly extracting his pistol. As he crouched in the darkness, Tooley began to wonder if he was getting a little nervous; even paranoid. The Ministry of Information's admonishment that walls have ears had never seemed so pertinent, although he was pretty sure they didn't have *him* in mind when they'd dreamed up that catchy slogan.

Tooley glanced down at the now quiet bundle beside him, and a dark smile played across his lips as he realised this wasn't the first, and it probably wouldn't be the last time he'd have to dig for victory.

Satisfied that the nearby noise was simply the constant shifting of loose rubble, Tooley pocketed his weapon and took a firm grip on his captive's ankles once more.

The inert bundle sprang into life again, and the half-coherent threats and curses resumed as Tooley doggedly dragged his prisoner across the floor of what had once been a busy import warehouse.

At last he reached his destination, a rectangular hole carved into the base of a large mound of masonry. Tooley rolled the mummified man over before drawing his pistol once more, his fingertips tracing the smooth machined surface of his army Colt. It was a good gun, bartered from a Yank deserter in exchange for a new identity. He aimed the pistol at the struggling bundle, thumbing off the safety as he fought temptation to pull the trigger, just to see what damage the forty-five calibre rounds would cause at close range.

Tooley's captive stopped struggling again, seeming to sense that his life hung in the balance. For a few seconds the only sounds filling the freezing night air were both men's laboured breathing.

Eventually sense prevailed and Tooley gently eased the hammer back into place. Corpses with bullet holes in them aroused suspicion, and their plans were far too far advanced to be jeopardised by such carelessness.

With business fixed firmly in mind, Tooley pocketed the pistol and set about loosening the canvas shroud around his prisoner's head. This grass's fate was already sealed, but he might offer up some useful information if a last-minute reprieve was dangled in front of him. Tooley's hopes weren't high as he loosened the ropes, but all opportunities had to be followed up.

At last the bloodied and bruised captive was able to suck in the damp December air, his expression a mixture of relief and trepidation.

The fake Royal Engineer stepped back a couple of paces and tilted his head as he studied his erstwhile partner in crime. "Now listen up, me old son..."

"Fuck you, George! I wanna see Mr Hill." The captured American's voice rebounded off the damp, fire scorched brickwork.

Tooley raised his eyebrows. "You've been working on your Cockney, me old china. Not bad, but this here's a private enterprise, nothing to do with Mr Hill. Besides, what makes you think he'll give a toss about a slag like you? He hates a bloke who'd sell out his mates, and so do I."

"Mr Hill knows me. I've found him some good deals in the past and he'll ask questions if I disappear!"

Tooley put a finger to his lips. “Quietly now or you’ll bring the rozzers poking around, and they’ll just hand you back to the Yanks once they find out who you really are.” He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Is that why you’ve been snitching? Did the G-men offer you some sort of deal?”

A choked laugh hissed between the prisoner’s swollen lips. “You’ve got it all wrong, buddy. If someone’s leaking it ain’t me, understand? It ain’t me!”

Tooley shook his head sadly. “Listen mate, it’s cold and I’ve got a busy night ahead, so I’ll save you the bother of going through all the bullshit. I already know everything. I know how you’ve been leaving messages for that walking scarecrow down the Red Lion.”

The prisoner’s eyes widened. “Red Lion? Never heard of the place.”

Tooley held up his hand for quiet. “A little bird told me, y’see.” He crouched down and grabbed the man roughly by the hair. “If you tell me who that scruffy little bugger is right now, there might still be a way out of this.”

The prisoner hissed with pain. “Oh yeah? How do you figure?”

Tooley released his grip and smiled. “Work for *me*, my son, my brother. You’re not one of them, and they’ll never let you be. You must know they’ll kill you in the end. It’s what they do, it’s how they survive. They get into your mind and convince you to betray the mates you should be helping. Do you think they really give a toss about you? Do you think they’ll invite you to their barbecues and cocktail parties after the war? Everything gets turned upside down sooner or later, and that’s when your friends become enemies. Work for me, and you can write the reports I tell you to. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

The battered man shook his head. “Too late for that. I don’t know what the hell you’ve been planning, but you’re one crazy son of a bitch. It’s over. They know all about you and they know all about your damned shopping list, so whatever you do to me won’t change that. You do what you gotta do. I know I’ve done what’s right, and that’s something you’ll never understand.”

Tooley felt around in the darkness, his fingers closing around a jagged half-brick. “You think I’m simple because of this cor blimey accent? Don’t you bloody dare lecture me about believing

in something bigger than yourself! You're just a mug, a tool to be used up, broken and discarded."

"You're nothing!" The American retorted. "Behind all your fancy talk and self-justification you're just a spiv, a thief, a man who only cares about..."

The prisoner's last sentence was cut short as Tooley savagely swung the half-brick into the doomed man's temple, sending a spray of warm blood into the freezing night. Tooley smashed the makeshift weapon down twice more, grimacing as more blood spurted across his victim's canvas cocoon. That would have to be burned now, and decent canvas was hard to come by.

Tooley wiped his hands on the bloodstained wrappings and removed the restraining ropes, before rolling the battered body into the shallow grave he'd already prepared. He shook his head ruefully as he began kicking dust and broken masonry back into the hole. "We lost you a long time ago, mate. Yank or Brit, Frenchy or Kraut, don't really make no difference. You should've spent more time thinking, instead of whoring and drinking. Now you're dead, and you never even came *close* to stopping me. You bloody fool."

His grim work completed, Tooley dusted his hands and gathered up the bloodied canvas before making his way back to the truck. The poor mug would be found eventually, but by then it would be too late for the Yard to pin it on anyone, and the Snowdrops had enough on their plate without chasing down a single dead deserter. By the time the Feds discovered their informant's fate, George Tooley and his crew would be long gone.

Crossing the rubble strewn lane, Tooley quickly stowed the canvas in the back of the truck and jumped into the cab, taking a long draw as he lit another cigarette. He'd never actually enjoy killing another real person. Officers and aristocrats, well that was different. They were much bigger villains than *he'd* ever managed to be, not that the courts would see it that way if the rozzers ever fingered his collar.

There was nobody within earshot as the truck's engine coughed into life, and nobody to witness the hooded headlamps piercing the misty darkness as George Tooley left the broken citadel of the dead and began his journey back towards the still living part of London.