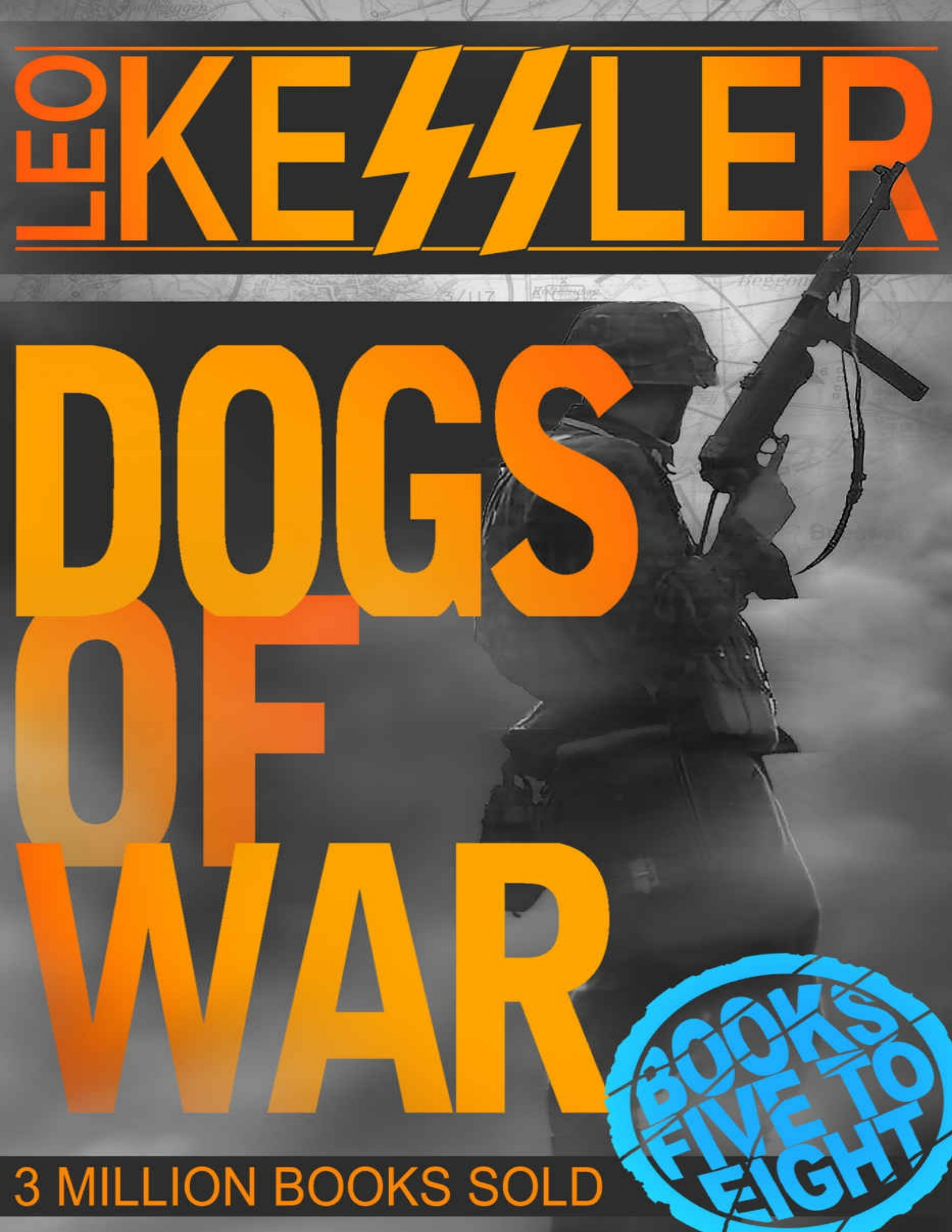
LEO KESSLER

DOGS OF WAR



3 MILLION BOOKS SOLD

BOOKS FIVE TO EIGHT

DOGS OF WAR PART TWO

by Leo Kessler

Featuring:
Stormtroop Edelweiss
Death's Head
Frozen Mountain
The Sand Panthers

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The DOGS OF WAR Books are based on the memoirs of the former SS officer, Kuno von Dodenburg. The manuscripts were discovered by Leo Kessler in a second-hand shop in Berne. No one could explain how they had arrived there, but from the facts that Leo Kessler was able to piece together, the following story emerged.

***

Kuno von Dodenburg joined the Berlin SS *Reitersturm*, a voluntary SS cavalry unit, in 1935 while he was still in high school. The von Dodenburgs had always been cavalry officers and his father, a General, had not objected to what he called the 'temporary aberration'. Privately he told his old cronies from the First World War that he didn't mind the boy joining the 'black pack' – for a while, at least. He'd learn to ride and the Reitersturm was patronised by the cream of Berlin society. Indeed its ranks included a couple of Hohenzollern princes from the old Monarchy. But one year later when young von Dodenburg graduated from high school and it was time for him to join the elite 'Cavalry Regiment, Four', his father's old unit, he was no longer interested in the *Wehrmacht*. In spite of the old General's heated protests, the 18-year-old boy volunteered for the Black Guards and was accepted into the newly created Adolf Hitler *Leibstandarte* – the Adolf Hitler Bodyguard Regiment. Unlike his contemporaries who joined the regular Army, he did not immediately become an officer-cadet, but was forced to serve in the ranks for some months, as was the SS custom. (The experience was later to prove useful when he came to describe the life of an ordinary SS trooper in his post-war books.) Finally he was accepted for officer training and was sent to the SS Cadet School at Bad Toelz in Bavaria.

A year later he graduated with honours and was posted to Himmler's staff, probably on the premise that a member of the old Prussian military aristocracy would add a little tone to the 'upstart SS'. Here he came under the influence of the 'Duke of Swabia', *SS Brigadeführer* Gottlob ('Praise-God') Berger, an energetic, unscrupulous First World War veteran, who was Himmler's principal adviser. As Berger wrote to his chief many years later in

a letter dated 9th March 1943, and with his usual lack of modesty, "My Reichsführer confides in me and tells me things personally which he would never do unless he was completely at ease with me."

Berger was the father of the Armed SS, Himmler's own private army, and it was he who inspired the young von Dodenburg with his own concept of a new type of soldier –a combination of hunter-poacher-athlete, an idea he had stolen from the British military expert, Captain Basil Liddell Hart, an ideological warrior who was prepared to fight and die for the cause of national socialism.

In Berger's opinion, the traditional Wehrmacht generals wanted to wage the next war as they had done the last one – with a citizen army based on mass conscription. Berger, however, was a believer in a highly trained and fast moving military elite. Von Dodenburg was fired by the General's concept of modern war and when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939 he requested a transfer back to his old regiment, the Leibstandarte, hoping to be able to put Berger's ideas into practice.

He, and other young enthusiastic officers like him, were able to do so, but at tremendous cost in human life. In his first battle in Bzura (Central Poland) he was wounded and received the Iron Cross, Third Class (it was to be the first of six wounds and the first of his many decorations, which included the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, before the war ended).

The years passed. Von Dodenburg fought in France and later in the Balkans and Greece, but he began to show his real talent as a commander in Russia in 1942 when the steam started to go out of 'Operation Barbarossa'. In December of that year when the Red Army launched a surprise counter-attack over the River Donetz, the newly promoted Major von Dodenburg was ordered by his new regimental commander Colonel Geier – 'the Vulture' of whom we shall hear more later – to break through to the trapped 240th Infantry Division which was trying to fight its way back to the German lines, although encumbered with over fifteen hundred wounded men.

At the head of his 800-strong SS Assault Battalion Wotan, von Dodenburg fought his way to the trapped division, cutting through a Siberian rifle corps to do so. Forming an armoured defensive position around the slow-moving division with its long convoy of ambulances and horse-drawn carts laden with wounded, he battled back to the Donetz. There he discovered that while the ice-covered river was thick enough to support the division's transport, it was too weak for his heavy Mark IV tanks. Another commander

might have told himself he had done enough, destroyed his tanks and made his way across on foot, but not Major von Dodenburg. Leaving the infantry *stubble-hoppers* to struggle across to the safety of the German lines, Assault Battalion Wotan turned and fought their way twenty kilometres up the river until they found and captured a bridge which would carry the tanks. No one was surprised when Hitler himself presented von Dodenburg with the Knight's Cross.

But von Dodenburg was not simply a glory hunter. He was not afraid to grab a rifle and fight side by side with his soldiers when the going got tough. In the autumn of 1943, for instance, when a massive Soviet tank attack swamped his position, he went after the huge Russian T-34s personally, armed with an infantryman's bazooka. Within the hour he had knocked out four and completely reversed the position. When his shame-faced men emerged from their holes, all he said was, "I suppose that qualifies me for the combat infantryman's badge?"

But Russia left its scars, both physical and mental, on von Dodenburg. He had gone to Russia, confident of victory and in the National Socialist cause. He came out of it in December 1943, with his shattered arm hanging by a few shreds of flesh and his confidence gone. In the old cavalry hospital at Heidelberg he began to take a look at himself and his country during the long period of his recovery.

Just before the attempt on Hitler's life in July, 1944, old General von Dodenburg, who was party to the plot, took it upon himself to destroy most of his son's notes, but from the few scraps of paper and the odd letter which remained it is clear that Kuno von Dodenburg was already a member of the resistance to Hitler, at least in spirit. One fragment of those 1943 notes read, "German occupation policy in the East is a masterpiece of ineptitude; within a year it has achieved the considerable and astonishing feat of turning pro-German peoples into partisans roaming the forests, thirsting for the blood of the men they welcomed as liberators from communist oppression in 1941." Another records that "German policy is one of ruthless brutality, employing methods used centuries ago against ignorant black slaves and executed by uneducated louts who proclaim themselves members of the Master Race." But it is a letter to an old comrade at the front which really expresses the depth of von Dodenburg's despair. "SS spirit," he wrote on 2 January, 1944, "I'm always hearing SS spirit! Shit! It's non-existent!"

In the spring of 1944 he returned to his old battalion which had now

become Kampfgruppe Wotan, having been built up to brigade strength with an influx of 18-year-olds, who came streaming to the elite formation in their hundreds, eager to pay their tribute to Hitler with their blood. Thus its new commander became the youngest full colonel in the Armed SS.

In Normandy and in Holland von Dodenburg led his Kampfgruppe Wotan with a recklessness which seemed to show that he could not wait for an enemy bullet to put an end to his wasted young life. But he was not fated to die on the battlefield. In the last great offensive of the German Army in the West, the Battle of the Bulge, he was captured when his Tiger was knocked out by a lone New Yorker – a Jewish bazookaman who, two weeks before, had been a cook in a rear-line outfit.

Von Dodenburg spent two years in Allied prison camps, 'finding himself', as he was wont to say whenever his comrades remarked upon his strange apathy. In the summer of 1946 he found himself, and escaped from the Dachau prison compound with commendable adroitness. With the aid of the Odessa Organization, the SS escape society, he fled to Italy where he began to write in earnest. But no one wanted to read his thinly fictionalized accounts of his life in the SS Assault Battalion Wotan, especially in his native country, where the SS was a dirty word to publishers who wanted to forget that the years 1933-45 had ever happened.

The money that his former friends in the Armed SS managed to smuggle out of Germany began to dry up. In the booming new Germany of the 'economic miracle' they did not want to risk their newly gained wealth and position by associating with Kuno von Dodenburg, the epitome of the SS officer. He struggled to make ends meet, working as a third-class translator into German in a fourth-class Roman agency during the day and covering page after page with his accounts of long-dead men who had once made up Assault Battalion Wotan during the night.

His health started to give out. He was befriended by a plump, plain and motherly typist in the translation agency. She became his mistress and in due course he moved in with her. Under her doting care his health improved, but only for a while.

In 1952 he was rushed to Rome's German Hospital, a dying man. The Jewish bazookaman, who was now back as a short-order cook in Brooklyn, unknowingly put paid to the life of the Black Guard's most decorated and youngest full colonel. According to Professor Donelli, the Italian surgeon who operated on him eight years later, the US Army surgeon had overlooked

a massive piece of rocket shrapnel which had lodged itself deep inside his body. Kuno von Dodenburg died on the night of 3 June 1952, attended only by his Italian mistress. It was only with difficulty that she could understand his last words, whispered in hoarse, hesitant German, "We were intoxicated by a vision of great power then. It gripped us like a huge frenzy, the frenzy of power."

Kuno von Dodenburg was thirty-four years old when he died.

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For twenty years von Dodenburg's manuscripts disappeared until they were found in June 1973, when they were translated by Leo Kessler. They enable us to hear the true voice of the Armed SS for the first time. For in World War II, the Armed SS, Hitler's Praetorian Guard, became the scourge of Europe, a ruthless, heartless collection of elite soldiers who fought for an idea which has long since lost its validity and a glory that has vanished forever.

Charles Whiting

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

For the sake of simplicity and better understanding the normal Army ranks have been used throughout this translation instead of the Armed SS designation of Kuno von Dodenburg's original. For those, however, who may care to work out the exact ranks of the members of SS Assault Battalion Wotan, the following table gives the most important ones:

KEY: *SS – German Army – British Army*
Standartenführer – Oberst – Colonel
Obersturmbannführer – Oberstleutnant – Lt-Colonel
Sturmbannführer – Major – Major
Hauptsturmführer – Hauptmann – Captain
Obersturmführer – Oberleutnant – Lieutenant
Untersturmführer – Leutnant – 2nd Lieutenant
Sturmscharführer – Stabsfeldwebel – Regimental Sergeant Major
Hauptsscharführer – Oberfeldwebel – Sergeant Major
Oberscharführer – Feldwebel – Quartermaster Sergeant
Scharführer – Unterfeldwebel – Staff Sergeant
Unterscharführer – Unteroffizier – Sergeant
Rottenführer – Gefreiter – Corporal
Sturmarm – Oberschutze – Lance Corporal
SS-Mann – Schutze – Private

And among all the many SS units – some 36 Armoured divisions by the end of the war – that saw action there was none more battle-hardened, more brutalized and more ruthless in their devotion to war and violent death than Kuno von Dodenburg's SS Assault Battalion Wotan.

A GLOSSARY OF WOTAN TERMS

Full House – both venereal diseases
Asparagus Tarzan – weakling
Popov, Ivan – Russian soldier
Dice-beaker – Jackboots
Flatman – flat bottle of schnapps
Green-beak, Wet-tail – raw recruit
Ami – American
Base Stallion – rear area soldier, base wallah
Bone-mender – doctor
Warm Brother – homosexual
Kitchen-bull – army cook
Dead Soldier – empty bottle
Field Mattress – German Army female auxiliary
Tin – decorations
Throat-ache – Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross
Moss, Green Leaves – money
Old Man – tinned meat
Cancer Stick – cigarette
Giddi-up Soup – horse meat soup
Stubble Hopper – infantryman
Reeperbahn Equaliser – brass knuckles
Pavement Tail – Street walker
Parisian – Contraceptive
Flipper – hand
Turnip – head

STORMTROOP EDELWEISS

Previously Entitled
BLOOD MOUNTAIN

DOGS OF WAR – VOLUME FIVE

by Leo Kessler

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ASSAULT ON A DEADLY MOUNTAIN

"A symbol!"

"What did you say, *mein Führer?*"

"You heard me, my dear Jodl. Soon our armies will march again, and this time we must kill the Russian monster for good. But my brave soldiers need a symbol, one that the Reds and those corrupt, cowardly Anglo-Saxons – indeed the whole world – will understand. Something that will symbolise the unbeatable prowess of German arms, and demonstrate that the holy creed of National Socialism cannot be stopped. It must be something... something that will transcend all time, will be remembered when you and I are long gone, General Jodl."

"You speak as if you intend to conquer nature itself, *mein Führer.*"

"Excellent, Jodl, excellent! What a grandiose idea – the conquest of nature itself... Like the ascent of some hitherto unclimbed mountain. What a symbol that would make for the universe! Nature submitting to the heroic creed of the National Socialist Movement. The echoes of such a deed will reach the remotest village in the furthest corner of the earth. It would be a tremendous triumph for German arms and our unbeatable movement!

"*Jodl, find me a mountain to conquer!*"

Adolf Hitler to Colonel-General Jodl, his Chief-of-Staff
Spring, 1942

BOOK 1

A CLIMB IS PROPOSED

CHAPTER 1

The little Yak observation plane made its third circuit.

Sitting next to the pilot, the officer in the earth-coloured, loose blouse of the Soviet Alpine Corps saw a thick wood of tall trees below, with scores of well camouflaged tents carefully dispersed among them. Beyond the wood there was the steppe, still winter-bleached and criss-crossed with tank tracks. And on the white ribbons of dusty roads, there were scenes of intense activity. There were field-grey columns everywhere, heading for the mountains, with long slow convoys of tanks and trucks lumbering up behind them. The young officer bit his bottom lip in dismay.

The pilot, a cocky black-haired, swarthy-skinned Georgian, caught the look. "Yes, comrade, the sons-of-whores are advancing again. And you don't need to be Old Leather Face to know where they're heading for."

The Alpine Corps officer ignored the disrespectful description of Marshal Stalin as 'Old Leather Face', though he told himself it wouldn't be long before the NKVD had the pilot in their cellars if he kept on talking like he did.

"Yes, I know, Comrade Lieutenant. They're after the Caucasus and our oil," he said.

The pilot nodded his head sagely and concentrated on finishing their third circle before levelling out. "Now what?" he asked, casually ignoring the lazy white tracers which started to curve their way towards them, gathering speed at every moment. "Do I make another run over the Fritzes?"

The observer, his mind still full of the new German threat to his Motherland, grunted, "No, Comrade. Now we fly to the mountain."

The pilot shrugged. "*Horoscho*, comrade. But be prepared to get out and begin walking on air, if this old crate's wings fall off at that height."

The observer didn't even deign to answer.

The observer pressed his handsome tanned young face closer to the window and gazed down. Now the little Yak was flying over high, rugged country, the naked rock a deep brown against the patches of snow. Here and there, rough country tracks were visible, scratched into rocky hillsides at impossible angles, but roads were few and far between, as he already knew from his

study of the maps before he had set out on this reconnaissance mission. He strained his neck and caught a glimpse of a long column of labouring camels, plodding up a steep track.

The pilot grinned, amused. "Something out of the Middle Ages," he commented. "You wouldn't think we were in the middle of a total war, would you?"

"No; the observer answered, his keen eyes searching a cluster of stone and wooden buildings below, for any sign of life. There was none – the village was abandoned, and he could guess why. The only vegetation up here in the mountains was an occasional patch of withered scrub or gorse, bent at a forty-five degree angle by the tearing wind. The only people who lived in the mountains were the damned *Karatski* – and everybody knew that they were bandits.

The interior of the little plane started to grow lighter. They were out of the overcast and above the snow line. From below and above there was the glare of sun and snow. The pilot flipped his sunglasses over his eyes and the smile vanished from his face, as he concentrated on gaining height.

It was a brilliant spring day now. All around the snow-capped peaks shone in the hard yellow sun with a blinding clarity. The observer felt his heart leap. In the good old days before the German invasion it had always been his dream to come here and climb. He knew that the Caucasus Mountains weren't always like this: calm, clear, brilliant. Sometimes the rocks would be as slimy as seaweed with dripping mist, with the wind shrieking like ten thousand banshees, trying with in visible hands to throw the climber off the mountainside. The mountains were like a glorious battlefield, he realized that, illumined by scenes of human treachery, but also of human heroism.

"Comrade, there she is!" the pilot cut into the observer's reverie, the muscles standing out on his dark hairy arms, as he fought the Yak ever upwards, its radial engine protesting at the effort.

"Elbrus!" the observer said reverently and gazed in awe at the great mountain's twin peaks, pink and white against the brilliant hard blue sky.

"Look like a couple of tiny tits, don't they?" the pilot gasped irreverently. "We Georgians like our women bigger than that."

The observer ignored the pilot's comment. Little did he know that the highest mountain in the Caucasus range had been called the Elbrus – the Breast – by some long-vanished people because it resembled the female

bosom. Instead, the observer hurriedly took out his binoculars and started to sweep the range from west to east. But the great field of glittering snow was empty. He adjusted the focus and directed his gaze at the west peak, the higher of the two. Metre by metre, he searched its surface, looking for the signs that they had been there, while next to him the pilot, suddenly grim-faced and sweating, tried to hold the Yak steady in the thin mountain air.

Nothing! Not a sign of them. Ignoring the Yak's sudden upwards surge, the moment of suspension, followed by an abrupt sickening drop, the observer turned his attention to the east peak. Again he searched its surface, hardly hearing the spluttering protests of the overtaxed engine and the pilot's thick curses in his native Georgian. The east peak, at five and a half thousand metres, a hundred metres lower than the other, revealed nothing. They hadn't been there, either.

Satisfied, he slipped his binoculars back into their leather case. His mission was completed. "All right," he said expansively, "take her over now, Comrade Pilot."

The pilot, his thick black eyebrows gleaming now with beads of sweat, shot him a murderous look. "Holy Mother of Kazan," he cried above the spluttering roar of the radial engine. "have you had your hundred, man?" This wooden son-of-a-bitch couldn't cross those tits up there! Her wings would fold up like matchwood."

The observer from the Alpine Corps shrugged easily. "You're the mechanic, comrade," he said, deliberately omitting the 'pilot'. "Take her back any way you want."

The sweating pilot did not need a second invitation. While the observer sat back more comfortably in his leather seat, he swung the Yak round in a tight circle and grunted through gritted teeth, "All right, back over the Fritz lines and down the valley of the River Kuban. And let's hope the field-greys are not waiting for us this time."

"They won't be," the observer answered, with all the supreme confidence of youth. In an hour, we'll be home and you'll undoubtedly be filling your guts with fire."

But the young observer was wrong. There would be no more fiery *Gorilka* vodka for the pilot, and no more mountains for him to climb.

The Georgian was down to a thousand metres, flying through the canyon of the Kuban, when it happened. Behind him lay range after range of snow

mountains, as desolate as the surface of the moon. Before him lay the first twinkling pink lights of the front. Once he had crossed them he would be safe. Suddenly a sinister black object hissed at a tremendous speed across his front. He had just time to catch its black-and-white cross insignia, and his heart sank.

"Ass-shit!" he cursed. "A Fritz fighter!"

A moment later, even before he had thought of what evasive action he might take in the narrow valley, the Messerschmitt came roaring in, its engine howling. Its machine guns chattered crazily. Slugs thumped into the Yak's wooden fuselage. The observer screamed, his face a sudden mass of red gore, as he slammed against the side of the cockpit. Desperately the Georgian tried to swing the plane to the side. But the Messerschmitt pilot beat him to it. A burst of fire shattered his tail. He had been badly hit! The Georgian wrestled frantically with the controls. No good! The tail had gone. As the plane started to plummet to the rocky floor of the canyon, the German's final burst of machine gun fire struck the cockpit canopy squarely. It shattered into a crazy spider's web. Screaming with fear, blinded, blood pouring from his face, the pilot let go of the controls.

With a great rending, tearing crash, the little Yak struck the valley wall, echoing and re-echoing down the length of the chasm, as if it might go on for ever and ever.

CHAPTER 2

"In three devils' name," Major Greul barked his breath fogging in the cold mountain air, "do you men call yourself mountaineers?" He looked down at the troopers in the peaked caps and baggy uniforms of the elite *Stormtroop Edelweiss*, as they toiled up the sheer rock face, hands on his hips, his muscular legs thrown astride, a look of utter contempt on his hard arrogant face. "From up here you look like nothing so much as a bunch of Munich beer bellies doing a little rock scrambling – and badly at that. Now, move it!"

Sergeant-Major Meier, known to his comrades, on account of his huge bulk and supposedly thick head, as Ox-Jo, whispered to his running mate, Jap, "I'd like to move that arrogant bastard – with a push of my alpenstock up his skinny ass!" Aloud, he said: "You heard the major, you bunch of juicy ball-sacks! Get the lead out of your butts and get up that wall!"

Major Greul, Edelweiss's second-in-command sighed at the big Bavarian NCO's choice of words, but he knew Meier achieved results, and so he turned to concentrate on working out the last phase of their climb to the wrecked Yak reconnaissance plane, somewhere out of sight about three or four hundred metres above his present position on the rock ledge. The forward Luftwaffe base, to which the Messerschmitt pilot belonged, who had shot the Yak down, had immediately notified the 1st Alpine Corps of the action, and had requested its help in searching the wrecked plane for maps and any other information that Intelligence might find useful. General Dietl had naturally turned the assignment over to his elite Edelweiss and he, Greul, had been forced to break off an important training mission to carry out the task.

Most of the pitches had been routine, calling for no more than the usual techniques of the practised rock climber – the knee jam, the press-and-push, the friction hold. All the same, progress had been slow, with constant hold-ups, due to the fact that he didn't know the climb and could only move by a process of trial and error. And time was running out. In an hour it would be dark. He sniffed angrily and stared up at the almost sheer rock face above him. To his right, he could see good holds and what looked like a promising chimney beyond. If he could reach that, he'd probably be able to reach the

unseen plane in about thirty minutes.

He made up his mind, just as Sergeant-Major Meier reached the ledge below him.

"Meier, are you prepared to try a pendulum?" he asked.

Meier looked down at Jap's wrinkled face. "That piece of ape-turd must think I'm a shitting monkey," he whispered. To the major, however, he called, "Yessir. Ready when you are. He braced his feet apart and tightened his hold on the rope which linked him to the major.

Greul, who had climbed his first eight-thousand metre height as a sixteen-year-old Hitler Youth and had conquered the North Face of the Eiger by the time he was twenty, did not hesitate. He reached up, well balanced on both feet, and hammered a piton home into the solitary crack above his head. Letting fall the hammer looped around his wrist, he tried his full weight on the steel hook. It held.

With a practised expert swiftness, he ran a loop of the climbing rope, which attached him to the bull-like NCO below, through a snap ring and fastened the loop to his waist. He was ready to go. Taking one last look at Meier tensed on his ledge, he drew himself back as far and as high as the loop would allow and then he was gone, out into space.

The swing of the pendulum was short and swift. But it sufficed. At the first attempt at the daring manoeuvre he had seized the handhold he had noted to his right. Barely breathing hard, he found a ledge for his feet, and untied the loop. A few minutes later he and Meier had found the entrance to the chimney and had disappeared from sight, while down below, Colonel Stuermer, the C.O. of Stormtroop Edelweiss, lowered his binoculars and cursed softly under his breath. That damned Greul had gotten away with yet another spectacular, and forbidden manoeuvre!

The chimney was tough, but it was no strain. At its opening, it was wide. Palms and back against one rocky side and mountain boots dug into the other, the two Stormtroop men moved up together. Towards its top, however, the chimney narrowed considerably. Greul took the lead. With his knees dug into the one wall and his broad muscular back against the other, he levered himself upwards, his breathing harsh and loud now with the strain.

Once he slipped, and his boots slammed into Meier's guts. Ox-Jo had yelped with the sudden pain, but he had not let go of his own hold. In a flash, Greul, his lean hard face flushed with either shame or effort, had regained his

hold, mumbled an apology and was on his way upwards again. And then they were out and sprawled in the snow, shoulder muscles afire with pain, breath coming in great, rasping gasps.

But not for long. Major Gottfried Greul had been punishing and hardening his body with an almost religious intensity ever since he had first heard the harsh Nordic call of the National Socialist creed; he was not a man to allow himself the soft decadent luxury of self-commiseration and rest. Action was his constant slogan. Controlling his harsh breathing by an effort of will, he rose to his feet and commanded, "All right, Meier. On your feet! Let's get to that plane."

With a groan, Ox-Jo rose to his feet and began to trail after the major through the deep snow, his broad face brick-red and covered with a film of sweat.

"Look," Greul exclaimed, as they swung round a slab of grey rock sticking out of the field of immaculate white. "There it is."

Meier took in the long broad track, showing where the little observation plane had skidded across the snow before it had come to its final rest.

The track was littered with bits of wreckage – a wheel, a chunk of wing with the red star of the Soviet Air Force, a limp shape which he knew instinctively was a body.

"Wonder what the Ivans were farting around here for, sir?" he asked. "They're bugging out everywhere."

Major Greul frowned at Meier's choice of words. "I wish, Sergeant-Major, you would learn to moderate your language," he snapped prissily. "A National Socialist does not lower himself to use such filth."

"At your command!" Ox-Jo said mechanically, and mentally told the arrogant major to kiss his National Socialist arse.

"Right, Sergeant-Major, you scout around to see what you can find. I'll examine the plane."

"Yessir," Meier answered and started to plod through the deep snow, circling the wreck, while Major Greul examined the Yak itself.

The Yak was broken-backed from the impact and it was with difficulty that Greul managed to force open the buckled door of the cockpit. A Russian, the pilot he guessed from the leather jacket the dead man wore, was slumped over the shattered controls, his face a gory mess.

Greul grunted. Taking the dead man by his long black hair, he pulled him out of the way and began examining the pockets under the controls for

maps.

There were two, but they were both the usual fliers' charts, and both were unmarked. Greul frowned. Where was the route chart and what had the Yak's mission been?

The first question was answered for him a moment later when the Sergeant-Major bellowed, "Sir, I've found the route map."

Greul straightened up and looked at the big NCO, crying, "Excellent, Meier, you have done–" The words froze on his lips when he saw what Meier was holding in his other hand.

It was a severed head, complete with Russian Army cap – and the cap bore the insignia of the Red Army's Alpine Corps!

CHAPTER 3

Colonel Stuermer sat on the ration box in his tent, waiting, and listening to the lazy evening buzz of the camp around him. The big officer in his mid-thirties, who had been one of Germany's leading climbers before the war, always savoured this moment of peace. It reminded him of all the countless times on some ascent or other when he had really been able to let himself go, smoke his pipe, drink his coffee or eat some awful mess of strawberry jam and condensed milk, and forget the awesome responsibilities of leadership.

Stuermer loved the mountains. He loved the physical effort, the danger, the skill and craft one needed, the wealth of memories and the friendships that they created. He liked the responsibility they had thrust upon him, too: the responsibility for a group of brave men, who had to he commanded, not by orders but by example, real leadership and firmness.

But most of all, the mountains meant dignity and freedom for him; removed from the loud, jackbooted, cheap vulgarity of the National Socialist 1,000 Year Reich: clean, wholesome, eternally wrapped in the silence of the deep snow. The mountains, or so it seemed to him as he sat there, quietly puffing his pipe and listening to the sounds of the camp settling down for another night of war, were the last refuge from the evil tide of arrogant aggression, which in these last three years had engulfed the whole of Europe. They were the final escape.

"Sir!"

Stuermer shook himself out of his reverie. Greul was standing at the open flap of the tent. He must have just come back from Corps HQ after completing his mission. "Come in, Greul, he snapped, a sudden look of anger on his thin face. "I want to talk to you."

Greul entered and replaced the flap carefully. It would soon be dark and the major took the Corps blackout regulations seriously, although the enemy air force had not attempted to bomb them yet, and this was 1942, the second year of the campaign against the Soviet Union.

"Sit down," Stuermer indicated the other ration box. "I've something to discuss with you."

"About this afternoon, sir?" Greul said eagerly, as if he could not contain his excitement.

"Exactly." Stuermer pointed the end of his pipe towards his second-in-command angrily, as if it were an offensive weapon. "What in the name of the great whore of Buxtehude were you trying to do this afternoon on that face?"

The excitement vanished from Greul's haughty arrogant face. "You mean the pendulum, sir?"

"I damn well do, Greul! You know I've forbidden that kind of trick in this unit."

"But Meier–"

"Even alpine eagles could get vertigo up there. What if that big ox of a Bavarian rogue, Meier, had got dizzy or lost his balance, Greul? Where would you – and probably he, too – have been then? I'll tell you," he snapped. "You would have been a nasty mess on the valley floor, that's where you would have been!"

"Sir, with all due respect," Greul sneered, "one can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. In this world one has to take risks to achieve success. Hasn't the Führer himself said many times that only a nation which thinks heroically can win through?"

It was on the tip of Stuermer's tongue to tell Greul what he thought of his damned Führer and such foolishness. But he knew that loyal as Greul was, he was first and foremost a National Socialist. He would not hesitate to report his commanding officer to the Gestapo. Therefore, he snapped instead, "The Führer is not a mountaineer, Greul. We are, and in my unit at least, unnecessary risks will not be taken." He looked at Greul's flushed face with his hard eyes and said, "Do you understand that, once and for all?"

Mutely Greul nodded his head, his grey eyes fixed on his dusty mountaineering boots.

For a few moments, Colonel Stuermer let him stew in his juice, while he listened to Ox-Jo telling one of his disreputable stories to his laughing cronies in what the big NCO probably imagined was a subtle whisper. Finally he broke the heavy silence in the tent. "Light the lantern, Greul, would you please?" he asked in his normal, polite voice. "I want to talk to you a little about tomorrow's programme.

Obediently Greul did as he was commanded, avoiding his C.O.'s eyes as he did so.

Stuermer pretended not to notice. Instead, he spread the little chart in front of him on his knees, saying, "I don't think I am revealing any great

military secret or showing any special insight, Greul, when I tell you that it is certain that the army is going to go over to the offensive pretty soon."

Greul, a little more at ease now, nodded his agreement.

"And it is obvious where we're heading – for the Caucasus and the Ivans."

Again Greul nodded his agreement. Outside Meier was saying: "Then I put my hand up her skirt and you know what I found?"

"Now the question for us is what role will the High Alpine Corps play in the coming offensive?"

"That she'd got two of them?" a voice queried amid a burst of raucous laughter. Stuermer recognized it as that of Jap, Meier's half-breed running mate. Stuermer smiled and Greul frowned severely. *Prig,* Stuermer told himself and went on to answer his own question.

"So far I haven't been taken into General Dietl's confidence, but I've got my own suspicions. The Alpine Corps will probably be given the job of securing the left flank – the one based on the mountains – of our advance, and Stormtroop Edelweiss undoubtedly will be assigned the mountains to check that the nasty Ivans don't attempt any flank attack with their own alpine troops. Now tomorrow I want the men to practise an emergency climb–"

"But sir," Greul interrupted, unable to contain his excitement any longer, "there will be no need for an exercise tomorrow!"

Stuermer looked keenly at the major. "What do you mean, Greul?"

"We are both summoned to meet with the Corps' Commander tomorrow morning at eight hundred hours, sir. General Dietl told me to tell you – and also to have Stormtroop Edelweiss on a two-hour stand-by."

"Action?"

Greul's grey eyes flashed with excitement. "It looks like it, sir."

"But, Greul," Colonel Stuermer objected, "the army is not ready to move yet. The units are not all in position by any means, and the necessary supplies are not available in sufficient quantities. My guess is that we will not be able to launch our attack into the Caucasus for another couple of weeks yet."

"I agree, sir. I think it is something else – perhaps something connected with what we found in that wrecked Russian plane this afternoon."

"What do you mean?"

Swiftly and eagerly Greul explained how he and Meier had found the dead Russians and how one of them had been wearing the uniform of the

Soviet Alpine Corps. Colonel Stuermer sat silent for a few moments in thought after Greul had finished, obviously absorbing the information the major had just given him.

Then he said, "So you feel that the dead Russian officer was engaged in some sort of recce of the mountains?"

"Yessir."

"But to what purpose?"

"To launch some sort of flank attack, is my belief," Greul answered swiftly, "and my guess is that General Dietl is going to ask us tomorrow, sir, to get up into the mountains and stop them."

Colonel Stuermer shook his head. "Impossible, Greul," he snapped. "The Russians are on the run everywhere. They are in no position to attack in strength, as you well know. No, an attack is out of the question." He pointed the stem of his pipe at the major. "My guess is that the dead Russian was trying to find a stop-line – one of the high passes up there in the mountains – where they could stop any attack on our part over that terrain. Yes, that will probably be it, Greul. Tomorrow morning General Dietl will most likely ask us to find and occupy that stop-line before the Russians do. Yes, that will be it."

Major Greul still seemed doubtful; and in the event both officers would be proved wrong on the morrow. Yet, when Greul had gone, Colonel Stuermer, sitting alone in the tent, sucking moodily at his cold pipe, felt none of the Major's elation at the prospect of fresh action. Instead, he experienced that old sinking feeling of apprehension at the knowledge that he must soon lead good men to their deaths.

CHAPTER 4

"*Meine Herren, der Kaukasus,*" the craggy-faced, skinny Commander of the High Alpine Corps rasped in his thick Bavarian accent, and slapped the map in front of him with his scarred mountaineer's hand. "At present our troops are stretched across a somewhat loose front between the River Kuban – here in the north – and the Black Sea – in the south – poised, as you can see, at the entrance to the Caucasus."

Both Colonel Stuermer and Major Greul nodded their understanding, but said nothing. General Dietl had a notoriously bad temper; he didn't take kindly to interruptions during a briefing. Instead they sat on the hard wooden chairs in the small room which had once been some Russian peasant's kitchen and listened.

"It is an open secret that the Führer's summer offensive will head into the Caucasus to seize those vital oil fields. Without more oil the Wehrmacht is going to grind to a halt this winter – the Rumanian fields' supply is not enough. Now, as I am sure you have anticipated, the Corps' mission will be to guard the army's flank, to prevent any Russian counter-thrust over the mountains and ensure that nothing will bar the army's progress from that quarter."

Greul flashed Stuermer a knowing look.

Dietl raised a long finger in warning. "However, gentlemen, that is not going to be the task of Stormtroop Edelweiss. The Führer has better plans for your unit, Colonel Stuermer." His craggy face broke into a sudden smile, and Stuermer could guess why. Direct attention from Adolf Hitler could only mean that the Führer was following the progress of the Alpine Corps personally and in its turn that could mean possible promotion for *Herr General der Gebirgstruppen* Dietl. He sniffed, a little contemptuously, and waited for the General's revelations.

Dietl took his time, obviously savouring whatever knowledge he possessed to the full. "In the last two years our Corps has been given some strange assignments in remote places from Norway to Greece, as you both know. We have climbed and fought in mountains far removed from the rest of the Army. But I think I have never been given a stranger assignment than this. In the middle of a total war to assign men to tackle a peacetime climb,

and one that most Westerners would give their eye-teeth to attempt!"

Now Dietl knew he had his two subordinates' attention. Both of them were numbered among the handful of German climbers who had belonged before the war to the international mountaineering elite, ranking with the top Austrians and the British. "As you both know," he continued, keeping Greul and Stuermer on tenterhooks, "Soviet Russia was a closed book to Western climbers before the war. Since the Revolution, no Westerner has ever obtained permission to climb here. The Ivans were always afraid that a Western climber might turn out to be a spy in disguise – they have this almost pathological thing about spies."

Greul clicked his tongue in impatience, eager to be let into the secret. Dietl ignored the sound, enjoying this moment of suspense.

"Now," he continued, "the Ivans are no longer in a position to enforce that ruling. We Germans make the rules this year."

"Yes indeed, sir," Greul interrupted eagerly. "But–"

Dietl frowned. "I shall explain in due course, Major," he said severely. "Be patient." He tapped the chart again. "Here is Cherkassy, the foremost position of our troops at the moment. Not more than two days' – perhaps three at the most – march from that town, along the valley of the River Kuban, there is *die Elbrus*."

Now it was Colonel Stuermer's turn to interrupt. "The Elbrus?" he echoed, puzzled. "What possible military value has that mountain for Germany, General?"

Dietl smiled at him bleakly. "None whatsoever, my dear Colonel," he answered. "It would be impossible for the Russians to maintain any kind of military post up there. The peak is well above the snow line and there are easier passes they could use much lower down if they wished to slip troops through the mountains to attack our flank. No, Mount Elbrus has no military value at all."

"So?" Stuermer asked, a little angry and very puzzled.

"So, Colonel, my Corps – and in particular, Stormtroop Edelweiss – has been given the honour by our Führer Adolf Hitler of climbing Mount Elbrus. As far as I can find out you will be the first Westerners to do so in this century."

"But why?" both Greul and Stuermer asked in unison, astonished at his announcement that in the middle of a life-and-death struggle between the East and West, they were being asked to go off on a climbing jaunt.

"Because wars are not always won simply by military means," Dietl answered. "The war in Russia has dragged on too long. We have lost too many good men here, and much equipment. This year we must finally break the Russian bear's back or be broken ourselves. But even though the Russians are still retreating, they have a superiority in numbers which we cannot match. We must, therefore, convince them and their many subject peoples that Germany and its soldiers are unbeatable. The Führer wants a symbol – a symbol of German invincibility, which will have such a tremendous moral effect upon them that they will know, whatever their officers and political commissars tell them to the contrary, that there is no hope for them. With luck, when our new offensive in the Caucasus starts, they will break, and come flocking to our colours in their thousands – their hundreds of thousands – as they did in 1941 when we broke through and drove for Moscow." His voice rose with excitement. "*Give me the conquest of Mount Elbrus, gentlemen, and I will guarantee you the conquest of the Caucasus* – those were the Führer's own words to me yesterday on the telephone." The Corps Commander's eyes blazed fanatically. "Elbrus, the key to the conquest of Southern Russia. A bold blow carried out by a handful of brave men, which will give our Fatherland all the oil it will ever need and might even mean the end of this war this very year. Don't you think that is a gamble worth taking?"

"Of course, General," Greul responded to Dietl's enthusiasm readily, his own flinty grey eyes gleaming wildly. "We Germans will show the world that we are unbeatable; that neither man nor nature can stop us!"

Colonel Stuermer's face remained cold. He did not share the other two men's vulgar dream – the conquest of a peak as a symbol of national superiority. For him it was yet another example of National Socialist Germany's contemptuous elitist thinking. Icily, he said, "Naturally Stormtroop Edelweiss will carry out any mission assigned to it, sir. But aren't you forgetting one thing, General?"

"And what is that, my dear Stuermer?" General Dietl asked in high good humour.

"The fact that yesterday a member of the Soviet Alpine Corps reconnoitred Mount Elbrus. What are we to make of that?"

General Dietl's look of self-satisfaction vanished abruptly, but he remained silent. He had no answer ready to that particular question.

CHAPTER 5

"Piss pansy!" Sergeant-Major Meier bellowed, as the truck hit yet another hole in the terrible road that led into Cherkassy. "Can't yer watch what yer doing? My kidneys are floating in my throat already."

Jap wrestled with the wheel of the ancient Opel truck and narrowly avoided a deep rut in the unsurfaced road. "Shut up, you Bavarian slime-shitter," he said through gritted teeth. "Can't yer see I'm doing the best I can? It's not my shitting fault that the shitting Popovs build such shitting lousy roads."

"Yer'll get a knuckle sandwich planted in the middle of your ugly yeller kisser if you talk like that to me, ape-turd. Don't yer know you're in the presence of a senior NCO of the High Alpine Corps?"

"Up yours!" was the sweating little corporal's sole reply, as he spun the wheel round to avoid another bump.

Meier gave a mock sigh, looked morosely out of the window, and said, "No respect these days in the German Army for old long-serving NCOs, who have given their all for Fatherland, Folk and Führer. No respect at all."

"What do you think this lark's all about, Ox-Jo," Jap asked, as the outskirts of the town began to come into sight ahead of them, a collection of shabby, white-painted cottages with straw roofs, surrounded by tumbledown picket fences, the gardens almost hidden by the tall yellow sunflowers.

"Search me, Jap," Meier answered, idly glancing at the houses, most of which seemed abandoned. "The C.O. told me to get down here and round up what mules I could find – that's all. The rest of the troop would follow in twenty-four hours. Now what do you make of that?"

Jap changed down before answering, "Well, of course, you Bavarians are known to have bird-brains, so I'll put it to you nice and simple. If we're to look for mules, that means that wherever we're going, it wouldn't be by truck, right?"

"Right," Meier agreed, eyeing with interest the first woman he saw: a barefoot, dark-haired beauty, with a heavy bosom for such a youngster. "She's got plenty of wood in front of her door," he remarked appreciatively. "I'd like to get my head between them and go *brrr!*"

"Perverted barn-shitter – she can't be a day over twelve!"

"No way is she that young!?" Meier said, scandalised, as the girl disappeared from view. "Watch yer tongue, you crap-can, or yer'll be lacking a set of ears before we get where we're going."

"As I was saying," Jap continued, unmoved by the threat, "If we're walking, where are we walking to?"

"You tell me, smart-ass," Meier said and launched a juicy, noisy kiss at a heavy-set woman bent over a wash-tub and revealing sturdy, muscular legs with plenty of white thigh above. "Get a load of those pins, Jap. I bet they go right up to her buttocks!"

"So, if we're walking and we need mules for transport to carry our gear," Jap went on purposefully, changing down to second as they entered Cherkassy's main square, "you can guess where we're heading for?"

"Naturally," Meier said casually, as the dust-covered Opel rolled to a stop in front of the Kommandatura. "Up there!" He pointed a forefinger like a sausage at the white gleaming peaks of the far mountains. "Now come on, let's see what these base stallions can do about finding us our four-legged friends."

Later, the two of them, Ox-Jo and Jap sat in the dusty square, drinking *Airan*, sour mare's milk, which Ox-Jo had described aptly as smelling "like a mixture of cow shit and pig sweat", watching the barefoot boys and girls drag in the reluctant mules to the big, red-faced police NCO, who handed them a bundle of worthless Occupation roubles for the animals.

"Look at 'em, Jap," Ox-Jo said lazily, bored with Cherkassy, bored with the drink, bored with the war, pointing at the little brown mules. "Did you ever see a worse bunch of knock-kneed, knackered–"

He stopped suddenly. A woman had entered the square, as tall and majestic as a high priestess, leading a fine brown mule, advancing through the crowd of scruffy, barefoot boys and girls, as if they weren't there. Meier took a quick gulp of the sour mare's milk, as if his throat were suddenly parched, and gasped. "Get a load of the lungs on that one! Wow, she's just my collar-size!"

"And what about me?" Jap protested.

But Meier was already on his big feet, sweeping the civilians aside to left and right as he descended upon the unsuspecting Russian woman. Taking off his peaked cap, with the silver badge of the Edelweiss on its side, and sweeping it in front of him in a low bow, he said happily: "My name is Meier. I am a senior NCO of the Greater German Wehrmacht, and I love you.

Shall we go to bed now?"

Unlike the local women, this one was blonde and blue-eyed, with a fine chiselled nose. For a moment her handsome, determined face showed rage and disdain at the boldness of this importuning giant of a German, then for some reason she glanced at his cap, and her look changed to one of agreeable pleasantness. "You are very gallant, Sergeant-Major," she said in surprisingly excellent German.

Meier's big face blushed a deep red, and behind him Jap chuckled, "She's gone and caught yer with yer skivvies down, Ox-Jo, eh?"

Meier, normally no respecter of persons, was definitely embarrassed now. "Excuse me, I didn't know... I thought you wouldn't understand..."

The big blonde woman smiled. "Soldiers will be soldiers, Sergeant-Major. German as well as Russian, they want only two things of a woman – and the second one is food." And with that she swept by the crimson-faced NCO, leaving him standing there open-mouthed.

"What's the matter with you, you asparagus Tarzan?" Jap asked, as the two of them sat on the stoop of the little cottage in which the Kommandatura had billeted them.

It was now evening, and the blood-red ball of the sun was beginning to slip down behind the mountains, tinting the snow–covered peaks with dramatic pink. The few civilians still about were hurrying back to their shabby homes before the curfew came into force. Any civilian found on the streets after nine o'clock was shot automatically, without trial. The Wehrmacht was too frightened of the Soviet partisans, reputed to be in the area, to take any chances.

"It's that Popov woman," Ox-Jo answered, dragging slowly at his cigarette. "I think I've fallen in love. At least my eggs are giving me jip."

"And what about me?" Angrily Jap spat out his cigarette butt. "I haven't had a bit for so long that I'm beginning to think those mules aren't so bad-looking after all."

"Ah, but the difference between me and you is that I'm a senior NCO – and besides, you are half a foreigner, anyway," he added, alluding to Jap's Sherpa father whose brief liaison with a Bavarian farm girl had resulted in the wrinkled, yellow-faced corporal. "and that sort of stuff is too good for a foreigner. Only us Germans qualify for that kind of lovely grub."

Jap sniffed. "At any rate, you'll have to keep it tied to yer right leg

tonight. You don't know where she lives, or whether she'd spread her pearly gates for you, even if you did. Besides, if the chain-dogs catch you after dark, they'll have yer behind Swedish curtains before yer feet can hit the ground." He spread his dirty fingers in front of his face to symbolize the prison bars.

"A couple of ruptured, crappy old military policemen don't frighten Mrs Meier's son when he's in love," Meier said contemptuously. "But I must find out where she lives."

"What's it worth to you?"

"What do you mean – what's it worth to me?" Meier demanded, looking round at him curiously.

"Well, I think I could help you, for a small – er – consideration."

Meier held up a fist like a small pink ham. "Now, none of that, Jap. I know what you mean by a small consideration. You're not getting any of that. I've told you already I love her – and you simply don't share the woman you love, even with your best pal."

Jap's face fell. "Well, then, that's that, I suppose," he said.

"Now come, on, Jap," Meier wheedled, "you wouldn't let a mate down like that. How do I find her?"

"Is it worth three jumps to you the next time we get to some place where they have a Wehrmacht knocking-shop?"

"Three jumps, Jap, that's a lot of moss! Fifty marks at least."

Jap shrugged eloquently. "Take it or leave it. Imagine what it'll be like for me, while you're there dipping your wick in all that honey. All that I'll have to keep me happy is five against one and the old five-fingered widow is getting a bit boring, I can tell you that."

Meier gave in. "All right. When you're in love, you're prepared to sacrifice anything for your beloved." He beamed at the little half-breed. "I read that in a book once," he announced proudly.

"You shouldn't have bothered," Jap said sourly. "For three jumps at the knocking shop, I'll tell you. You see the Kommandatura," he began to explain, as if he were talking to a very small and very stupid child. "You go in there and down the corridor. To the right, you'll find a little office, and in that little office, you'll find a fat chain-dog with a red hooter, which he'll explain to you is red because he's got a bad cold, but which is in fact the result of too much indulgence in strong waters–"

"Oh, get on with it," Meier interrupted impatiently. "My eggs are really acting up with all that love juice."

"Well, you say to the chap with the red hooter, discreetly passing him over a pack of twenty cancer-sticks as you do so, that you are looking for a long-lost maiden aunt, whom you will describe as being tall, blonde and having a well-endowed balcony–"

"Of course!" Meier blurted out exuberantly. "All these Popovs have to be registered with the local German bulls! That chain-dog will know where everybody in a little dump like this is located. Now why didn't I think of that?"

"Because you're as thick as two oaken planks, that's why. Now don't forget–"

But Sergeant-Major Meier was no longer listening; he was already running in the direction of the Kommandatura.

The woman was not surprised in the least when he came blundering through the door of her little cottage, without knocking, a packet of stolen Army sausage under one arm and a double litre bottle of black market vodka under the other, crying as he did so, "Food and drink – and me – for my beloved!"

Lazily she slid her legs from under her on the rickety sofa, revealing a delicious glimpse of creamy white inner thigh and black silken panties as she did so. "I've been expecting you," she said in a thick throaty seductive purr. "Take your clothes off."

With one hand she released the single catch that held up her skirt. With the other she clicked off the light. In the sudden darkness, Sergeant-Major Meier sighed in awe, as if he had just been informed he was to be admitted to Paradise.

CHAPTER 6

"Well, Haas?" Colonel Stuermer snapped. "But please stand at ease."

Lieutenant Haas, the Stormtroop's newest officer, shot out the right foot of his immaculately polished mountain boots and flashed his C.O. a quick smile of thanks. "Well, sir," he said, waving his hand at the piles of equipment stored in the shed, "I've been through the lot three times. Boots, crampons, ice-axes – everything – and I am pretty sure we've got all we need."

"Only pretty sure?" Stuermer asked quietly. He liked the boy, whose father had been a celebrated Alpine Troop commander in Italy in the First World War; he didn't want to play the typical heavy C.O. with him. Haas flushed.

"You see, Haas, in an operation like this, complicated by the fact that we are also at war, one single oversight can spell disaster." He bent down to the pile of ropes and rummaged through them for a few moments, while the young officer watched him nervously. Finally he straightened up, a smile on his face. "I was just checking if you had included a Prusik sling. You know, if one of those big-footed mountain boys of mine fell into a crevasse we'd need the Prusik to get him out. I see you've got one. Good."

Lieutenant Haas looked at his C.O.'s lean, sunburnt face with its sensitive chiselled mouth and the blue eyes which could be so cold, yet so compassionate, and was glad – in spite of his ever-present fear – that he was going into action for the first time under the command of such a man. "Thank you, sir. I really did make a careful inspection."

"Of course, you did. Now come along, Haas, let us break the happy news to the men."

Happily the young officer followed his C.O. outside. The weather was brilliant and hot; all the same, the snow still gleamed on the far peaks. It would take more than this heat to melt the snow up there, Stuermer told himself, and returned the waiting Meier's tremendous salute with a casual gesture. "I see you've got sentries posted, Sergeant-Major," he said.

"The Ivans have got big ears, sir," Ox-Jo replied. "Thought it better they didn't hear anything which would give them earache."

"Good idea, Meier."

"I'm not just a pretty face, sir," Meier answered with a smirk. He tapped his temple. "There's a brain up here as well."

"Some people will believe anything, I suppose, Meier," Stuermer said in high good humour and opened the door to the big barn in which he would give his briefing. With a crash of heavy, nailed boots on the wooden floor, which sent up a cloud of ancient dust, the men of Stormtroop Edelweiss stamped to attention.

Greul swung his commander an immaculate salute and bellowed at the top of his voice, as if he were back on some Prussian parade ground. "Stormtroop Edelweiss, two officers, sixteen NCOs and sixty men. All present and correct, sir!"

"Thank you, Greul," Stuermer answered coldly, wishing that Greul would not attempt to play the new kind of brutal, aggressive National Socialist officer. He looked at the men's faces. They were hard, bronzed and tough: the faces of the world's best mountain troops, every one of them born and bred in the Bavarian Alps, where male children absorb mountain lore and skill with their mother's milk. "Morning, soldiers!" he said with forced cheerfulness, feeling again the awesome responsibility of attempting to ensure that these men returned one day to their mountain homes.

"Morning, Colonel!" they sang back in hearty unison.

"Please sit down." Stuermer nodded to Greul, and as the soldiers squatted on the wooden floor, the major whipped away the blanket which covered the map attached to the wall.

Stuermer let his men have a good look at the big map before he commenced his briefing. "Comrades, we have been given a mission by the Corps Commander himself." He tapped the map. "Here Mount Elbrus is located – all five thousand, six hundred metres of it. We have been given the task of climbing it, not for any military purpose, but as a symbol of German superiority and heroism!"

While the barn buzzed with excited chatter, Stuermer could not help but look at Greul. But his irony had had no effect. The major's face glowed with vulgar pride. Stuermer raised his hands to stop the chatter. "Now you must not think we're off on some peacetime climbing jaunt." Again he tapped the map. "Before we even reach the foot of the mountain we will have to pass through some fifty kilometres of enemy territory. As far as we know, the Red Army has evacuated the area in its retreat into the Caucasus. But there are still the partisans to reckon with, and, according to Intelligence, the *Karatski*

tribe located around the hamlet of Chursuk – here!" He tapped the map. "By tradition they are bandits, and Moslems to boot. Therefore they were against the Reds, but that doesn't mean automatically that they will be for us. And, again according to Intelligence, they have some pretty unpleasant habits with their prisoners."

"Oh, don't tell me, sir, that I'm going to be a singing tenor if they get their paws on me!" Meier squeaked in a falsetto voice, clutching the front of his baggy grey trousers to make his meaning perfectly clear.

"Yes, something like that, Meier," Stuermer agreed, joining in the burst, of laughter which had greeted the Sergeant-Major's remark. "Though the thought shouldn't worry you. The way you've been going at it these last few years, it's bound to drop off of its own accord anyway, one day."

His sally brought forth another burst of laughter. But it wasn't shared by two men there: Greul, who was prudish to an extreme, and young Lieutenant Haas, whose face revealed all too plainly his sudden fear.

Stuermer's face grew grave again as he continued. "Providing we have no trouble at Chursuk or before that, we'll begin the real business of climbing once we are through the Chotyu-Tau Pass – here. It's about three thousand metres above sea-level, and in spite of the good weather we've been having of late, we can assume there'll be snow up there still. With a bit of luck, however, we'll be able to reach Elbrus House – here by the end of the first day."

"A house, sir?" Jap queried.

"Yes," Stuermer answered, seeing the puzzled look on the little half-breed's yellow face. "Apparently the Russians had begun building it at the beginning of the war. Supposed to be covered with aluminium or some sort of alloy to make it proof against the kind of weather you can expect in winter at four thousand odd metres. It was intended as a weather station, but whether the Russians were able to complete it, we don't know."

"Is it occupied, sir?" Meier asked.

"Again, we don't know that, Meier. At all events we shall rest the second day and prepare for the ascent to the West Peak – here. At five thousand six hundred and thirty-three metres, it is the real summit. The other is a hundred metres lower."

"Looks like a couple of breasts, sir," Meier said. "We should call it Twin-Tit Mountain. Imagine the headlines in Berlin, sir, once we've climbed it – Stormtroop Edelweiss Plants Swastika on Right Nipple of Twin

Mountain."

"Sergeant-Major Meier," Greul barked above the laughter, his lean face flushed with anger, "must you mouth such filth – and insult our flag, to boot?"

"Just trying to cheer the chaps up, sir," Meier replied easily, unmoved by the major's angry outburst.

"Leave the cheering up of the chaps to me, please, Meier," Stuermer said quickly, and continued. "I'm not going to risk taking the whole unit up that peak. Once we're in the house I'll pick a good dozen of the fittest of you for the ascent. With luck, we should be able to be up and down in a day, though the ascent will be a matter of trial and error. Intelligence has been unable to turn up any Russian material on the difficulty of the climb and no one in the West has attempted it since the Russian revolution."

"Has it ever been climbed at all?" Haas asked curiously.

"I don't know. I should imagine that someone might have attempted it – the Russians have some excellent climbers, though we know little about their exploits – their Government never allowed them out of the country for an international climb." He smiled at the boy. "We'll give you the honour of carrying the flag up the mountain, Haas. That'll get you in the record books. If I recollect correctly, your father had a dozen 'eight thousands' to his credit."

"Yessir, he did. And thank you – for the flag," Haas mumbled, a little red in the face.

His father, Haas thought as the Colonel continued his briefing. How he wished he could be like the giant old colonel, bluff, jovial and without one little bit of fear in his still-muscular body! All his life the old colonel had sailed from one adventure to another, shrugging off the danger, supremely confident that nothing could go wrong. His father would never have understood the fears that had plagued him ever since the time the old colonel had taken him on his first ascent at the age of five, his stomach knotted and constricted in that nameless terrifying fear that he was to come to know so well in the years to come. He had learned to hide his fears; the old colonel would have never believed that a son of his could ever suffer from a dread that was completely unknown to him. But Lieutenant Haas knew well that one day, somehow and somewhere, he would not be able to conceal his fear – and then that would be the end for him.

"But remember this," Colonel Stuermer was saying, "we are at war, though from the mission we have been given I have my doubts that the base

stallions at the Führer's HQ realize it. We will just have to keep one eye on the summit of Mount Elbrus, but at the same time we must also keep an eye to our rear." He looked around at the men's faces, which were abruptly very serious. "Just in case some nasty Ivan decides to stick a knife in such a tempting, unguarded target."

Lieutenant Haas shuddered. But no one, least of all the C.O., noticed: an oversight, which was going to have disastrous consequences for Stormtroop Edelweiss.

CHAPTER 7

The next thirty-six hours flew by. There were a hundred-and-one minor and major problems for Colonel Stuermer to solve, from the ammunition he could expect each man to carry once they had commenced the ascent, to whether they should take salt tablets (against heat exhaustion) or not. For now the summer sun was there in full strength, and in the suddenly oven-hot air of the plain, from which there was no relief, the half-naked mountaineers sweated over their equipment, preparing to load it on the drooping, listless, brown mules.

Colonel Stuermer longed for the cool of far mountain peaks. But, his lean face already brick-red from the sun, he forced himself out into the burning sunshine to inspect and check the mountaineers' preparations. And from early morning to late evening, the sun continued to blaze down mercilessly, the heat waves trembling on the still air, the mountains in a stifling opaque haze.

It was not surprising that when Major Greul sneered at a sweat-drenched, exhausted Lieutenant Haas, who was acting as the Stormtroop's supply officer – *"My God, Haas pull yourself together in front of the men,"* – Colonel Stuermer rounded on the surprised Major with, "Greul, can't you ever remember you are a human being – and that human beings have weaknesses?"

"Weaknesses, sir?" Greul echoed, puzzled.

"Yes, weaknesses. You and your cheap ideology! Do you think that is what war and the mountains are about? The creation of a new master race, who use the possibility of death as a kind of political and national aphrodisiac?" With an angry gesture, Stuermer wiped the sweat from his burning face. "The mountains prove nothing – they are just there. Remember that!"

And with that, Colonel Stuermer strode away to inspect another group of mountaineers grouped around a reluctant mule, leaving Greul staring after him in open-mouthed bewilderment, while a grinning Haas went back to work with renewed energy, confident that his C.O. was the best in the whole of the Greater German Wehrmacht.

At the end of the second day of preparations, Colonel Stuermer called Stormtroop Edelweiss together and told the weary men that the preparations were finished. "You can take the next twenty-four hours off. We shall move out after dark, as soon as the curfew is enforced tomorrow evening. But one thing: remember the peasants in the village seem to be friendly – so far they have been very co-operative – yet we still can't take any chances. For that reason – everybody is confined to camp for the next twenty-four hours. And I mean everybody! Good, dismiss!"

Most of the men were only too glad to lie down in the shade of their bunks, away from the blinding sun and the back breaking work of the last forty-eight hours. But not all. Sergeant-Major Meier, for one, had other plans for that night. As he said to his running-mate Jap, who was stretched out completely naked on his blankets, exhausted, arm shielding his eyes from the last rays of the sinking sun which came in through the hole in the wall that served as the cottage's window, "I mean, you lot of warm brothers don't like women. I do. Besides it'll be a long time till I get another bit of how's yer father – and I think I love Roswitha," the big NCO added thoughtfully. "As soon as it's dark I'm off under the wire."

"Love her?" Jap said wearily. "You big currant-crapper, you've only known her a week!"

"In wartime, love blossoms quick," Meier announced. "I read that in a book once."

"Books!" Jap snorted. "It takes you all yer time to read the instructions on a packet of Parisians."

"Well, by the look of that nasty little worm you've got drooping there, You'd never need a Parisian. They don't make em for midgets." He rose from the bunk, and walked across to the tin basin of grey suddy water on the chair in the corner. "Better start making myself more beautiful for Roswitha. And remember to cover up for me when the orderly officer comes round – tell him I'm in the thunderbox or somewhere – or I'll dock that worm of yours down to the size of a maggot!"

"Hope she's given you a nice juicy case of clap," replied Jap in his usual friendly manner, "that'll certainly make love blossom even faster."

***

Roswitha was waiting for him as usual when he slipped into her little

blacked-out cottage, lying on the couch, naked save for a pair of black silken knickers, her ivory-white body glowing in the dusky red light given out by the solitary candle under its red glass shade.

"Firewater?" she enquired.

Meier took his greedy eyes off her beautiful naked body and looked for the usual bottle of vodka. It was standing on the top of the green-tiled oven. Grabbing it, he took a hefty slug straight from the bottle. "Grr!" he breathed gratefully. "That was good. The dust was up to my tonsils."

"You have been working hard today, yes?" she asked carefully, still not moving.

"Yes." He grinned knowingly and advanced upon her, taking off his clothes as he did so. "But I know I'm going to work a lot harder for the next thirty minutes. Come here, my little Russian cheetah!"

Quivering with what the big NCO took for passion and desire, the Russian woman allowed him to fondle her breasts. She sighed with pleasure at his touch. His hairy paws grabbed for her black knickers and ripped them off in one swift greedy grab. "*Nyet!*" she gasped.

"Don't be impatient – soon," he gasped, misunderstanding her protest, grappling with his boots as he forced her backwards.

"*Boshe moy – Nyet!*" Her fervent protest ended in a hysterical, gurgling scream, deep down in her throat, as he thrust himself savagely between her wide-open legs.

It was nearly dawn now. Outside, the birds were beginning their first frantic chatter of welcome to the new light. Eyes half-closed, weary, and yawning constantly, as if he would never really wake up again, a tousle-haired Meier searched unwillingly for his clothes, while the Russian woman, lying naked on the rumpled sofa, watched him, half-amused, half-wary. "You have duty this morning?" she asked as he pulled on his boots and began to thread the laces through the brass-rimmed holes.

"No," he said thickly.

"Why the hurry, then?"

"We're not allowed out of camp. I am here without permission. I must get back before everyone wakes up."

She nodded her pretty blonde head. "Is there something happening there?"

Meier was too busy trying to tie his boots to notice the sudden gleam of

interest in her eyes. "I think we're leaving."

"For the mountains?"

He looked at her suddenly, aware of her persistence. "How do you know – the mountains?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered, shrugging easily. "Just your badge. The *Edelweiss*. Everyone knows that alpine flower is the badge of the German alpine troops. So, if you go anywhere – you go to the mountains. Yes or no?"

Meier ignored her question. "Don't you worry your pretty Popov head about such things," he said. He clasped her to his uniformed chest. "Listen. I'll come out with the driver to get bread from the bakehouse up the road for the soldiers at midday. It'll take about half an hour to load up the loaves. Can I come by for a quickie?"

"Quickie?" she queried.

"You know, Roswitha. *Bang bang, goodbye ma'am.*" The big Bavarian NCO made an explicit gesture with his thumb pressed between his two forefingers.

"Oh yes, I see.... Yes. I will be here for you." She smiled, but there was no accompanying warmth in her bright blue eyes.

"Fine." He planted a big, wet, noisy kiss on the side of her cheek. "Off I go to the big war. See you at midday, Roswitha."

"*Dosvidanya*, soldier," she sighed wearily and watched him go, never to return, as she had watched many of their proud field-grey backs depart in these last terrible twelve months. Then, snapping out of her momentary reverie, she started hastily to put on her clothes.

Punctually at twelve o'clock, a happy smiling Sergeant-Major Meier clicked open the gate to her little cottage and knocked politely on the door. There was no answer. He knocked again and again. Still no answer. Puzzled, and not a little disappointed, for he knew at the back of his mind he would never see the handsome blonde Russian woman again after today, he opened the door and said, "Roswitha, it's me – and I'm limping already."

There was no answering call.

"Perhaps she's in the thunderbox," he said to himself, and opening the door of the kitchen he looked out at the little wooden lean-to with the crude heart carved in its door. It, too, was empty. The girl was nowhere to be found.

In his few bits of fractured Russian, with the aid of much arm-waving and exaggerated gestures, he tried the neighbours on both sides of the

tumbledown cottage. They were obviously frightened, and there was nothing he could get out of them about Roswitha's strange disappearance. Over and over again, they kept repeating the same word "*schpion*", "*schpion*", which meant nothing to him until, as he walked disconsolately back to the waiting truck, its meaning dawned upon him. '*Schpion*' was the same as the German *Spion*, meaning 'spy'.

He paused in the middle of his stride, and staring blankly at the dirty white wall in front of him, he said to no-one in particular, "Roswitha is a spy!" He bit his bottom lip in bewilderment. "But for whom – and what did she want to know?" There was no answer forthcoming to those particular questions.

Watching the German's strange behaviour from the open door of his bakery, the sweating, flour-covered baker in his dirty undershirt tapped his temple and said to himself, "The Fritzes – they're always either drunk or crazy – or a bit of both..."

CHAPTER 8

"All right, you bunch of wet-tails," Meier called, "get those twinkle-toes of yours moving! Make dust!"

Colonel Stuermer sighed. "Meier, must you make so much noise? You'll waken half of Southern Russia with that fog horn of yours!"

Meier peered at him through the gloom. "Sorry, sir. Just doing my duty as a conscientious NCO of the Greater German Army should."

"I shit upon you, Meier," Stuermer said, sensing rather than seeing the mocking look on the big Bavarian's face. "From a great height!"

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your concern for my well-being."

"Get on with it, you rogue," Stuermer chuckled and turned to the elderly one-armed colonel in charge of the Kommandatura who stood next to him, framed in the yellow light streaming from the door of his quarters. Well, I suppose this is the parting of the ways, Colonel."

"Wish I were going with you, Stuermer. But with this one flipper of mine, I don't suppose I'd be much use to you where you're going."

Stuermer knew the elderly Colonel was happy he was staying behind. He preferred his nightly bottle of vodka, his warm bed, and the even warmer young Russian girl who shared it with him. All the same, Stuermer said, "I wish you could come along with us too, Colonel. We can always use good men. But someone must keep things ticking over in the rear echelon, you know."

"Spect you're right, Stuermer," the colonel said, his mind already occupied with the thought of Irena's naked body, waiting for him under the covers upstairs once Stormtroop Edelweiss was gone.

Stuermer took one last look at his men lined up in a long column in the blacked-out gloom, with the mules at the rear under the command of Lieutenant Haas, their hooves and equipment wrapped in sacking so that they would make as little noise as possible as they passed through a sleeping Cherkassy. Then he turned back to the colonel. "Many thanks once again for everything you have done for us while we were here. He swung his opposite number a salute. "Till the next time, Colonel."

"Till the next time, Stuermer – and lots of luck."

"Thank you." Stuermer turned and strode away. He gave a soft

command to Major Greul, who was in charge of the point. "Broken step!" Greul ordered. "Advance!"

Shuffling through the ankle-deep dust, the men and mules started to advance. Like silent ghosts, they disappeared one by one into the darkness.

At the door to his quarters, the old one-armed colonel watched them for a few moments, his mind full of Irena. Then he turned and closed the door behind him, licking his suddenly dry lips in anticipation. But Colonel August Adams was not fated to enjoy the ample charms of his eighteen year-old Irena that night or any other night.

The blonde woman waited till the last plodding mule had shuffled past, its head bowed as if it bore not only its load but all the cares of the world, before she whispered, "Now!"

Dark clouds parted in the moon's path for an instant, and she could see the men all around her, tensed over the knives and axes, as they started to creep towards the Kommandatura. Metre by metre they crawled towards the silent bunker which was the HQ's sole defence. She clutched her own pistol more firmly in a hand that was beginning to sweat heavily with nervousness, and followed.

They were about fifty metres from the bunker now. There was no sound save the soft whisper of the wind in the tall oaks. Abruptly the blonde woman froze. Two dark shapes had detached themselves from the deep shadows cast by the oaks. Slowly they plodded towards the crouching men, in the slow, weary manner of soldiers everywhere who were carrying out a boring duty in the middle of the night. Carefully, very carefully, she cupped her hands around her mouth and whispered in the ear of the man nearest to her, "Fritzes, Sergei."

"I've seen them already," the boy whispered back. "Shall I take them out, Comrade Captain?" His stainless steel teeth flashed in a grin.

"Yes."

Sergei needed no urging. He gripped his knife between his steel teeth and crawled forward, while she watched his progress tensely, knowing that they would have a real fight on their hands if the sentries managed to alert the bunker in time. But her fears were groundless.

Just as the first of the elderly sentries turned, probably alarmed by some slight noise Sergei made, the boy flung himself forward. His knife flashed. There was a stifled cry of pain. The first sentry sank to his knees, clutching

his slit throat, trying to stem the sudden flaw of blood. Sergei sprang on the other one's back, gripped the rear of his coal-scuttle helmet and tugged hard. It was an old partisan trick. The Fritz's chin strap would dig into his neck and effectively cut off any shout of warning.

The woman waited no longer. "Forward comrades!" she hissed, while Sergei wrestled the dying German to the ground.

The men swept forward like grey, hungry timber wolves emerging from some winter forest, greedy for prey to still their gnawing hunger. A partisan kicked the kneeling German in the face. He smashed against the nearest tree and was dead before he hit the ground. Behind the first partisan, another one sprang over the dead body and flung open the door to the bunker. A third knew exactly what he had to do. The captured grenade flew from his hand. In the same instant that it hurtled into the inside of the bunker, the man at the door slammed it closed again. There was a thick throaty crump from within.

"Into the Kommandatura," the woman cried above the noise. They hurtled up the steps. A half-naked German came running towards them, trying to pull up his braces over his fat belly as he did so. Sergei's knife flashed once more. He went down, his throat slashed open from jugular to the carotid, drowning in his own blood. Sergei gave the woman another of his gleaming steel smiles of triumph.

"Up the stairs!" she commanded.

Followed by half a dozen of the partisans she clattered up the staircase. A German opened a door, pistol in hand. Before he could fire, a partisan Tommy-gun chattered. He jack-knifed, stomach ripped open by the vicious burst, and flopped over the landing rail.

"This way," the woman gasped. She knew the way to the one-armed Fritz colonel's room exactly. With the heel of his boot, Sergei smashed in the door.

The one-armed Colonel was completely naked, standing next to the rumpled bed in which cowered a pretty baby-faced girl, who couldn't have been a day older than eighteen.

The woman was suddenly seized by an all-consuming rage. It was pretty obvious what the one-armed Fritz had been about to do when they had burst in, and it was clear, too, that the girl had been a willing party to his disgusting form of fornication. "Pigs – vile pigs!" she hissed through clenched teeth and pressed the trigger of her pistol.

The bullet struck the Colonel in the stomach. He smashed back against

the wall, eyes wide and staring, pink foam suddenly on his lips, a gaping hole vivid red against the pale white of his stomach. She fired again. This time she did not miss her target.

The Colonel's sexual organs shattered in a red flurry of flesh and blood. He screamed once like a pig being castrated and slammed to the floor.

"*Boshe moy!*" Sergei said in awe, as he stared at the hole in the base of the Colonel's stomach.

The woman turned her burning eyes on the girl cowering in the bed, the felt quilt drawn up in front of her, as if that fragile thing might protect her from what must come.

"Let me have her first, Comrade Captain," Sergei pleaded. "I'll give her one good meal of real Russian meat after all that Fritz carrion."

The woman ignored his plea. She raised her still-smoking pistol. The girl backed against the headrest, as if she might be able to press herself through it and escape. "Comrade...Comrade...please Ros–"

Her frantic request for mercy was cut short by the sharp crack of the pistol. She screamed as the slug shattered her pretty white face like the shell of a soft-boiled egg being struck by a too-heavy spoon. Her lifeless body slumped on the quilt.

The woman savoured this moment. It seemed to her at that instant that her action had purified her beautiful body of all the dirt it had accumulated in these last terrible months when she had been no different from the girl she had just murdered. She had killed herself. Then she snapped out of her reverie. "Collect all their weapons and distribute them to the peasants!" she cried. "Come on – hurry it up there. There is a lot to be done yet..."

And far away at the tail-end of the Stormtroop column, young Lieutenant Haas heard the faint sound of firing to their rear and felt an icy finger of fear trace its way down the length of his spine. Instinctively he knew what had just happened. Behind them the road to the rear had been cut. They were on their own in Russian-held territory. There was no way back.

BOOK 2

A TRAP IS SPRUNG

CHAPTER 9

"Sir!"

Colonel Stuermer swung round on Sergeant-Major Meier who was marching behind him at the point of the long slow column of mules and mountaineers. "Yes, Meier? What is it?"

By way of an answer, Ox-Jo pointed a big finger at the foot hills to the right of the road that led to Chursuk. Outlined a stark black against the crimson ball of the late afternoon sun, a handful of riders were plodding along on a parallel course to their own.

"Must be well over a couple of kilometres away," Meier confirmed what Stuermer was thinking. "In this mountain air, you can see much further than in the plains."

Stuermer nodded, and flinging up his glasses, focused them on the mysterious riders. There were a dozen of them, mounted on ponies not much bigger than their own mules, and as far as he could make out, they wore no uniform. But it was clear that the dark objects they bore across their shoulders were rifles. They were an armed party.

The question was, *who were they?*

It was a question that Major Greul aired a moment later. "What do you make of them, sir?" he asked, lowering his own binoculars.

Stuermer did the same slowly. "Don't know exactly, Greul. They could be partisans. They could be this tribe – the Karatski that Intelligence mentioned."

"One thing is certain though, sir," Meier interrupted. "They know we're here and they're watching us." He pointed his finger at the sudden bright gleam that came from the ranks of the strange riders. "Binoculars."

"Yes," Stuermer agreed. "You're right there." For a moment he stood still, his brow creased in a puzzled frown, while the column came to a halt behind him. Then he made his decision. "There is nothing we can do about them. We're on foot, they're mounted. Meier?"

"Sir?"

"Pass the word back – everyone is to keep his eyes peeled, and you and Jap better hoof it to the rear of the column to give Lieutenant Haas a bit of muscle – just in case."

"Right, sir," Meier said cheerfully, and nudged his running mate. "Come on, we're going to have a look at mule arses from behind. It'll be better than looking at your ugly mug all the time." Holding onto their machine pistols, the two NCOs doubled the length of the column, passing on the CO's orders, while the men of Stormtroop Edelweiss checked their weapons in anticipation.

But nothing happened. As that long afternoon passed, the riders kept level with the column, but made no attempt to attack it. After a while the mountaineers gave up their regular glances in their direction and concentrated on the march towards the glittering peaks of the snow-covered mountains, above which the still air seemed to shimmer an electric blue.

As the afternoon started to draw to a close, and the temperature began to become bearable, the character of the country also changed. The steppe became more broken. Grey rock outcrop was more frequent and the grass grew yellow and stunted, as if it had been pressed down for a long time by the winter snows. Here and there a sweating trooper buttoned up his tunic, shivering a little at the cooler wind which was blowing from the mountains, in welcome relief from the almost unbearable heat of the steppe.

Just before nightfall, Stuermer ordered a stop near a pleasantly babbling mountain stream and when the tired troopers stumbled sore-footed to it, they found the water icy-cold, as if it had originated in one of the far-off glaciers. As Jap complained through suddenly chattering teeth, "Cold enough to freeze the eggs off yer."

"Yes, if yer had any to freeze off," Meier agreed, pouring a canteen of the icy water over his big head.

Standing a little way from the men grouped around the stream quenching their thirst and bathing their tired feet, Stuermer surveyed their position.

The place was as good as any for an overnight camp. The area was littered with small boulders – probably the result of some Ice Age moraine – with solid tufts of large thistles dotted here and there between the boulders. It would make an ideal defensive site just in case.

For the first time in the last hour or so, he remembered the strange riders who had accompanied the column for most of the afternoon. He swung round and focused his binoculars on the hills to their right. Screwing up his eyes against the almost horizontal rays of the setting sun, he searched every

nook and cranny. Without success. The riders had vanished as abruptly as they had come. A few moments later the sun slipped behind the hills and the valley was swamped in darkness. Stormtroop Edelweiss was alone again.

They had eaten the last of the pea soup, washed their canteens in the stream and now, with the stars glittering a hard silver in the immense purple sweep of the sky above them, the men of Edelweiss lay in their blankets, drifting off to sleep.

Colonel Stuermer lay next to young Haas, his head resting on his rucksack, fully dressed save for his boots, thinking over the events of the day. Far away he could hear the faint howl of the timber wolf. Idly he wondered if it could have any significance. *A warning perhaps?*

"Do you think we'll reach Chursuk tomorrow, sir?" Haas broke into his thoughts.

"Very probably Haas. With a bit of luck."

"But those riders, sir. Do you think they could be partisans?" Stuermer misunderstood the anxious note in the young officer's voice. "Don't worry, Haas, you'll get to climb the mountain," he said with a soft chuckle. "Remember, I promised you you'd carry the flag on the ascent."

"Thank you, sir, but.. but perhaps I wont be good enough for a climb like that."

Again Colonel Stuermer chuckled. "Don't worry, any son of Colonel Haas is good enough. Your father would have my hide if I refused to let his son in on something like the ascent of Mount Elbrus. God forbid!"

Lieutenant Haas remained silent and again Colonel Stuermer misunderstood. "Your father is of the old generation. Almost nineteenth century," Colonel Stuermer went on, unaware of the young officer's real reasons. "The English started climbing, you know. The rich sons of the fat bourgeoisie. They were sick of the commercialism of city life. They wanted a new challenge – *a new dimension of existence*, the English climber Edward Whymper called it. On the one hand, they wanted to get away from civilization, and on the other, climbing mountains was a sort of symbol that human beings could tame nature, even the highest peaks. Your father belongs to that generation. I understand his motives, but I don't quite agree with them."

Lieutenant Haas turned in his blankets and stared through the velvet gloom at the white blur of Colonel Stuermer's face. How he wished his father

were like the colonel: a man to whom he could talk openly, express his inner fears his emotions, his weaknesses! "Why don't you agree, sir?" he asked softly.

"Well, I agree in the sense that it is good to get away from civilization – remote from city squalor, the noise, the purposeless activity of buying and selling. But the conquest of nature. No! Nature is simply there, it is nothing that you can fight and conquer. That is a kind of philosophy to which I cannot subscribe. It smacks–"

"Of the brown uniform and the crooked cross," the young Lieutenant beat him to it.

"Perhaps," Colonel Stuermer agreed, and smiled softly. Haas knew; he had seen through him. "But, my dear Lieutenant, I think we'd better drop that particular subject for this night. After all, one can't have a unit commander talking treason with one of his officers, can one?"

Haas laughed softly and a little nervously. "No, one can't, Colonel."

"Good night, then, Haas. Up at five tomorrow."

"Good night, sir," Haas replied, feeling reassured and confident again. "And thank you, sir."

Colonel Stuermer turned on his side and made himself more comfortable on the hard stony ground, but he didn't close his eyes immediately. *Thank you sir*, the boy had said. He wondered idly: *Why?*

Slowly the Stormtroop men fell asleep. Now there was no sound in the little camp save the snores of the weary mountaineers, the soft tread of the sentries and the crackle of the watch fires. Above them in the heights, the watchers counted the number of fires and carefully noted their positions. The woman was a stickler for details; she wouldn't tolerate any carelessness. Thus they watched and waited.

CHAPTER 10

Sergeant-Major Meier raised his right leg and gave a soft fart. "Heil Hitler," he said automatically.

"Shut up!" Colonel Stuermer whispered. "Do you want them to hear, you stupid lout?" He waved his pistol. "Follow me."

Together with Ox-Jo, Jap and six of his veterans, he began to steal into the thin night mist which writhed through the boulders, their sock-covered boots almost noiseless. They waded a little torrent, its rushing water again drowning any sound they might have made. On the other side, Colonel Stuermer knelt and ran his hand over the damp earth. His fingers traced the outline of what he had expected to find there – a horse-hoof mark.

"They're up this way," he whispered to Ox-Jo, "and remember when the balloon goes up, I'm not looking for corpses, I want prisoners."

The big NCO clutched the sand-filled sock he had prepared specially for this night's excursion more firmly in his ham-like fist, and whispered back, "Never fear, sir, you'll get one – handed to you on a silver platter."

They went on, the track becoming more difficult. Stuermer veered to the right, telling himself that whoever was watching them would need a clear field of sight over the camp below. They worked their way through a group of mountain pines, carefully lifting back branch and holding it until the man behind could catch it and do the same for the man coming after him. The method was almost soundless, in spite of the thickness of the trees.

Stuermer was holding the last pine branch when his nostrils were suddenly assailed by the warm sweet smell of horses. In that same moment, they must have scented him. There was a faint whinny and the sound of a fretting horse pawing the earth. He froze. They were there. The unknown watchers could only be a matter of metres away. He crouched low and slid into the glade. Before him, there was a line of boulders, with beyond, far down below, the faint pink flickering of the mountaineers' camp fires. This was the observation site. He began to crawl forward. Behind him his men emerged one by one, and veterans that they were, they split into two groups, intent on converging on the boulders from both sides.

Now Colonel Stuermer's nostrils picked up the scent of unwashed human bodies and the stinking black *Marhokker* tobacco the Russians

smoked. They were very close now. He could feel the sweat begin to break out all over his lean body, in spite of the coldness of the night. And he knew why. It was at the prospect of violent action.

The horses, tethered somewhere out of sight beyond the boulders, obviously sensing that the strangers represented danger, continued their fretting and nervous low whinnying. But the unknown watchers seemingly were asleep. There was no reaction from their positions. Colonel Stuermer told himself they must be amateurs. Even partisan units usually put out sentries when they slept. But then perhaps his own trick of leading out this little patrol in the middle of the night, when the rest of the Stormtroop had been asleep for hours, might well have lulled the watchers into a false sense of security. He crept on, body tense and tingling, expecting the shout of alarm and fear to come at any moment.

It did. The very next moment. But from a quarter he had not expected. Suddenly he stumbled and nearly lost his balance. At his feet, a pale blur of face stared up at him in shocked surprise. For what seemed an age, the two men stared at each other, soundlessly, motionlessly. Stuermer recovered first. Just as the Russian opened his mouth to sound the alarm, Stuermer's pistol clubbed down on his head. With a soft moan, he dropped back into the hole grubbed in the stony earth in which he had been sleeping.

But the moan was enough. Beyond the boulders, the horses reared up in alarm, tugging and jingling their traces, whinnying with fear.

"*Stoi?*" a voice broke the silence.

Stuermer knew they had been discovered. "At them!" he cried.

Sleeping men woke up startled. Here and there a man managed to scramble to his feet before the attack descended upon them. A Russian tried to grapple with Ox-Jo. The big NCO didn't give him a chance. His blackjack smashed into the back of the Russian's head. He fell, as if pole-axed. A man broke away from the furious mêlée. Instinctively, Stuermer knew he was heading for the tethered horses. Stuermer jerked the trigger of his pistol. Scarlet flame stabbed the darkness. The running man faltered, his hands fanning the air, spine curved in unbearable agony. Then, as the light vanished, he flopped to the ground, face-first.

Another man broke loose from the scene of murder and mayhem. Stuermer pulled the trigger. No one must escape, he knew that. Nothing happened! Angrily he pressed it again. Once more nothing. He swung round to Jap who was acting as his bodyguard. "*Fire – damn you!*" he roared. Jap

did not hesitate. The machine pistol chattered in his hands. The running man zig-zagged violently, and vicious spurts of sparks were thrown up at his heels. But he seemed to bear a charmed life. Just as Ox-Jo slugged the last Russian into insensibility, the running man disappeared behind the cover of the far boulders. A moment's silence. Next instant there was the frantic clatter of horse's hooves down the stony trail that led to the valley. Stuermer let his shoulders slump, suddenly feeling very tired. The Russian had got away. He would warn the others, whoever they might be.

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"All right, shithouse mouse," Ox-Jo snarled, drawing back his big fist. "Sing, or you'll get the biggest knuckle-sandwich you've ever eaten!"

Their sole prisoner, the man Colonel Stuermer had stumbled across, stared back at the big NCO numbly, his face gleaming with sweat in the light of the torch that Jap held. He shook his head.

The Stormtroop corporal, who spoke some Russian, repeated the question that Stuermer had posed. "Who are you and what is your mission?"

Again the man shook his head.

Before Stuermer could stop him, Ox-Jo dropped his fist. He pulled out his pistol and cracked the muzzle against the prisoner's mouth. With a yelp of sudden pain, he opened it. In a flash, Ox-Jo's pistol muzzle had penetrated into his throat and thrust him back against the rock face. Gagging and choking, trying to free himself from the gun, the man's head writhed back and forth as Ox-Jo cursed him roundly in his thick Munich accent.

Colonel Stuermer had had enough. He understood Ox-Jo's reason for using this kind of method to extract the information they needed. Time was short. The man who had escaped might already he bringing up reinforcements. This was not the proper place for a long-winded interrogation. All the same, he could not tolerate torture in Stormtroop Edelweiss.

"All right, Sergeant-Major," he snapped, "that's enough!"

"But sir, I've just got the perverted banana-sucker where I want him," Meier began to protest.

"I said that's enough!" Stuermer cut him short. "Let him go, do you hear?"

Meier did as he was ordered. The prisoner sank to his knees, face wild

with pain, bloody, pulpy tissue spewing from his wide-open, frantic mouth.

Stuermer licked his lips. "Ask him the question once more, Corporal," he commanded in a weak voice. "If he doesn't talk, we're getting out of here."

The interpreter repeated the question.

The prisoner looked up at the circle of hard faces, hollowed out to death in the blue light, and probably told himself he could expect no mercy from them. They would kill him if he didn't talk. He spat out a broken tooth and a gob of thick blood, and began to speak.

Hastily the corporal translated: he, too, wanted to be on the way back to the camp before the escaped Russian returned with his comrades. "He says, sir, that he belongs to a partisan group... They were formed in the winter... They have units all over the south... They are supplied by air."

"Ask him why they were watching us?" Stuermer asked. Far away he thought he could hear the clip-clop of horses' hooves picking their way with difficulty, up the steep trail in the darkness.

The Corporal translated swiftly.

Again the prisoner spat out blood. Now his answer came more slowly. Perhaps he, too, heard the sound of horses. "I was ordered to, that's all he says, sir," the corporal interpreted.

The clatter of hooves was getting louder now. "Who ordered him to watch us?" Stuermer flung a last question at the prisoner. The prisoner seemed about to refuse to answer. Ox-Jo raised the bloody muzzle of his pistol threateningly. The Russian gulped. He spoke.

"Well?" Stuermer demanded, when the interpreter did not speak. "Who?"

"A woman, sir. A blonde woman from Moscow," the corporal answered, his face puzzled.

And then as the first wild bullets began to howl from the boulders all around them, the men of Stormtroop Edelweiss were scrambling for safety back into the trees, leaving their one-time prisoner unconscious in the blood-stained dust.

CHAPTER 11

Major Greul had had the men awake and ready to march off, as agreed with Colonel Stuermer, when he had heard the sound of the small fire above, in the mountains. Together with the sweating, hard-breathing little patrol, they had disappeared into the night, their haste communicated even to the normally slow-moving mules, followed by the wild erratic fire of the new group of partisans. They had escaped without a casualty, and after a while the firing had died away altogether, and they had been able to slacken their pace to the normal sixty paces a minute.

Now it was mid-afternoon, and at the point, Colonel Stuermer, narrowing his eyes against the glare of the sun, could just make out the blue wisps of lazy smoke emerging from the little huts the locals called *isbas*. They were arriving at the village of Chursuk. He decided to take no chances. Placing two troops under the command of Major Greul, he ordered them to secure the heights on both sides of the dusty winding country road. Then, assuming command of the rest, and followed at a distance of five hundred metres by Lieutenant Haas and his mules, he began to advance on the village.

The clip-clop of the mules' hooves started the skinny-ribbed dogs, lolling outside the decrepit huts, off barking – the racket wakening the inhabitants of the huts who had been sleeping. Barefoot, shaven-headed boys, with dark eyes, came out, scattering the chickens which shared the huts with them, and gawped open-mouthed at the newcomers. Heavy-bosomed women in rags, their dark faces almost hidden, save for the eyes, by cloths hastily flung across them in the Muslim fashion, followed. There were a few men in the crowd that gathered as well. And Colonel Stuermer noted out of the corner of his eye that most of them were armed. Was he leading Stormtroop Edelweiss right into a trap? The thought flashed through his mind alarmingly. "Keep a weather-eye peeled, Meier," he snapped at the big NCO who followed at his heels, together with Jap, who because of the Mongol-cast of his features courtesy of his Sherpa father, seemed to be attracting most of the attention.

"Will do, sir," Meier replied promptly, brandishing his machine pistol significantly.

They passed on into a kind of rough square, with the houses built into the side of the rock wall above them and supported by rough-hewn, weather-worn timbers. To Colonel Stuermer's mind, it would be an ideal place for an ambush.

He raised his hand and the dusty column halted. He would go no further, especially as his progress was barred by a group of men, dirty, unkempt, with bloodshot drunkard's eyes, who, like the ones he had spotted earlier, were all armed. "Everybody on his toes," he commanded. "But nobody fires unless I give an order to."

For what seemed an age, the ragged scowling bunch of tribesmen and the tense mountaineers faced each other in the hot rays of the sun in the dusty square, in complete silence. Suddenly there was the sound of many horses' hooves. It was followed a moment later by the crackle of small-arms fire.

"Stand to," Colonel Stuermer ordered urgently as the crowd parted and about fifty horsemen came riding full tilt, firing their ancient pieces above their heads as they did so.

"Hold it!" Stuermer yelled above the racket just in time, as the horsemen jerked at their reins and brought their sweat-lathered mounts back on their haunches in a slither of pebbles and a cloud of dust, sliding to a halt. The Karatski were putting on a demonstration of strength for his benefit.

For a few moments more, the wildly excited dirty horsemen continued to expend their ammunition while their frenzied, wild-eyed horses spun round in crazy circles. Then, one by one, the ancient curved rifles started to fall silent, until no one was firing.

Stuermer heaved a sigh of relief, and stared up at the dirty bearded faces of the sweat-stained horsemen. They were definitely un-Russian in appearance with their high cheekbones and slant eyes. No one in Intelligence had been able to tell him much about the Karatski, but one didn't need to be clairvoyant to know that they were from the East, perhaps the last survivors of one of the great oriental scourges which had swept across Russia in the old days.

But the big colonel had little time to speculate about the origin of the horsemen. Suddenly one of them swung himself down from a white stallion heavily decorated in antique silver braids, and dropped neatly in front of Stuermer. "Bandit," he announced. "*Ya Starost.*"

"He's the headman here, sir," the corporal translated. "His name is – er – Bandit."

"Well, piss up my sleeve," Meier whispered to the colonel. "He shitting well looks like it too, sir!"

Stuermer agreed. The headman certainly did, with his long yellow face, terrible squint and long, drooping, Mexican bandit moustache, obviously dyed, hanging down on both sides of a sly mouth. Hoping that appearances did not always count, he said to the interpreter, "Tell Bandit, Corporal, that we come as friends. Tell him that although we represent the mighty German Army, we will allow him and his men to keep their weapons, providing they use them only against our enemies – the Russians."

"Circumcise your watches!" Meier breathed, in awe at the colonel's boldness when the little force of mountaineers was clearly outnumbered by the wild riders. "You certainly know how to lay it on, sir."

Stuermer ignored the NCO's comment. His eyes were fixed on the headman's face for his reaction. Although he didn't understand the words, the yellow man's reaction was obvious enough.

At the mention of the word *Russki*, he hawked thickly, spat in the dust and drew one dirty forefinger slowly along his throat as if he were slitting it. The headman was definitely no friend of the Russians.

The corporal took a long time interpreting the headman's speech, in which he explained he and his people had always been the enemies of the Russians, presumably as far back as the days of the legendary Rurik. But in the end he finished his diatribe, which was replete with much hawking and spitting, and clapped his hands.

As if by magic, a barefoot, shaven-headed boy appeared, bearing a silver tray, obviously looted somewhere or other on one of the tribe's rampages down into the plains. On it was a crisp loaf of white bread, salt and two glasses of vodka.

Stuermer knew the tradition. In the old days when Germany had first invaded Russia, the advancing troops had been welcomed thus by headmen at the entrance of every village. But when the population had begun to realize that the Greater German Wehrmacht had not come as liberators from the Communists, but as new conquerors, the custom had ceased. He took the loaf, tore a strip off it, and swallowed it. Then, placing a pinch of salt in the 'V' of taut skin formed by stretching his thumb and forefinger round one of the glasses of vodka, he licked the salt, raised the glass in toast to the headman, who had taken the other glass, and downed the firewater in one fast gulp.

The ice was broken. The wild-looking tribesmen applauded by slapping the butts of their weapons against their horses' sweating flanks and the celebration could begin.

Woman after woman entered, bearing tray upon tray of food: mutton, raw and pounded to a kind of stinking paste, boiled, or roasted and pungent with garlic. Great mounds of the crisp white bread of the area. Huge casks of honey. Bowls of water, drawn directly from the River Kuban and grey with the tiny pebbles that it contained. Steaming gourds of warm mare's milk – and alcohol, for although the Karatski were supposedly Muslim, and from the window of the barn in which the Stormtroop had been billeted they could see the wooden mosque, they seemed to have no objection to alcohol. On the contrary, the road outside was already littered with 'vodka corpses' and the tribesmen constantly kept falling out of the saddles of their mounts, overcome by too much vodka.

But if their men were wild and uninhibited, the women were modest, silent and invariably veiled with a piece of cloth covering their faces between the mouth and the eyes. Yet there was no concealing their interest in Jap. Their black eyes flashed with allure every time they passed the place where he squatted on the floor, and he received the largest portions of food and drink. Once or twice the women overcame their shyness sufficiently to touch his yellow face, as if they were reassuring themselves that his colour was real. In particular, Jap received the attention of the Starost's daughter, a tall, wonderfully built young woman, of whom Meier said: "I'd give her a piece of my salami any day – for free, too!" She could hardly keep her eyes and hands off the little corporal, who munched away at his food on the floor in greasy-lipped contentment. In the end she leaned across and whispered something in the interpreter's ear, and incidentally gave an appreciative Jap a generous look at her melon-sized breasts, before fleeing in embarrassed confusion, giggling as she ran out.

"What did she say?" Jap asked, his mouth full of roast mutton, the grease dribbling down his unshaven chin.

"She said, she liked you most. She said you were one of them."

"Yer," Ox-Jo snarled, showing his envy. "I always knew he was one of them."

"Yellow is mellow," Jap said, unmoved, and accepted another leg of steaming roast mutton from one of the admiring females. "Yellow is very

definitely mellow up here."

"What do you make of them, sir?" Lieutenant Haas asked Colonel Stuermer, as the latter and Greul sipped the warm mare's milk reflectively.

"I don't think friend Bandit is exactly Andre Hofer taking on Napoleon," Colonel Stuermer answered. "I mean they are out-and-out robbers. They do no work. That, they leave to their womenfolk. Their occupation is hunting and robbing. But because of that, they seem to have come into conflict with the powers-that-be ever since the days of the Czar. And I think for that reason they have been traditionally anti-Russian and now anti-Soviet." He took another sip of his *Airan*. "As far as I could make out from the Starost, the Red Army launched a punitive expedition against his people – there are a couple of hundred thousand of them altogether – just before the war. They managed to beat the Reds off, but they suffered severe casualties. That expedition seemingly has made them more anti-Russian than ever. At all events, that Bandit chap appears to want us here." He waved a hand at the red-faced, gorged mountaineers.

"Appears!" Greul emphasized the word with a sneer. "To my way of thinking they are just as sub-human as the rest of the Red rabble. I don't think you can trust a single one of them."

"You might be right, my dear Major," Colonel Stuermer said. "But for the time being we must not show them that we distrust them. What is it that that American said? *Walk softly and carry a stick*? This whole expedition puzzles me. First that business in the mountain last night. *Who is the woman?* And remember that Soviet Alpine Corps cap you found in the plane. What of that? And now these people. They look like villains, yet they welcome us as if we are long-lost cousins." He finished the last of his drink, and yawned. "We will play the role of the happy, welcomed visitor, but we will be on our guard as long as we are here in Chursuk. We will carry a very big stick."

"Wooden eye, be on thy guard," Haas said, pulling down the side of his right eye in the German gesture of caution. "Is that it, sir?"

"Exactly, Haas," Colonel Stuermer said, rising to his feet. Everywhere the drunken soldiers attempted to rise, hut he waved them to remain seated. "Carry on, soldiers," he commanded and looking down at Greul's face, set in its usual look of contempt for such drunken indulgence, he said, before leaving for his bed, "Ensure that Sergeant-Major Meier runs a security patrol this night, Greul. I want no more unpleasant surprises to disturb my nocturnal

slumbers."

Greul looked at Haas's grinning face as their C.O. left the scene of debauchery. "Does something amuse you, Haas?" he snapped.

"Not really, sir."

"Not really," Greul echoed harshly. "A German officer and a National Socialist is never vague. It is either one thing or the other for him. Well?"

Haas flushed. "I was just thinking, sir," he stuttered, "that the C.O. does everything with a... a certain sort of style. I mean, he never takes things beer-seriously."

"Meaning I do?"

"No, I didn't say that, sir."

"Well, now I'm going to be beer-serious, as you put it in that common soldiers' slang you prefer to use. Lieutenant Haas, you will take charge of this night's security arrangements." He rose stiffly to his feet, eager to he away from the scene of drunken carousing.

Haas sprang to attention. "Sir!"

Greul gave him one last look. "Remember, Haas, you are in charge. Now I bid you goodnight." And with that, he strode out in his usual imperious manner, leaving Haas staring after him, suddenly very afraid.

CHAPTER 12

Jap staggered up to his feet drunkenly. All around him, his comrades lay snoring where they had fallen, in a heavy drunken sleep. He shook his head. The bone-littered room came into focus, looming at him out of the drunken fog. He shook his head again and wished he hadn't. His head started to throb rhythmically, like an overworked outboard motor. Slowly, very slowly, he creaked his head round, as if it worked by heavy weights.

The 'vodka corpses' lay sprawled everywhere, hands still clutching their glasses, draped like broken puppets across up-turned trestle tables, slumped, like over-grown grey embryos, in corners. There was even one trooper lying lengthwise across the pot-bellied iron stove at the back of the room, the steam rising slowly from his vodka-soaked uniform, giving off the unpleasant stink of smouldering serge. "Suppose the stupid shit must be cold," Jap told himself, drunkenly.

Then the picture of those two melon-sized breasts flashed in front of his eyes, and he remembered why he had woken up. *The Starost's daughter!* He gave a low growl. "My little pussycat," he blurted out. "Must have my pussycat tonight!"

One yellow paw stretched out in front of him, unaware that he was clad solely in his boots and tunic, he staggered towards the door like a blind man feeling his way, crunching across the bones which littered the floor, stumbling over the unprotesting bodies of his comrades, his mind full of those magnificent breasts, which seemed to fill the whole world like two huge yellow Zeppelins.

He flung open the door and blinked. It was pitch-black outside. He blinked again and, undaunted, stepped out into the night, realizing, as the cold mountain air struck his hot face, that he was more drunk than he thought. Still, he staggered on through the narrow silent streets, already playing with those great breasts, balancing them in his hands, as if he were judging the weight and sweetness of sugar melons, juggling them up and down like a circus clown, sticking them in each ear and crying, "I've gone deaf – I can't hear a thing!"

The row of cliff-like houses in the little village square came into view,

outlined a starker black against the jagged silhouette of the mountains beyond. He stood there, puzzled, swaying back and forth, a cold wind breezing about his naked rump, trying to puzzle out which was the Starost's house. His eye fell on the yellow candle flickering in one of the little windows. For a moment he could not believe it: then he gasped, "She knew I was coming... She lit a candle for me!"

He blundered forward eagerly, his mind already stripping the Starost's daughter, with the exotic beauty lying in her bed, completely naked, her legs slightly parted, her lips red and wet with passionate anticipation. " Never fear, my beloved," he called to no-one in particular. "Your Jap is coming!" He laughed uproariously, "But not yet. You get the joke?" The words froze on his lips. He had bumped into a solid rock wall. For a moment or two he searched it, mumbling to himself, "Who's taken the shitty house away... Come on, put that place back again, eh?"

Then it dawned on him, after minutes of fumbling along the rock wall, that the houses were built above the stone. "Of course," he reassured himself drunkenly. "She wouldn't try to cheat me. She loves me."

He stood, considering the problem. She was waiting for him up there, her naked nubile body tormented with passion. But how was he to reach her? Suddenly he remembered. The tribesmen reached their houses by a rope ladder that they could draw up in time of trouble. Groggily he searched around until he found the knotted rope, which hung just above his head. He reached up and grabbed it, but found that the strength seemed to have gone from his arms. For what seemed a long time he just hung there, the wind whistling around his naked rear, puffing, sweating and swearing like an angry blue-bottomed monkey.

"I'm coming up, if it shittingly well kills me," he cursed, the sweat dropping into his eyes like vinegar, his shoulders feeling as if they were going to be dragged out of their sockets at any moment.

He summoned up the last of his strength, heaved, and pulled himself onto the ledge above, to lie there gasping and sobbing, while one of the fat pigeons which the Karatski kept, stared at him, cooing softly, wondering whether this little man who had turned up from nowhere in the middle of the night was dangerous.

"Make dust, you feathered fart!" Jap snarled, and flapped one hand weakly at the bird.

It flew away, squawking.

Jap staggered to his feet, and nearly fell over the side, catching himself just in time. He looked to his right. There was the yellow light, all right. His first instinct was to rush straight in and snuggle right up to her. Then he remembered what the colonel had said about the unpleasant treatment the tribesmen sometimes handed out. He shuddered. It would be like jumping too low over a too-high fence. He couldn't chance that. Tip-toeing forward with the exaggerated caution of the drunk, he approached the flickering light.

As he crept closer, he became aware of the low murmur of several voices. "Not that!" he exclaimed, stopping in his tracks, as if he had just stood on a sharp nail. "She hasn't betrayed me? No!"

For what seemed a long time, he couldn't bring himself to move any further; he knew he couldn't bear the knowledge that she was in the sack with another man. He ran his mind over the possibilities, anger now beginning to fire his blood. *Not that big Bavarian bastard Meier!* He'd be the only one in Edelweiss who would dare pull off a dirty trick of that kind. "By the great goolies of the Adolf Hitler!" he swore, "I'll pound that shit into wallpaper if it's him!" He rushed forward, and peered into the dirty, fly-blown little window.

To his immense relief, there was no sign of either the Starost's daughter or Meier. Instead a group of tribesmen were squatting on their haunches around a low wooden table, drinking from an enamel pail of vodka, which was passed from man to man, listening intently to the sly-faced Starost, who was obviously explaining something to them by means of a rough sketch drawn in the dust at his feet.

Jap stared at the group in drunken bewilderment. What the hell were they sitting up for at this time of the night, listening to a lecture? Any right-thinking man was in the hay with his woman by now, and if he was of good moral character, he'd be busy slipping her a link, he told himself. That was only fair. Women liked that kind of salami-spiel. You couldn't disappoint them if you were any kind of real man. All the same, he was fascinated by the sight. In three devils' name, what could they be talking about? He screwed his head round and tried to get a better look at the sketch. He puffed out his lips in a gesture of contempt. He couldn't make head or tail of it. A long oblong with a couple of arrows drawn at each end of it. What was that shittingly well supposed to mean?

He forgot the girl he had come to make love to. He seemed hypnotized by the low drone of conversation from within, although he could not

understand a single word of it. He followed the Starost's every gesture, as he explained whatever he was talking about in lengthy detail, licking his dry lips in envy every time one of the tribesmen raised the pail of vodka.

And then the Starost began to draw a familiar shape in the dust with his dirty long finger and it was suddenly quite clear to the German soldier what this strange meeting in the middle of the night was all about. His drunkenness vanished in a flash. The Starost was drawing a Schmeisser machine pistol on the floor, with the loving attention to detail of a Rubens, shaping in one of the mighty, red-tipped breasts of the fleshy nudes the Dutch master delighted in, almost drooling in anticipation, as if he could not wait to get his skinny yellow paws on such a beautiful weapon. When he was finished, he looked up at the tribesmen's expectant faces, rapacious and menacing in the flickering candlelight. They responded as he had anticipated. They sighed with awe, and one or two of them simulated a soldier firing the machine pistol, swinging an imaginary Schmeisser from left to right, lips chattering like the high-pitched hiss of the weapon.

Jap needed to know no more. All thoughts of the girl had vanished now. He was stone-cold sober, aware suddenly of the wind hissing about his naked rump and the danger of his present position. Cautiously, not taking his eyes off the yellow light, he started to back to the rope ladder.

He didn't quite make it. He stumbled into one of the crude cages in which the tribesmen kept their pigeons. A dozen pigeons squawked in sudden alarm. The door flew open. Pigeons flew out in a white blur with a rattle of wings.

"Stop!" a hoarse voice croaked. A tribesman was staring at him, ancient rifle coming to his shoulder.

Jap was quicker off the mark. His heart thumping like a trip hammer, he darted forward. His naked knee slammed into the tribesman's stomach. He gasped like the air escaping abruptly from a punctured balloon, and jack-knifed. Jap's knee rammed into his chin. He shot backwards over the wall, arms flailing wildly, screaming at the top of his voice. And then Jap was swinging down the ladder, his hands burning as he slid down, while from above him there came the sudden sounds of confusion, rage and alarm. Next moment he was pelting down the dusty street, his rump a white blur in the glowing darkness.

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"What was that?" Lieutenant Haas asked in sudden fear, as the stillness of the night was broken by the first wild snap-and-crackle of rifle-fire.

"Well, it wasn't New Year fireworks, sir," Sergeant-Major Meier answered groggily.

The young officer felt that familiar bunching of his arm-muscles and the tightening of his hands to claws, as if his body possessed independent volition. An uncontrollable tremor gripped his right leg. Fear overcame him once more.

Meier, standing at the head of the swaying six-man patrol, looked up the road as if bored; as if mysterious shots in the middle of the night were very much routine to him: something not worth mentioning.

Haas gulped and forced himself to speak, attempting to control his voice, but failing lamentably. "What... what do you suggest we do, Meier?" he quavered.

Meier unslung his machine pistol and shrugged. "You're the officer, sir. It's always the officers and gents who make the decisions in the Greater German Wehrmacht." His tone was casual, and offensive; all the same, his keen eyes were searching the darkness for any sign of trouble. *The locals might just be celebrating by letting off a few wild shots like they had that afternoon*, he told himself. *But they might be up to something else.* You just couldn't trust foreigners.

"But Sergeant-Major, you are a veteran – experienced –" The plea died on Haas's trembling lips.

A wild figure was pelting towards them, gasping something in what appeared to be German.

Instinctively Meier dropped to one knee and clicked off his safety.

"Don't shoot... Don't shoot," the figure yelled. "It's me... me!"

"Freeze!" Meier commanded, while Haas fumbled fearfully for his pistol with fingers that felt like thick, swollen sausages.

"I can't shittingly well freeze," the running figure cried breathlessly. "They're after me!"

"It's you – *Jap!*" Meier exclaimed, as Jap came running full-tilt into the little patrol. His eyes flashed down to the little corporal's naked lower half. "What's this, you dirty little perverted banana-sucker? Don't tell me you got caught on the job with your skivvies down?" He threw back his head and bellowed with laughter. "What's up? Some nasty big tribesman after e'er with

a sharp knife?"

Jap, his chest heaving violently, tried to control his wild breathing. "You'll be laughing on the other side of yer mug in a minute. They're after me!"

"Who?"

"The Karatski – and they're coming to attack the barn. The shits are after our weapons. They'd been planning it all along. That's why they got us all pissed tonight."

"The turds!" Meier cried angrily, and spinning round on the patrol, he ordered, "All right, you flirts, don't just stand there. Take up your positions. I'm going to smear those treacherous bastards all over the wallpaper when they start coming down this street."

Lieutenant Haas suddenly woke up to his danger. Already he could hear the soft shuffle of their naked feet in the darkness. He remembered what the C.O. had said about the tribesmen's habit of emasculating their enemies, and a sudden terrifying vision of his own grotesquely mangled body flashed before his mind's eye. "No, Sergeant-Major," he cried, "we're too weak to stop them here. We'd better get back to the others."

"But once they get us all in that barn...!" Meier began to protest.

Haas was not listening. Overcome by a great all-consuming fear, he cried, "Come on – everyone back to the barn! Quick!"

And then he was running the way they had come, followed by the rest of the men. From the darkness came cries of triumph. Slugs started to howl off the walls next to Meier. He cursed, and slung his machine pistol. "Come on, Jap, get the lead out of your butt. Shit, the C.O.'s going to rupture a gut about this!"

Behind them the tribesmen began to close in, knowing now that they had successfully sprung their trap on the Germans.

CHAPTER 13

"Damn it, Haas, why the devil didn't you stay in the street and stop?" An angry, red-faced Colonel Stuermer ducked as the first slug slammed into the open door of the barn and showered the gasping men filing through it with wood-splinters. "All right, Haas, get inside quick! It's too late." Stuermer crashed the door to as the first tribesmen started to come into sight, firing as they came.

He swung around at the tousle-haired, hung over mountaineers who had been wakened from their drunken sleep so rudely and were now frantically searching for their clothes and weapons, "Get those lights!" he bellowed above the rising crescendo of the small-arms fire from outside. "And, man those windows. At the double!"

Ox-Jo didn't wait for the rest. He barrelled his way through the confused throng, and smashing the glass of the nearest window, fired a rapid burst into the gloom. There was an anguished yelp of pain, and then the tribesmen's combined fire swamped the wooden barn.

The thin planks shattered like matchwood. Bullet holes appeared everywhere. Wood splinters flew through the air. Here and there a mountaineer was hit and cried out in pain.

"Down – to the ground!" Major Greul yelled hastily.

The veterans flung themselves flat on the dirt floor. With the butts of their carbines and their sharp-bladed mountain knives they started to hack firing-holes in the base of the planks. Lying full-length, with the bullets singing over their heads only millimetres away, they began to return the enemy's fire.

Crouched behind one of the broad trestle tables, which was of thick oak and offered satisfactory protection from the tribesmen's slugs, a worried Colonel Stuermer took stock of his position hurriedly, while the snap and crackle of small-arms fire mounted in intensity.

The barn was surrounded on three sides, where it faced the street. Its fourth side was built up against a sheer rock wall. Indeed, at this moment he could feel the coldness of the stone against his own sweat-soaked shirt. Presumably their attackers thought there was no way out for them that way, since so far there had been no fire from above on that side.

But what were the tribesmen's intentions? Suddenly he spotted Jap crawling back and forth among the mess of equipment and clothing. For some reason known only to himself he was naked below the waist. "Corporal," he called above the frantic racket, "over here!"

Jap crawled hurriedly to the cover of the upturned trestle table, his skinny rump moving like clockwork, with the slugs cutting the air dangerously close to it. Under other circumstances. Stuermer would have found the sight funny, but not at this particular moment. "Jap," he said urgently. "You were outside just now, though God knows what you were up to, half-naked like that. No matter. What happened?"

In short chopped sentences, Jap told him what he had seen, raising his voice to almost a shout whenever the racket got too loud.

"Thank you," Stuermer snapped when he was finished, "All right, get off and find yourself a pair of pants, for God's sake! You'd not make a very military-looking corpse at the moment."

Jap laughed and scuttled away to continue his search.

So that was it, Stuermer told himself. They wanted the Stormtroop's weapons to replace their own ancient pieces. They had planned the whole thing right from the start, to lull the mountaineers into a false sense of security. Now it was obvious that they were prepared to kill in order to obtain those weapons. Suddenly a very alarming thought flashed through a worried Colonel Stuermer's head. They wouldn't want those weapons destroyed, and they certainly weren't going to throw away their own lives purposelessly in all-out attack on the barn. After all, the mountaineers were trapped in the rickety structure. There was no way out for them. So how would they obtain the precious weapons intact? The answer to that particular question made Colonel Stuermer shudder involuntarily with sudden fear. It was obvious. They would burn them out!

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The woman, standing on the dark heights far above, lowered her night glasses, and the scarlet stab and spurt of the soundless fire-fight below vanished from the bright circles of glass.

Sergei, standing attentively at her side, her sole companion, since she had left the partisan unit forty-eight hours before, looked at her handsome face inquiringly. She said nothing.

He flashed her one of his gleaming stainless-steel smiles, his narrow youthful face lit up by the first blood-red rays of sun, which was now beginning to rise over the snowy peaks.

She became aware of his presence. "You have done well, comrade," she said. "You guessed right that Bandit would do anything for weapons, even accepting advice from Moscow's running dogs."

"Yes, first the pigs wanted to slit my throat, and then they fed me and gave me drink as if I was one of their own greasy selves, after I had explained about the weapons the Fritzes were bringing with them," the young partisan said, obviously very pleased with the success of his mission to the Karatski.

"Let them enjoy their moment of triumph, Sergei. In due course, we will reckon with them. Then they will learn what kind of bill Moscow will present them with."

"And now?" Sergei asked expectantly. He had been alone with the woman from Moscow for forty-eight hours as they had wandered through the mountains. "Now their mission, as far as he knew, was completed. She was a handsome woman and in spite of his stainless steel teeth, he was generally regarded by the girls of the collective farm, from which he had fled to the partisans, as not without charm. He was young, they were alone, and the sap was rising. He knew of a mountain hut where the two of them...

"Now," the blonde woman cut into his fond picture of what they might do together in that lonely hut. "Now you must go back to your unit, my dear Sergei."

"But–"

"No buts," she said firmly, but there was a smile on her lips as she spoke.

"And you?"

"Me?" She swung round and pointed to the far peak, gleaming a cold pink now in the rising sun. "I have other duties..."

"Up there?" Sergei asked incredulously.

She didn't answer his question. Instead she said, her hand fumbling at her belt, as if she were in a hurry to be gone. "Perhaps you would help me with my rucksack?"

"Yes, comrade," Sergei said grumpily, cheering up a little at the thought that he might get a feel of her magnificent breasts as he helped her on with the sack. He bent and seized the straps. In that same instant, she pulled out her pistol and aimed it at a spot directly behind his right ear. Just as

Sergei grunted and prepared to lift, she fired. The shot broke the silence of the mountain.

Somewhere a startled bird flew shrieking with alarm into the still blue air. Sergei's skull shattered in a red flurry of blood and bone. He slumped over the rucksack. Calmly, completely unaffected by the murder she had just committed, the woman planted her foot in Sergei's ribs and pushed the limp body to one side in the snow. Easily, she lifted the heavy rucksack and swung it over her shoulders. Without even another look at the dead boy, whose stainless-steel teeth gleamed grotesquely against the bloody snow, she turned and began her long climb to the far peak. Down below, the first fire bombs started to hit the barn.

***

Tinder-dry and resinous, the shattered planks started to burn. In the sudden thick choking smoke, mountaineers ran back and forth, dragging the wounded out of danger and searching around for water to extinguish the flames, while others, wreathed in smoke, tried to keep the fire-bombers at a safe distance. Meier, his broad face streaked with sweat and black stains, sprang from hole to hole, firing at every new bomber he could spot, as they darted forward, burning pitch torches in their hands, within throwing distance of the barn.

Haas, crouched in the far corner of the barn, could not move. His eyes were fixed on the body of a mountaineer, impaled on the splintered wreck of one of the trestle tables, a ghastly, mangled caricature of the man he had once been: decapitated, horrible, and totally frightening, with the blood dripping steadily from the purple hole in his neck.

Haas had been afraid many times before, but never like this. No one around him could even imagine the waves of panic-stricken, nauseating fear that flooded his body over and over again and threatened to take over his whole nervous system. Any moment, he knew, he would begin screaming. He was keeping control of himself by a mere hair's breadth. Yet he knew he had been the cause of everything. He had heard the shooting behind them that first day when they had left Cherkassy, and he hadn't reported it. He had panicked in the street, and instead of throwing a barrier across the road until the men in the barn had been alerted by the firing, he had fled, and allowed the trap to close upon the Stormtroop. Now all these good brave men were

going to be burnt alive because of his cowardice. He shuddered as yet another pine-resin torch exploded with a great whoosh as it hit the wooden boards to his right. A mountaineer fell back, hastily beating out the flames which threatened to engulf him.

Haas swallowed and sobbed out loud, "No... *No!*"

Two metres away, Greul, his tunic singed and holed, his face black, paused in between shots and flashed him a look of absolute, bottomless contempt, and Haas knew he had been discovered at last. His fear had been spotted. What of his self-respect? Sick and spent, moaning aloud in self-loathing, Haas staggered across the burning room, blundering over the slumped bodies, ignoring the ricochets howling from shattered wall to wall, blindly trying to find the only man he had ever trusted, Colonel Stuermer.

Stuermer knew that he must act – and act at once. Time was running out fast for Stormtroop Edelweiss. He could surrender. But he knew what the result would be. Bandit and the tribesmen would massacre them, once they had surrendered their weapons. He had no illusions on that score. But what was he to do? He glanced around the room. He had already lost ten men and there were perhaps a dozen wounded, sheltering as best they could behind the burning tables, coughing and choking in the thick acrid smoke which was beginning to fill the barn. He had only a matter of minutes left.

"Meier," he yelled above the racket.

The big NCO, his tunic ruined, revealing singed brawny arms, scuttled across to him. "Sir."

"On my shoulders!" Stuermer ordered.

"What?"

"No time for explanations. Do as I order."

Stuermer bent, and dropping his Schmeisser, Ox-Jo clambered on his C.O.'s back. Stuermer groaned involuntarily under the NCO's weight. But in spite of his lean figure, Stuermer possessed tremendous strength. He straightened up so that Meier's head was just beneath the wooden roof. "Make a hole," he ordered through gritted teeth, the veins standing out a deep blue at his temples, the sweat running down his forehead and threatening to blind him. "Quick!"

Meier didn't hesitate. He knew there was no time to remove the planking. He smashed his big shaven head against the planks. They snapped. He crashed his skull home once more. They gave altogether and suddenly he was breathing fresh, cold air.

"What's it like?" Stuermer called thickly. "The rock face?"

"Shitty, sir," Meier said, staring up at the almost perpendicular wall that rose some hundred metres above the barn. No wonder the Karatski had not bothered to post people up there. Although they were a mountain folk themselves, they hadn't thought anyone could tackle that sort of a pitch. "I couldn't do it."

"Could I?"

Meier hesitated for an instant. "I think so, sir. But it'd be a shit under these conditions."

"Good enough. Drop down. I can't carry you any longer, you Bavarian bull."

Meier dropped lightly, for such a big man, just as Haas, his face ashen, his lips pressed tightly together to prevent them from trembling, approached his C.O.

"What is it?"

"Sir," he blurted out, his face suddenly revealing the depth of his misery and self-loathing, "I've let you down!"

"Nonsense," Stuermer cut him short, his mind already full of the one way of escape left to the trapped mountaineers.

"But I have, sir. I panicked. I should have remained out there and held them off until you had a chance to get the men outside. I'm–" he gulped before he spoke the word, "I'm a rotten coward."

"You are a young officer, who lost his nerve in his first action. Now you must let me–"

"I know what you are going to do, sir. And I don't think you've got a chance. Once they spot you attempting that climb, they'll concentrate all their fire upon you. It stands to reason."

"Agreed. But we have smoke bombs. Once I'm up there–"

"But you've got to be up there first." Again the young officer cut him short, knowing that if Stuermer didn't accept his offer now, tried to appease him, he would break down and sink to the floor, a weeping abject mess.

"What do you suggest then, Haas?" Stuermer snapped, knowing how right the boy was.

With a final effort of will, Lieutenant Haas forced himself to say the two simple words, "A decoy!"

A knotted ball of jangling, writhing nerves filled his lower body. He felt as if

he might wet himself at any moment. Hastily he grasped the rope, while below in the barn, Meier steadied it. He took one last deep gasp of the acrid air and thrust his head through the hole in the roof. Next instant he had begun the climb to the ledge on which the rope was anchored.

From below there came angry shouts. Slugs started to chip the rock all around him. Something stung his cheek. Blood spurted up hot and wet. He ignored it, concentrating now on heaving himself upwards, trying to forget that overwhelming fear, the knowledge that soon – very soon – hard, hot lead would smack into the defenceless soft flesh of his back.

Young Lieutenant Haas had begun his last climb.

Stuermer heard the new salvo of shots and knew they had spotted Haas. It was now or never. He slung the container of smoke bombs over his shoulder and reached up to the place, a little covered by the barn's chimney, where Meier had broken open another exit. Easily, he swung himself up and through it. For an instant he knelt behind the stone chimney. Down below in the battle-littered streets, the robed figures of the tribesmen were hidden in the doorways, firing at the boy going up the steep cliff like a Bavarian mountain goat. The slugs whined off the rock in angry flurries of blue and red sparks everywhere, but he seemed to bear a charmed life. So far he hadn't been hurt.

"Good luck, boy!" Stuermer whispered under his breath, and then he forgot Haas. Swinging round, still concealed by the chimney, he surveyed the almost sheer face. Then he spotted what he sought: a small indentation in the rock, which might offer him some elementary cover from the riflemen down below until he was out of range of their ancient pieces.

Taking a deep breath, he sprang from his cover and grasped the rock in his practised hands. His boots dug into a fissure. They held. His race against time had commenced.

The slug had hit him in the right shoulder. It hurt like hell. Twice he slid into the darkness of near-unconsciousness and twice he struggled up from the depths of the black stupor and kept on climbing, how, he knew not. All he knew was that he must keep on going and keep attracting their fire. "Nightmare," he told himself, "I'm having a nightmare. It's not true. It's not happening to me. I'm not crawling up a cliff face I would never have tackled in reality. I'm not wounded – and I'm not going to fall to my death in a moment. *It's just a nightmare!*"

The slugs continued to whine off the rock all around him. He was hit again. He hardly felt the pain. He was halfway up now. Two or three metres away, wavering in the red mist in front of his eyes now, he saw a ledge. There he would rest. Yes, there he would rest! He crawled on, the bullets striking the stone in furious flurries of angry red sparks. He did not hear them. He did not hear the angry cries from below. Now he heard nothing, felt nothing. His sole concern was on keeping going until he reached that ledge.

He hooked his bleeding, torn fingers into the rock, his feet automatically seeking for a toe-hold. With a grunt, he levered himself upwards and onto it.

For an instant the fog which had swamped his mind lifted. He saw the burning barn below, the angry upturned faces, heard the whine of the bullets off the rock and knew fear for the last time. He was alone and going to die – and he was only eighteen; he had never even known a woman. Then the deadening fog swept over him again and the fear vanished.

Slowly, infinitely slowly, he raised himself on the ledge to his full height so that he presented a target which would anger them, keep them firing, would draw their attention from Colonel Stuermer. The bullets increased in volume. The tribesmen even forgot the fire-bombs in their anger. Now their efforts were concentrated on bringing down the man who taunted them thus.

A burst struck the rock near his head. The chips showered his face. He felt the pain momentarily. He laughed crazily. "Miss..." he began, just as the volley of rifle fire ripped open his stomach. He felt nothing. There was no fear now. There was only a vast, heedless indifference. His knees started to fold beneath him. He did not try to stop the movement, although he knew quite clearly he would fall if he didn't. Like a stone he fell. He made no sound. That final scream of unbearable agony never passed his lips. He hit the ground with a dull sickening thud. His body bounced up again with the impact, and in that instant before his spine snapped like a rotten twig and he died, Lieutenant Haas was glad.

Stuermer heard the crash of the body hitting the ground and felt the grey bitterness of defeat, he could almost taste its sourness. So young, and dead already. Then he thought of the others and forced out of his mind the bitter lassitude which had threatened to overcome him. He must save the Stormtroop!

He fought his way up the sheer rock face, his muscles afire, the breath rasping in great gulping inhalations into his oxygen-starved lungs, keeping up an impossible pace, knowing that every second counted now. On and on. A brutal gasping agony. He was nearly there now. Still they hadn't discovered him. He ripped off his nails as his right hand sought and failed to find a purchase on a slab of rock that gave way beneath his desperate fingers. He tried again, ignoring the pain in his hand, which made him want to scream out loud. He found a hold. He climbed on. Below, the fire bombs were hissing through the air again. He could hear the fierce crackle of the burning barn.

He reached the ledge. His bleeding fingers dug into the earth until they were locked in solid rock. He could not afford to fall now. He found a toe-hold and raised himself. He gasped with surprise. Twenty metres away a man was sitting, long rifle between his knees, with his back towards Stuermer, smoking a cigarette calmly, as if the brutal murder taking place below was happening on another planet.

Every movement as smooth and controlled as possible, Stuermer wormed his way over the edge of the cliff. Praying that the man wouldn't hear him, grateful for the wind that blew up on the top and drowned some of his movements, he started to crawl towards the unsuspecting sentry. Fifteen metres... Ten metres... Still the sentry didn't hear him...

Five metres. With his good hand, Stuermer freed the mountain knife at his waist... Three metres. The man must hear him now!

Suddenly Stuermer saw the sentry's right shoulder move. He tensed. The skinny yellow claw which gripped the long rifle tightened. The man started to turn. Stuermer dived forward, knife upraised. The two of them crashed together and the impact flung the man to the ground. Stuermer's knife flashed. He grunted. The sentry howled and the breath left him in a violent, convulsive exhalation. Stuermer heard the thud of his knife-hilt striking home against the ribs. He plunged it in once again and the sentry's crazy writhings ceased. He went limp. He was dead!

For a moment the two of them, the dead and the quick, lay there, clasped together like spent lovers. Then Stuermer pushed the dead man away and sprang to his feet, the bloody knife clattering to the rock. He doubled back to the edge of the cliff. He flung the first smoke-bomb over. It exploded with a soft plop. Almost immediately thick white smoke streamed from it. Another followed. In seconds the attacking tribesmen vanished from view.

Stuermer did not waste another second. With frantic, bleeding fingers he started to play out the rope.

BOOK 3

THE BATTLE FOR A PASS

CHAPTER 14

He was smaller than most of them had imagined, fatter too, and with that half smile on his thick sensual lips they could understand why the Americans called him, with such disrespect, 'Uncle Joe'. Yet there was no denying the power of the man. Even the simple gesture of stuffing a cigarette into his hooked pipe, while the most powerful officers in the Red Army waited for him to speak, revealed the might this pock-marked Georgian possessed.

Finally he was finished and began to explain the reason for their hurried summons from the Southern Front. "Comrades," he said, and his Georgian accent was very evident, "I don't need to tell you that the Red Army has suffered a very severe reverse on the Southern Front. Our troops have been driven back across the Kuban and into the Caucasus."

The generals lowered their gazes. Were heads going to roll? Was that the reason they had been called to Moscow? Siberia and the murderous labour camps of the snow wilderness – was that where they were heading after they left here?

"I don't need to tell you, either, what the loss of the Caucasus would mean for us. We could afford the loss of the oil. But if Turkey entered the war on the German side as a result of that loss..." The little dictator shrugged. "Well, I need to say no more, do I, comrades?"

There was a hasty murmur of agreement.

Josef Stalin puffed almost happily at his hooked pipe, his avuncular face wreathed in blue smoke, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

In the pause, Aleksandr Poskrebyshev, Stalin's sinister hunchbacked secretary, hobbled from general to general pouring *eau de cologne* on their outstretched hands. Gratefully the generals dabbed the cologne on their foreheads in the Soviet fashion – whether because of the heat in the room or whether on account of their fears about what might be coming, known only to themselves. Old Leather Face, as they called the dictator behind his back, watched them with something akin to amusement in his dark brown eyes.

Finally Stalin broke the heavy silence. "You understand our problem then, comrades and that it is imperative that we hold the Germans back when they attack – and our Intelligence tells us that they will attack soon. Now in what direction will they attack?" He answered his own question, as the silent

generals had expected him to. "The Fritzes' alternatives are limited, due to the terrain. Down the valley of the Kuban, swing south to – say Suchumi and then along the coastal littoral of the Black Sea south-east and into the Caucasus."

There was a murmur of agreement from the generals and Colonel-General Kozlov, the senior officer present, said, "That is what we think, Comrade Stalin. The Stavka is of the same opinion."

"Is that so, Comrade Kozlov?" Stalin said with deceptive softness. "And you have made your dispositions accordingly, I presume?"

"Yes, Comrade Stalin," said Kozlov, a broad-chested bear of a man, whose tight-fitting tunic, with its heavy gold epaulettes, was bright with the battle ribbons of forty years of campaigning. "We have the mass of three armies, plus several independent artillery and armoured corps, packed into the bottle-neck, from which they must emerge on the Black Sea coast."

"I see. Therefore you have put all your eggs in one basket, Comrade Colonel-General," Stalin said, his voice still very low.

Kozlov flushed. "I don't quite understand, Comrade Stalin," he began.

"And because of it you deserve a kick up your damn stupid Kulak arse!" Stalin exploded, cutting into his words brutally. "Do you think the Fritzes are fool enough not to realize that we will be waiting for them once they move along the Black Sea coast? It is as if they are giving us a written invitation to be ready to receive them there. No, Kozlov, the Fritz generals are not as mad as their master! They do not play foolish games like that."

Kozlov's professional pride was hurt. "Comrade Stalin, aerial reconnaissance shows, however, that the Germans are massing their forces above the Black Sea coast. Besides, how else can they get out of the Kuban Basin?"

By way of an answer, Stalin clicked his fingers. The hunchback hobbled over to him, bearing the map, as if he could read his master's mind. He spread it, uncommanded, across the great marble table at which the Czars had once signed their papers.

Stalin tapped it with his pipe. "Here, Comrade Generals, *here!*"

Kozlov looked at the dictator's pock-marked face, as if he had gone out of his mind. "But Comrade Stalin," he objected, "those are the high mountains. Even in summer they are virtually insurmountable."

"Did they never teach you about Hannibal in that academy to which we sent you to learn to read and write?" Stalin sneered.

"Hannibal did not possess armour. Nor did he have to transport heavy shells and rations for half a million men," Kozlov said, knowing now he was not only risking his command, but also his neck.

"But he crossed the Alps in the dead of winter and kicked the Romans up their surprised arses, just as the Fritzes might well do to you, if I were not here to protect you from your own foolishness." Stalin ignored the looks on his generals' faces. He had broken their power in '37. Those who had survived the Army purges were yes-men; he knew he could do with them what he wished. They were all deadly afraid of him, although they had the largest army in the world under their command. "I want each army to relinquish one corps and transfer it to the rear of the mountains. I want armour and artillery too. You will say that you cannot afford to lose the troops. But you must! You must make do with what you have left."

"Comrade Stalin." It was Lieutenant-General Kerst, as precise and as methodical as the Germans whom he fought and from whose country his own forefathers had emigrated to Russia. "What indication have you that the Germans might attempt to cross the mountains?" The voice was quiet and respectful, but there was iron in it all the same.

"*This.* For the last three days a unit of the German High Alpine Corps has been pushing from Cherkassy up into the mountains. It is obvious that they are some kind of reconnaissance party for a large group to follow. Once the Alpine Corps has traversed the mountains, what is to stop the rest from following?"

Now the generals began to forget their initial disbelief; there was the dawning of respect on their hard wooden faces. But General Kerst was not absolutely convinced. "One reconnaissance party, with all due respect, Comrade Stalin, does not mean more than that there is a small army following them." He shrugged slightly. "There could be a good half dozen reasons for their presence there." There was a murmur of agreement from the others.

"You could be right, Kerst, save for one thing – our agent reports that they are equipped to climb the highest peak. That, for my poor humble self," he added cynically, "is proof enough."

Still the methodical General was not convinced. "And of what calibre is this agent? What does he know of climbing?"

"Not he, Comrade Kerst, but she," Stalin said, pleased that he could spring his surprise on them.

"*She?*"

"Yes, my dear comrade, no other than Comrade Roswitha Mikhailovna! Now are you convinced?"

They didn't need to answer his question. The looks of awe on their faces told him all he wished to know: they were convinced all right. "Now then," he said briskly, leaning forward across the great table, "this is what we are going to do..."

CHAPTER 15

Roswitha Mikhailovna had been exactly ten years old when the Russian Revolution had broken out in 1917. It had changed her whole world. Her father, a humble peasant, had been murdered by the Whites, and her mother had gone off with one of the wandering bands of soldier-bandits that were constantly passing through their miserable village. She had never returned.

In 1920, after three years of living off the land, trying to feed herself as best she could in a starving countryside, fighting off the constant demands of the men of all races and all political persuasions who tried to go to bed with the handsome blonde virgin, she finally landed in an orphanage in Moscow as a ward of the state.

She had spent her next ten years in such institutions, making up for her lost schooling, developing her magnificent body in order to achieve her aim – the qualification of Master of Sport and the teaching job that went with it. The killing routine of the training camps – the six o'clock bugle, followed by Swedish drill before breakfast, the hours in the gym, the long afternoons of basketball, the para-military training – had meant nothing to her. Where many of her male colleagues were exhausted, glassy-eyed and lathered in sweat, she was still fresh, bright-eyed and eager for more.

In the summer of 1930, just after graduation, she accepted the invitation of a group of male students to accompany them on a climb in the Caucasus mountains. It was to be her job to take care of the ground organisation of the climbs, preparing the routine pre-climb form with its details of the number of climbers, their target, estimated time-of-return, etc., and arranging the usual welcome ceremony-address by the local camp commandant, presentation of flowers for a successful climb and so on. In essence, she was going to have a rest after the long gruelling task of obtaining her Master of Sport degree.

But after the first week of inactivity and boredom, she had asked on sudden impulse, whether she could go along on a climb. Later, much later, she had reasoned that fate had willed her to go along to discover at whatever cost – a fall, an accident, even death – what made a puny mortal tackle the magnificent peaks of the majestic, silent mountains.

After that first climb, as rough, unprofessional and sometimes frightening as it was, she had seen the mountains no longer as remote sights

which filled her with awe and affection. Instead, they had become the walls of enemy cities, the castles of the aristocracy, the fortresses of the reactionaries, the enemies of the Soviet State to be attacked and stormed. At that moment her sense of awe had vanished forever to be replaced by a violent, almost sexual, desire to conquer.

At the end of that climb, the senior student, who had been the leader of the climb, had spat out a mouthful of sunflower seeds, his bronzed face a mixture of awe and dislike, and said, "Roswitha, you have determination and talent. I think our mountains better look out with you around."

"Thank you, comrade," she had answered, pleased with herself, forgetting her bloody knees and aching shoulder muscles. "It was very instructive."

"But remember one thing, Roswitha: he had added softly, the mountains have to be loved too."

But Roswitha Mikhailovna had no longer been listening. From 1930 onwards, she had spent every vacation tackling ever-new climbs, saving every penny of her teacher's salary to travel all over the Soviet Union to her targets. The newspapers started to notice her. *Pravda* called her 'the new Soviet Woman'. *Trud* said she was a 'model for all our female comrades'. Her climbing motto – *Nada Vitserapat*: 'never give in' – became famous throughout the Soviet Union.

By 1935 Roswitha Mikhailovna had become one of the Soviet Union's best-known women, had been given a sinecure at Moscow University, and had even been granted the great honour of being received by Comrade Stalin himself, who publicly had awarded her the Order of the Red Star and privately remarked to his fellow Georgian Beria, head of the Secret Police, Lavrenti Pavlovich, "I could think of a better occupation for that particular piece of female flesh."

"Yes," the Secret Police Chief, who was known for his sexual exploits, had agreed. "On her back with her legs spread!"

"Only with those muscles, I think she'd squeeze me to death!" And the two old lechers had burst into ribald laughter.

But Roswitha Mikhailovna was no lesbian. Neither was she a blue-stocking. She liked men and she liked pretty clothes. She thought of herself as a feminist: a patriotic, loyal Russian, who owed everything to the Soviet State, which allowed her to do the thing she loved most, climb mountains; but who at the same time wanted herself to be seen as an example to the many

millions of Russian women who had been downtrodden for centuries by men who had gone to bed on their honeymoon night, drunk, satiated from the attentions of the whores, and armed with a knout, the traditional Russian whip, to tame the new bride.

And at this moment she was climbing, this amazing, ambitious woman, who had spent the last three months behind the German lines, risking her neck time and time again to help prevent the enemy breaking out of the Kuban valley into the Caucasus. The going was tough. It did not worry her. Over the mountain lay a coverlet of pale clouds, closely knit and swirling. The sun had vanished too and the rocks looked bluish and lifeless. She knew that snow was on the way. But neither the difficulty of the ascent nor the prospect of bad weather dismayed her, as she struggled ever upwards. She was going back to her friends, and that knowledge lent strength and purpose to her long, elegant legs.

The wind rose. It whistled a dirge across the face of the rock. The dirty white clouds were directly above her now and they were becoming more leaden in appearance by the second. It started to snow: thin weak flakes at first, but swiftly growing in strength. She pulled down her goggles with a gloved hand, knowing instinctively they would be clogged up within minutes. Still she pressed on determinedly, hardly able to wait until she was with them again, feeling an almost sexual longing for them, but dismissing the feeling at once as perverse.

As she ploughed through the snow, her agile mind ran over the events of the last few days. She didn't enjoy killing Sergei, but it was better that one should suffer death than thousands. A careless word on his part might well have revealed their presence in the mountains. He had to go. For it was certain that the Germans would send another patrol into the mountains, if only to discover what had happened at Chursuk; and it was not too difficult to reason that that patrol might press on further to continue their attempt to find a route through the mountains down into the great plain below. Once the Germans discovered just how weak the Russian defences were, they would cross the mountains in their thousands into the Caucasus beyond. Until Comrade Stalin was ready for them – and she was sure that he would heed her warning – she had to hold the mountains. Thus she pushed on, her mind full of the problems of defence.

"*Stoi?*" the high-pitched challenge came from the middle of nowhere,

echoing and re-echoing around the circle of mountain peaks.

Roswitha Mikhailovna halted. She whipped off her goggles and narrowing her eyes against the flying snowflakes, peered around in the grey gloom. She could see nothing. She licked her snow-dry cracked lips. "Where are you?" she called, high and harsh.

"*Stoi?*" the voice demanded again.

Now she located it. It came from beneath a snow-heavy overhang to her right. She swung round and called happily, "Better not shout too loud. Or you'll have that lot of snow down upon you."

"It's you!" the voice was no longer harsh.

"Who did you expect – Hitler?" she said in high good humour.

"*Boshe Moi.*" A white bulky figure clad in a snow suit detached itself from the cover of the overhang and waddled with difficulty across the fresh snow, slinging a rifle as it did so.

Roswitha waited there, her arms outspread.

The other flung back the fur hood. A round youthful face, full of strength and character, under the carefully plucked dark eyebrows, came into view.

"*Lydia!*" Roswitha cried happily and embraced the other woman joyfully, kissing her time and time again in the Russian fashion. At last she was back with her own kind again.

CHAPTER 16

It was the next morning.

Roswitha stood at the entrance to the caves surveying the terrain below, her keen gaze sweeping the smooth gleaming white surface of the mountains, checking for the enemy, but at the same time enjoying the view. How beautiful the great curved sweep of the valley was, cradled in the embrace of the high mountains and falling away gently to the south!

She turned and stared at the mountain, gleaming pink and pure in the dawn light. One day, she promised herself, she would conquer it too. Those twin peaks would be hers. A warm feeling swept through her body, as she visualized surmounting those peaks which looked so like the breasts of some proud young virgin, as yet unconquered by the importuning male. The next moment she dismissed the feeling, as decadent and unworthy of a feminist, who did not succumb to the foolishness of the general run of womanhood. Taking a deep breath of pure mountain air, she thrust back the canvas cover to the main entrance to the cave system and for an instant surveyed her still-sleeping troop, their bodies wrapped in their heavy down sleeping bags, which rose and fell rhythmically as the women enjoyed the last moments of their time free of war.

She smiled, her face full of compassion and pride. They had laughed at her in Moscow when she had offered them her militia unit back in July 1941. *What good were women,* they had asked contemptuously, *save as nurses, or perhaps snipers?*

"Give me and my girls a chance," she had pleaded. In the end, grateful for anyone capable of carrying and firing a rifle, they had; and she had proved just what her girls could do. On the coldest night of the year in January 1942, when sentries froze to death at their posts, she and her girls had climbed the ramparts of the German-held fortress outside beleaguered Leningrad, slaughtered the divisional commander and his staff who were billeted there, and escaped without a single casualty.

The exploit had occasioned sensational headlines in the Soviet Press. But it had been nothing in comparison with her girls' bold attempt to break through the German Volga front by scaling the heights and assassinating the commander of the German Sixth Army. That attempt had failed. But it had

made the Fritzes so insecure that they had begun to see partisans everywhere. Stalin himself had ordered the girls to be paraded through Moscow, and to be received and heaped with decorations at the Kremlin. The legend of the 'Red Ravens', as the popular press called them due to their myriad decorations, had been born. Now no one, even the most anti-feminist general in the Stavka, dare denigrate her girls. The Red Ravens were a unit to be reckoned with, even if they did wear skirts when they were not in line.

As Stalin himself had told the Russian people, "Wherever the front is the hottest, comrades, you will find my bold and beautiful Red Ravens." It had been high praise indeed, and Roswitha Mikhailovna was determined to live up to it.

Taking out her whistle, she blew three shrill blasts. The girls awoke at once like the veterans they were, who knew that in an emergency immediate obedience to a command might well mean the difference between life and death. Leaping out of their sleeping bags, already fully clad save for their mountaineering boots, they stood stiffly to attention, staring rigidly to the front, as if they were standing on some home-front parade ground, waiting to be inspected by Marshal Voroshilov himself.

She smiled and snapped, "Stand at ease, comrades – and good morning."

"Good morning, Comrade Captain," they answered.

"We will have a conference in" – she checked her cheap wrist watch – "exactly thirty minutes. There are things I need to explain to you." She smiled at the dark-haired Lydia, who had welcomed her the day before and joked, "And for goodness sake, Lydia, let your hair down. At the moment you look like – er – one of those."

Lydia flushed and the others laughed. They all knew what *those* were. After all, most of the hard-line anti-feminists of the Stavka thought that this was what the Red Ravens were all about. Giggling they set about preparing the morning soup and tea.

They crowded around her in the main gallery of the cave system, their young handsome bodies shapeless in their thick, heavily padded jackets and coarse serge mountain pants. To Roswitha waiting to brief them, they looked no different than their male comrades of the Red Army. Naturally they would fight and die like the men, but they could not be ordered to do things like their male comrades. They had to have their orders explained to them.

"Comrades," she commenced, "I have been on a long and not very pleasant mission. Like you, living under these hard conditions, I would like a rest. I would like to ensure you have a rest too."

"No, no," they protested as loyal as ever. "We need no rest. We will perform our duty however tired and cold we may be."

"Thank you, comrades," she said, visibly moved, knowing how hard their lives had been these last six weeks in the high mountains. "I knew I could rely upon you – no, *more*: that Mother Russia could rely upon you – at this grave hour, when everything is balanced on a knife's edge."

Sergeant Lanya Lermintov, a raw-boned woman in her early thirties, whose jet-black hair was cropped as short as any soldier's and who before the war had been – like most of the Red Ravens – one of Russia's best amateur rock-climbers, spat in the dust of the cave and growled: "Comrade Captain, I'll stay up here till hell freezes, if it will let me get my paws on a Fritz." She raised her hard, calloused, ham-like hands. "And I can promise you, it won't be a night of love I'll offer him." She spat contemptuously once again.

The others laughed and Roswitha joined in dutifully. Sergeant Lermintov was always good for a joke or the apt comment which could defuse any potentially explosive situation. "Yes, I could well imagine you would have other things in mind than the – er procreation of the species."

Again the girls laughed, and Roswitha told herself what a happy crowd they were, working together as a team, without the usual bickering of the average woman living in close proximity with another female, where the unauthorized borrowing of a simple hairpin might lead to a major quarrel complete with slanging match and hair-pulling. Her Red Ravens were not like that. One day the whole of womanhood might well be like them, freed from the domestic silliness of the average woman's life.

"Now, comrades, it is clear that we are very thin on the ground," she went on. "But you all know why. Our male comrades are needed for the fighting front and our generals. These know-it-all men have not seen the danger to our rear presented by the mountains. Good. So," she shrugged, "it is up to us to stop a whole German mountain corps – fifty Red Ravens against twenty thousand Fritzes."

"Many enemies, much honour," Lydia said. She was proud of her classical education at the University of Moscow and was given to quotes from the half-dozen languages she spoke. "German expression," she added for their enlightenment.

"Agreed," Roswitha said. "But we must realize our weaknesses. We cannot do everything with the handful of people available. We have to take certain calculated risks."

"Such as?" one of the girls asked.

"Such as this." Swiftly and expertly she did a quick sketch in the frozen dust of the cave's floor. "Here – the pass," she said. "Here is Elbrus House. Through the pass everyone trying to cross the mountains must come, and from the House the whole range can be covered, at least at this time of the year. Now, my plan is that we leave a small group of Red Ravens at the pass. The rest of the unit should take up position at Elbrus House ready to move to any hot spot."

"How many at the pass?" Sergeant Lermintov asked.

"We can't afford more than a dozen."

"Far too few," the sergeant growled in her deep voice. "We couldn't hold the pass against a determined Fritz attack. Request permission to volunteer for command of that particular group?"

Roswitha shook her head, half amused, half moved by the big woman's offer. "All right, Sergeant, it's yours."

"Do I have your permission to pick my own people, Comrade Captain?"

"You do."

Sergeant Lermintov looked across at the pretty dark Lydia, knowingly. Hurriedly Roswitha shook her head and pushed on. "Now, as Sergeant Lermintov has just said, we cannot hold the pass against any serious Fritz attack with a dozen Red Ravens. For that reason, while you slept I asked for air."

"Air?" they echoed.

She beamed at them, a warm feeling flooding her body as she did so. "Yes, the Stavka has promised me a permanent patrol over the pass – one whole squadron of Sturmoviks."

"Sturmoviks," Sergeant Lermintov cried excitedly, "that'll make the Fritzes shit their breeches..."

The Red Ravens broke down at the words and giggled like a lot of silly schoolgirls. It was the last time that most of them would giggle in this lifetime.

CHAPTER 17

"Rata, sir!" Meier, at the head of the long column toiling upwards through the snow towards the pass, yelled urgently.

"Everyone down!" Stuermer ordered.

On all sides the mountaineers, their weariness forgotten now in the urgency of this moment, flung themselves into the snow, as the sound of the little spotter plane's engine grew ever louder.

Crouched behind a rock, gloved hand shading his face so that its whiteness didn't give his position away, Colonel Stuermer followed the progress of the little wooden biplane as it curved leisurely over the pass and started to level out. On the sledges the wounded stirred uneasily at the new noise and he called sharply, "Remain where you are – there is no danger!"

The Rata had levelled out. Now it was coming in from the east, trailing a black shadow behind it over the gleaming surface of the snow. It took its time and Stuermer could guess what the pilot, a dark blob behind the gleaming egg of the cockpit perspex, was doing: he was looking to left and right, searching the white carpet of snow – for them!

He caught his breath involuntarily, and froze. The Rata, its engine sounding like some ancient sewing machine, was flying straight down the trail from the pass. Now everything depended on the men of Edelweiss remaining perfectly still. In their white snow suits they would be hard to see, especially from a moving object. With a bit of luck they would get away with it.

The noise of the engine grew ever louder. The Rata was almost above them now. Lying everywhere in the snow, the mountaineers tensed, their faces pressed into the snow, their hearts pounding furiously. And then the spotter plane was above them and Sergeant Hackebeil, who had been badly wounded in the head during the attack on the barn and who had been barely coherent since then, staggered from his sledge, trailing bandages behind, crying weakly, "They're gonna bomb us... The bastards are going to bomb us..."

"Get that man!" Stuermer yelled.

Jap was up and running. Diving low, he tackled the crazily staggering NCO and flung him to the ground, holding him there till his struggling,

protesting body grew limp again, while the sound of the Rata's motor grew fainter as it disappeared behind a peak.

"Stay where you are!" Stuermer commanded. "Not a move. He might come–"

The words died on the big colonel's lips. The Rata had emerged from behind the glistening peak, a harsh black against the bright blue of the sky. Now the spotter plane was coming in at treetop height, its engine barely above stalling speed. Instinctively Stuermer knew they had been spotted.

There was no use attempting to hide any more. "Independent fire!" he ordered urgently. "Knock the bastard out of the sky!"

The mountaineers needed no further urging. They all knew what it might mean if the pilot reported his sighting back to the Red HQ. Everywhere they sprang from the snow, fumbling with their carbines as they did so.

Ox-Jo let fly with a futile burst of machine-pistol fire. The tracer zipped by the plane harmlessly. Greul, standing as if he were back on the ranges, one hand behind his back in the classic stance of the pistol marksman, took aim carefully and fired. The perspex shattered into a gleaming spider's web. The little Rata seemed to fall from the sky, as the blinded pilot fought with the controls.

"You've got him, sir," the words sprang up from half-a-dozen gleeful throats to die the next instant, as the pilot somehow regained control of the spotter plane and, flying blind, speed increasing at every moment, fled for the safety of the high peaks.

"For God's sake don't let him get away!" Stuermer cried furiously above the roar of the plane's engine.

The men opened up again. Tracer slit the blue sky angrily after the speeding plane. But already it was too late. The Russian pilot banked to the right, leaving the angry tracer hissing harmlessly into nothing. A moment later the Rata had vanished behind the nearest rock wall and the firing started to die away. Suddenly there was no sound save the steady throb of the motor in the east, becoming fainter by the second.

Greul stamped across to where a red-faced, angry Stuermer stared into the sky. "Well?" he demanded.

"Well what?"

Greul indicated the spot where the Rata had disappeared. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you, sir, that that plane spells trouble for us."

"You don't, Major Greul," Stuermer answered icily, turning his

attention to his arrogant second and. "So?"

"So, sir, assuming that the Rata is an indication that we shall soon be receiving visitors, what are we to do about *them?*" He indicated the wounded lying on the makeshift sledges.

Stuermer knew exactly what Major Greul meant, but it was something he did not even want to think about. He played stupid. "What do you mean, Greul?"

"I mean sir, that one can't make an omelette–"

"–without breaking eggs," Stuermer interrupted him angrily, "I know your favourite motto, Greul. Come to the point."

Greul flushed. "In this kind of country, we should be pretty safe against aerial attack. With five or ten seconds' notice the men could be up the rock walls on either side and out of harm's way. We are safe as long as we are in a position to disperse swiftly. But not with those wounded."

Greul had expressed what he had not dared even to think about, yet Stuermer was still shocked. "But we can't abandon the wounded, Greul!" he cried. "They are our comrades and our responsibility."

"The decision is yours, sir," Greul replied. "It is either the wounded or us – and the success of our mission." With that he turned and stumped back through the snow, leaving Stuermer standing there, his shoulders bowed, his face stricken with grief.

The dive-bombers appeared suddenly on the blood-red horizon. For one long moment they seemed to hover there, the red ball of the sun behind them.

Stuermer watched them through his binoculars, horror-stricken. They were Sturmoviks, Russian dive-bombers, and they were preparing to come in with the sun behind them. It was the usual tactic: a means of blinding any gunner attempting to stop them. Standing next to him, his glasses focussed on the sinister black hawks of planes hovering on the horizon, Major Greul said quietly, "Well, sir?"

Stuermer knew they had only a matter of moments. Could they fight the dive-bombers off? Even as he asked himself the question, he knew the answer. *No!* Their sole heavy weapons were the machine guns. But could he sacrifice the wounded like that? His face revealed the agony of decision.

Greul said, "Time is running out, sir."

"I know, for God's sake, I know!" Stuermer exploded. "But the wounded, what can I do about the wounded?"

"Nothing, sir – and here they come." He lowered his glasses as the

black hawks sped from the horizon, growing larger by the instant.

"All right...all right," Stuermer sobbed. "Tell the men to get up on the rock wall!"

Greul did not hesitate. "Up the rock... up the rock... at the double!" he yelled above the frightening roar of the approaching dive.

The mountaineers broke at once. Like human flies, weapons slung over their shoulders, they started to scale the almost sheer walls on both sides of the snow-bound mountain track. Stuermer hesitated, his face contorted with horror at the knowledge of what was soon to come. Greul grabbed him roughly by the arm. "Come on... come on, Colonel. There is nothing you can do!" He broke into a run, dragging the reluctant Stuermer with him.

As they ran by the sledge which bore the dying Sergeant Hackebeil, the NCO raised himself painfully and croaked, "The best of luck, sir. *Berg Heil!*" he gave the mountaineer's greeting and fell back exhausted to wait for the inevitable.

Stuermer sobbed and staggered on, knowing that he would not forget the look in the dying man's eyes for as long as he lived.

The squadron commander jiggled his wings. Abruptly he dropped out of the hard blue sky. At four hundred kilometres an hour, sirens howling, he hurtled for the ground. Behind him one after another the Sturmoviks peeled off and did the same. Watching them from the relative safety of the rock wall, the mountaineers stared wide-eyed at the diving planes which seemed to threaten to smash into the ground at any moment.

Just when it seemed the leader would not make it, he levelled off. From their hiding place they could see quite clearly his pale blur of a face and the great red crosses on the Sturmovik's side. The plane shuddered violently. Tiny deadly black eggs tumbled wildly from its belly. Behind the almost stationary Sturmovik, plane after plane levelled off and discharged their bombs too.

Just as the first stick exploded with an ear-splitting crash, Stuermer caught one last glimpse of the men trapped below on their sledges, their faces contorted with fear and horror. Then his world was swamped in furious sound, drowning the screams of the dying men...

The bombers had gone now, winging their triumphant way to the east, leaving behind them only dead mountaineers. Silently, his head bared, his eyes filled with tears of compassion and shame, Colonel Stuermer wandered

in a daze through the shattered sledges: a jumbled mass of twisted weapons, smashed wood and severed limbs, already beginning, in the cold mountain air, to settle into a pool of congealing blood.

"Sir."

Slowly Stuermer turned round. It was Ox-Jo. In his big hand he held a canteen. "A drink sir. It's the last of the *Enzian*. Pity to see it go, sir," he said, his voice unusually soft for him.

Numbly Colonel Stuermer shook his head.

"It'll do you good, sir. Puts hairs –" the words faltered to nothing, as the NCO realized that they were having no effect. He put the canteen away and said, his voice heavy and without its usual bite, "Volunteers to bury the dead!"

Thirty minutes later, they began their progress up the Pass once more, leaving behind them fourteen rough mounds of earth and stone already beginning to be covered by the new snow. Colonel Stuermer did not look back. He couldn't.

CHAPTER 18

Sergeant Lermintov swept the ground below with her glasses, ignoring her cramped leg muscles and the stiffness in her arms. She had held the same position for nearly an hour now – ever since dawn when she had begun to search the area beyond the pass for any sign that the Fritzes had survived the bombing of the previous day. For Comrade Captain Mikhailovna had informed her by radio that what appeared to be another German patrol was on its way into the high mountains.

Now the sun, rime-ringed and a pale, luminous yellow after the night's fresh snow, had appeared behind the towering buttressed giant of the Elbrus and was casting long black shadows, which raced like live things across the gleaming white surface below. Everything was outlined against it a harsh stark black. Lermintov adjusted the focus of her glasses and swept the area to the right of the track which led up to the pass. She had covered the same terrain only ten minutes before. Then it had been empty. Now things had changed. From that direction came the faint shrill wheep of a whistle.

For what seemed a long time, the cropped woman sergeant, lying among the snow boulders, her brow creased in a puzzled frown, tried to work out the reason for this strange alien sound among the white mountain wilderness.

Then she had it. Tiny dark figures were advancing with the slow, measured movements of men ploughing through deep snow.

She felt a thrill of sudden fear, but dismissed the feeling the next instant. Raising herself a little from her hiding place, she started to count them.

It wasn't easy. The tiny figures, startlingly black against the ascending sun, continually slipped into the shadows cast by the great boulders which littered the slope below, and disappeared from sight. But in the end she had it. Nearly thirty of them, spread out in a line about a kilometre in length, in its centre a man directing them forward by means of an alpenstock – an officer, probably. Thirty against a dozen women. For a moment she lay there, considering the odds, watching the snail-like relentlessness with which the Fritzes advanced up the slope, knowing that inevitably they and her own force would clash. Then she remembered how well-sited her own position

was, and just how loyal and brave the Red Ravens were. Encouraged,she slipped out of her hiding place and started to steal back to the caves. It was a badly timed move. Because of it she missed the second force – another thirty men – moving in from the left flank.

She pushed back the canvas which covered the entrance to the caves.

"Anything wrong, Comrade Sergeant?" one of the girls asked, alarmed by the look on her broad masculine face.

Sergeant Lermintov pulled herself together. She was ten years older than her girls; she must not alarm them. "Not much," she said casually, taking out one of the long ration cigarettes, biting off the paper mouthpiece and lighting it with demonstrative casualness. "I've just seen a bunch of Fritzes out there." She breathed out a stream of blue smoke, her eyes wrinkled up as she did so.

"Fritzes?"

"Yes, perhaps thirty of them. They are spread out like fleas on a poodle's back. Easy meat for us to pick them off. Listen," she continued more urgently. "We have nothing to fear. We are in an excellent position up here. We have the heights and there is no way in hell that they can get past us. They might have the superior numbers, but we have the advantage of the dug-in position.

"Now then, don't look so glum, my beautiful Red Ravens. We're going to give those Fritzes a bloody nose – a very bloody one. *Come on!*"

The Fritzes, more closely bunched now as they came closer to the pass, were less than half a kilometre away. Sergeant Lermintov tucked the stock of her sniper rifle deep into the hollow formed by her cheek and shoulder. The time had come to stop them. All around her the Red Ravens waited tensely. She swung the rifle round. An NCO came into the round glittering eye of the sight. She watched the Fritz blow his whistle and heard the noise it made echo mournfully down the snow-bound valley like the wailing of some lost bird. She sucked in her breath and in that same moment, gently squeezed the trigger. The rifle slapped against her shoulder – hard. The whistle sound merged into a long bubbling scream of agony. The NCO's hands fanned the air frantically. His knees started to crumble beneath him like those of a new-born calf. Next instant he pitched face-forward into the snow and lay still.

It was the signal the Red Ravens had been waiting for. They opened fire. The first volley crashed into the line of advancing Germans. Fritzes went

down everywhere, suddenly galvanized into frenetic lethal activity, bowled over, slapped against the boulders by the impact of the slugs smacking into their bodies, doubling crazily for cover.

Next moment the first wild flurry of bullets began to patter against the Ravens' positions. The battle for the Chotyu-Tau Pass had commenced.

CHAPTER 19

As the echo of that first startling volley rolled and rolled dramatically down the valley, the first gentle, feathery flakes of a new snowfall began to trickle down, growing in intensity by the instant.

"Return fire–" Colonel Stuermer began, his voice snatched away by the sudden wind, which had already started whipping the snow into their bent faces and stinging tears from their blinking eyes.

Within seconds visibility was down to a metre and they were blanketed in an impenetrable cocoon of swirling white. Colonel Stuermer crouched in the falling snow. A burst of automatic fire whined off the rocks to his right in a murderous ricochet. Everywhere, scarlet flame stabbed the whirling white gloom, as their attackers fired blind at the mountaineers. Stuermer flung a hasty prayer to heaven. This day God had been looking after them. Undoubtedly Stormtroop had suffered some casualties, but the sudden snowstorm was now giving them all the protection they needed.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Return fire," he yelled with all his strength; then, "Meier and Jap – to me! Over here – quick now!"

An instant later the two NCOs emerged from the snow.

"Listen, you two," he yelled above the howling wind, "I want two volunteers to come with me up the track. We've got to find out the kind of opposition we're facing. Major Greul on the right can't put in an attack until he knows what he's up against."

"And I suppose we're the two volunteers, sir?" Jap grunted.

"That's right. How did you guess?"

"I just felt it *somehow*, sir," Jap replied and tugged his snow smock, close to his skinny frame.

"You'll be feeling the toe of my boot up yer arse – *somehow*," Ox-Jo snarled. "When do we start, sir?"

"Now. Come on."

Bent almost double against the howling wind, which whipped the snowflakes into their crimson streaming faces like white tracer, the three men worked their way along a line of broken rock, hardly noticing the stray slugs which whined off it every now and again. In comparison with this howling crazy onslaught by Nature, man-made viciousness seemed relatively

harmless.

Stuermer stumbled to a halt at the edge of the track which led upwards. They had left it early, because he had reasoned that if the pass were held, its defenders would have a fixed machine-gun covering it, firing regularly at intervals, its range already set.

The next moment his guess was proved right. There was the chatter of a heavy machine-gun. Red glowing tracer zipped through the whirling white fog. Slugs howled off the rock a couple of metres away from them.

Stuermer didn't hesitate. "Come on – quick," he commanded, and broke cover. Madly the three of them, bodies bent double, scurried across the trail and pitched into the deep snow of the other side, just as the machine-gun fired its next vicious burst.

Doggedly, the three men began to stumble up the mountainside, slipping and falling time after time on the treacherous surface of the new snow, bodies wet with sweat in spite of the biting cold, faces whipped mercilessly by the bitter flying flakes. The ascent seemed interminable. No one spoke. The only sound was the harsh rasping of their own breath. Their sole concern was not the enemy, but the physical effort of keeping going, fighting the vicious whirling snow.

Then, as suddenly as it had commenced, the snow-storm started to peter out. Visibility, began to improve. The wind dropped and the intensity of the flakes diminished. Now Colonel Stuermer, in the lead, could catch glimpses of the great swell of Elbrus with to its front the sharp twin peaks on either side of the pass. He knew that it would only be a matter of minutes before the snow storm stopped altogether and they would be completely exposed to the unknown defenders' view. He decided they could go no further. "Hit the dirt," he ordered.

They needed no urging. The storm had taken its toll. They were exhausted. Wearily, the two of them slumped behind the cover of the nearest boulder, while Colonel Stuermer wormed his way forward in order to get a better view of the summit. The last few feathery flakes melted on his face. Stuermer blinked a couple of times to clear them from his eyelids, then squirming round on his back in the hollow in which he found himself, he pulled out his metal shaving mirror.

Slowly, very slowly, he raised it above his head. Nothing happened. No angry burst of fire. The mirror had not been spotted. For a moment he could see nothing. The steel was misted from the heat of his body. But only for an

instant; the chill mountain air soon cleared the grey film and he could see the top of the pass. Gingerly he turned the mirror, grateful that there was no sun to betray the shining surface, and covered the heights. Soon a dark figure came into view – and another. He held the mirror still and surveyed them. Then he nearly dropped the mirror. The bigger of the two figures had thrown back its snow hood to reveal a full head of blonde curls. The defenders of the Chotyu-Tau Pass were women!

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"Women or no women, Greul," Stuermer said firmly, "they've got a beautiful position up there!" He drew a line in the snow with his knife. "They're covering it with a fixed line machine-gun here. And then," he paused and let the ragged burst of firing from the other Edelweiss's position die away, telling himself that they were carrying out his order to keep the defenders occupied during the night, "they've got another couple of machine-guns over to their right – here and here."

Greul nodded sombrely and flicked off the torch with which he had illuminated the little sketch in the snow. At first he had sniffed contemptuously when Stuermer had explained that the pass was defended by women. He had urged an all-out attack from the right, where his own force, still unspotted by the Russian women, was located. But the second new blizzard, and Colonel Stuermer's description of the enemy position, had now made him more cautious. "What do you suggest then, sir?"

"We've no chance at all of taking the pass by direct assault, Greul," Stuermer answered, selecting his words with care. "A flank attack by your people might well have some initial surprise success. But remember the terrain and the depth of the snow up there. They would have time enough to recover, and exposed like they would be, your men would be sitting ducks."

"Not at night," Greul objected.

"Agreed. But they would still take heavy casualties and I cannot afford any more serious losses. In the last seventy-two hours we have suffered over twenty-five casualties and God knows what else faces us once we have cleared the pass. I need all the men I can find."

"I understand, sir. But what are we going to do?"

"This." Swiftly Stuermer explained the plan that had been forming in his mind over the last hour, as he had wrestled with the problem of clearing

the pass without any further losses.

For a moment Greul said nothing when Stuermer was finished. There was no sound save the howl of the night wind and the odd crack of rifle fire from the other Stormtroop position. Then he said slowly and thoughtfully, "It's going to be Hell, sir."

"Yes, Hell – and then some." Colonel Stuermer was forced to agree.

CHAPTER 20

Sergeant Lermintov sipped her black tea, liberally laced with vodka, and stared down the mountainside. It was a beautiful dawn. The sky above was a hard, glittering blue and the slope below was an eye-blinking, perfect white. But the cropped-haired Sergeant had no eyes for the beauty of the summer morning; her gaze was fixed on the dark motionless shapes, capped here and there by a mound of snow, which were the Fritz dead, with, beyond, the little occasional spurts of scarlet that indicated the enemy was still firing back but was not making any attempt to out-flank their position.

"Well, Comrade Sergeant?" petite, baby-faced Ilona Serova, who had brought her the canteen of tea, asked, as they crouched together in the firing pit next to the machine-gun.

"I was just thinking, my sweet Ilona," the Sergeant growled in that gruff masculine bass she had begun to affect as soon as she had donned the earth-coloured uniform of the Alpine Corps in '41 and had been able at last to display her true sexual inclinations, "that we have the Fritzes by their short and curlies."

The girl giggled. "The expressions you use, Comrade Sergeant!"

"I could use others. But no matter," Sergeant Lermintov said, obviously very pleased with herself, and finished her tea with a flourish. "All right, Ilona Serova, I'm off back up to the caves. And keep those pretty eyes of yours peeled – or some hairy Fritz'll be up your knickers before you know it."

Again the girl giggled, while Sergeant Lermintov eased her enormous bulk through the snow towards the cave from whence she would radio the captain in Elbrus House that all was quiet on the Chotyu-Tau Pass front.

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It had been a murderous climb. The four of them – Stuermer, Greul, Ox-Jo and Jap – had started out in yet another blizzard, the heavy wet snow melting and trickling through every gap in their clothing and sticking to their boots in huge clumps so that they had been thoroughly miserable, their leg muscles burning with pain, by the time they had arrived at the bottom of the ascent.

By then it had stopped snowing. That had been a blessing. The only

one, for as Stuermer had predicted to Greul, the ascent was 'hell – and then some'. For a while everything had gone well. Stuermer knew it was madness to climb an unknown mountain in the middle of the night. But somehow the challenge of the unknown had brought to full flower his skill, revealing to him capabilities and knowledge that he thought he had lost long before in his youth. Then they had run into shale, covered by wet snow. A sixty-five minute miserable slog had commenced, agonizing step-by-step up the treacherous slippery surface, with all four of them falling every few minutes, slithering down into the darkness, muffling their curses and the noise as best they could, their bodies bruised and slashed by the sharp edges of the shale.

At five o'clock Stuermer had been forced to order a rest. Gratefully Ox-Jo eased the mortar tube off his bruised shoulders and lay full length in the snow, as if he were lying on a down quilt. Within minutes he was snoring, while the other three had huddled there on the ledge in miserable shivering silence.

At five-thirty, knowing that they could rest no longer, Stuermer had ordered them to begin climbing again. This time Greul took the lead, while he brought up the rear, carrying the mortar tube across his back.

Now the going had become even worse. They had run into a *couloir*, a deep V-shaped fissure in the mountain side, its rocky walls almost sheer, with here and there the face choked with high mounds of frozen snow, shaped by the bitter wind into fantastic shapes.

It had been a murderous, back-breaking business to conquer the *couloir*. Greul had displayed all that talent which had made him Germany's best young climber before the war, hammering in spike after spike, leading them ever higher with seemingly tireless ease. But even his talent failed him when they came to the snow mounds. The snow crust had been too thin to bear their weight so that at every step they had broken through and sunk in, sometimes up to their waists. Repeatedly they had been forced to stop and use their axes to remove the huge balls of snow that had collected under their boots and made their every movement as ponderous as a deep-sea diver's.

By six, just as the first ugly white of the false dawn had begun to flush the sky, they had overcome the *couloir*. But they had still not completed that terrible ascent. Before them lay perhaps some two hundred metres of almost sheer rock. Now Stuermer had taken the lead again, handing the mortar tube back to Ox-Jo, while Greul, carrying the bombs strapped to his soaked back, brought up the rear. After a couple of abortive attempts, Stuermer found the

crack he sought. It ran in a slanting fashion across the rock, but it did go upwards. Time was running out and Stuermer knew he could not afford to look for anything better. It would have to do.

What had followed had been a nightmare, a brutal, lung-rasping nightmare, with the wind and the occasional bitter flurry of snow, tearing at their faces and trying to rip them from the surface of the rock face to which they clung like pathetic human flies, dwarfed by the might of that majestic mountain panorama.

It had been an interminable burning agony of hanging on with muscles which were afire, and toes and fingertips which felt like they might fall off at any moment, taking suicidal risks that no mountaineer in his right mind should ever take, hammering in spike after spike, repeating the same double-hitch, and crawling centimetre by centimetre up the sheer face to the ledge which seemed to be a million kilometres away.

One hour later, with the first rays of the sun casting a blood-red hue over his sweat-lathered face, Colonel Stuermer slid over the edge of the cliff, collapsing there in a spent shapeless heap, his body racked with pain, his breath coming in great hectic rasping gasps, unable to hear, see, think for what seemed an age.

Then, like an old, old man, he raised himself, forcing his body to forget the murderous burning pains, aware again of the steel ring of climbing boots against rock and spike, telling himself that his comrades had not yet completed that terrible climb and that he must help them.

Using his last reserves of strength, he plucked the mortar tube from its straps on Meier's broad back and heaved it over the top. Next moment he had helped Meier himself over the top, where he flopped face forward into the snow, gasping with relief. The mortar shell-box on Greul's back followed and even the arrogant National Socialist major did not disdain a helping hand this time. Jap brought up the rear and on this occasion the descendant of generations of Himalayan porters and Bavarian cowherds was as exhausted as the rest of them: the ascent had taken full toll of the wiry man's normally indefatigable staying-power. The little team was beat to the world.

It was now an hour after dawn. Stuermer had forced them all to eat a little of their hard-dried meat, washed down with a mouthful of melted snow. They had protested that they weren't hungry, just exhausted. But he had insisted, knowing that they needed new energy for the task ahead. Then, like a careful

mother rewarding her brood for some particularly good deed, he had solemnly handed each one of them a piece of dextrose sugar. The sweet tablets, he knew, would flood swift energy into their bloodstreams.

Slowly they began to rouse themselves from their lethargy, while Stuermer, lying full length in the snow, surveyed the women's positions below.

Ox-Jo crawled to him, dragging the mortar tube. "Heaven, arse and twine, sir!" he cursed in awe when he saw the Russians. "Women – a good dozen of them – in the middle of nowhere and us poor troopers without any of that good stuff for days on end. What a waste of talent!"

Stuermer sniffed. "You might be right. There could well be some better use for their charms. But I'm afraid at this particular moment, those Russian women simply spell trouble for Stormtroop Edelweiss."

Ox-Jo grinned hugely. "Let Mrs Meier's little boy get down there among them, sir, and I'd soon show you how to deal with them. Club them over the head with a certain blunt instrument."

Stuermer smiled faintly and then his smile vanished as the full impact hit him of what they must do next. There were no two ways about it: the women would have to be eradicated if the Stormtroop were to pass to Elbrus.

"All right, Meier," he snapped, "start setting up the tube." He squirmed round and commanded, "Jap, get that base plate over here."

Swiftly the four men began setting up the 47mm mortar, Jap laying the base plate, while Ox-Jo screwed in the tube. At their side, Major Greul shucked the bulbous deadly winged bombs out of their cardboard cases and laid them next to the mortar in the snow. For his part, Colonel Stuermer estimated the distance and made the necessary adjustment to the range metre and the angle. Like the trained, veteran team they were, the four of them were ready to fire within a matter of brief minutes.

Stuermer nodded to Greul. "You take over the firing Greul. You're our best shot. Immediately I give the word, fire – don't hesitate!" He nodded to Ox-Jo, "You can load, and remember to keep them coming, once the firing commences."

"Right, sir."

"Jap, you come with me."

Quickly the two men squirmed through the deep snow until they were directly overlooking the women's positions some one hundred and fifty metres below.

"All right, Jap, we've got to smoke them out of those holes. And we've got exactly six bombs to do it with. So we can't afford to make mistakes. We've got to panic them into running into the open. Then it will be our job to –" He left the rest of the sentence unsaid.

Jap nodded. "I understand, sir."

"On no account must they be allowed to bury themselves into those holes of theirs. Then we'll never get them out. We'll be marking time in front of this damned pass until Doomsday. All right, here we go!"

The red flare hissed into the hard blue sky with startling suddenness. Everywhere the Red Ravens turned in their holes to stare at it, their handsome faces bathed a blood-red hue, their abruptly damp hands clutching their weapons in frightened tension.

"What the devil –"

The words died on Sergeant Lermintov's abruptly dry lips. There was an obscene thick belch, followed an instant later by the stomach-churning howl of a mortar firing. She caught a glimpse of the little black bomb hurtling slowly into the sky and then it had gone, and she knew from her experience on the Moscow Front the previous winter that the bomb was swooping down on their positions faster than the eye could see.

"The pricks have got behind us!" she yelled. "*Down – everywhere!*"

Her curses were drowned by the earth-shaking explosion of the mortar bomb. The ground came up and slapped her hard in the mouth. Her nostrils flooded with the acrid choking stink of cordite. Shaking her head violently to rid it of the ringing, she blinked her eyes several times and stared about her. The shell had scored a direct hit on Ilona Serova's foxhole. Now it was a smoking mass of fresh brown soil. There was no sign of the girl. Then Sergeant Lermintov saw it, and caught her scream just in time. The thing rolling slowly across the plateau which looked like an abandoned football was Ilona Serova's head!

But Sergeant Lermintov had no time to indulge herself in shocked emotionalism. Above them on the height which overlooked the pass and which she had thought was unscaleable, the mortar spewed scarlet flame again. Another bomb sped into the sky until it had achieved the necessary height before beginning to fall upon the panic-stricken women at a tremendous speed, trailing its obscene frightening howl behind it. She ducked her head. In that same instant, the bomb exploded right in the middle of the

plateau. Fist-sized, gleaming-silver fragments howled everywhere alarmingly. She felt something strike her helmet a glancing blow. Red and white stars exploded in front of her eyes. For an instant she thought she was going to faint. By a sheer effort of will, she fought off the dark wave of unconsciousness that threatened to swamp her. Instead she raised her machine pistol and fired a wild burst at the height, watching with a feeling of helplessness the slugs striking the snow impotently, below where the German mortar was located. Their weapons simply did not have the range. And then the whole plateau was engulfed in a hot, choking, earth-shaking, furious barrage and the Krupp steel was ripping, gouging, tearing, slicing their soft female bodies, leaving their foxholes a smoking horror of mangled, limbless bodies, swimming in their own thick hot red gore: and the survivors were up streaming wildly across the red snow, throwing away their weapons in their mindless panic, blind and deaf to her warnings, running directly into the German machine-gun fire.

Far above, Stuermer shook his head, his lean face white with shock at the way the women had run straight into their fire, leaving their young bodies sprawled across the snow-covered plateau like abandoned bundles of rags. Slowly he let his smoking machine pistol sink, his shoulders slumped with weary despair. *Why did the women have to die?* But he knew there was no answer to that overwhelming question. He might as well have asked why there should be war.

"Cease fire, Jap," he commanded, his voice filled with an almost unbearable weariness. "Cease firing – the pass is ours!"

Summoning up the last of his strength, trying not to see the still black shapes below, he raised his flare pistol and fired the green *Verey* light, which signalled their victory to the men waiting below.

The battle for the Chotyu-Tau Pass was over.

BOOK 4

THE RED RAVENS

CHAPTER 21

Colonel Stuermer picked up a handful of the loose snow, which covered the edge of the glacier and let it melt in his parched mouth. He fought off the temptation to swallow it – he knew that would result in diarrhoea. Instead, his burning thirst quenched a little, he spat out the snow and stared wearily at the task that now confronted his tired mountaineers, who slumped in the snow all around him.

All that morning they had been climbing through a raging blizzard. Heavy wet snow had swirled around them in a thick blanket, sifting down inside their tunics and mountain boots, blocking their eyes and mouths, turning their hands into leaden lumps of ice which could hardly feel their alpenstocks. Now the blizzard had ceased, but he knew as he stared at the glacier which barred any further progress that the going would continue to be just as difficult and back-breaking.

The glacier stretched as far as the eye could see, gleaming a dull menacing grey in spite of the lack of sun. He sucked his teeth, which ached constantly at this height, and told himself that there were sure to be crevasses, Some of them probably covered over with a light, treacherous roof of snow: and with visibility the way it was, it would be difficult to pick out the usual telltale warning signs that indicated the presence of a crevasse. The prospect before him and Stormtroop Edelweiss was definitely uninviting, but there was no other way up Mount Elbrus. It had to be taken or they would have to turn back.

"All right," he croaked through cracked, parched lips, wishing as he spoke that he could simply lie down in the soft wet snow and go to sleep and forget his raging headache and his aching teeth. "Rope up. We're going on."

Slowly, with fingers that felt like clumsy sausages, his weary mountaineers began to comply with his order, while Stuermer gave his final instructions to Major Greul who would follow him as number two onto the glacier.

"I know the old rule – never go two on a glacier, Greul, but there is no other way to do it. We'll keep a distance of – say – ten metres between each man. That way if anyone goes into a crevasse, he won't drag his neighbour in with him."

Greul nodded his understanding.

"We'll also ensure that there is enough spare rope to use for rescue purposes, in case an accident happens."

"I suggest about twenty metres!"

"Agreed."

The men were ready now, but Stuermer had one final instruction for them. "Use your Prusik slings," he commanded.

Obediently, the men attached the device to the rope which linked them together: one sling near the body, its loose end passed through the waist loop and tucked into the pocket of their tunics, the other thrust along the rope until its free end was within easy reaching distance.

"Good," Stuermer praised when they were finished. "All right, you men know the drill. Watch the man in front of you all the time – don't worry about the surface of the glacier. I'll guide you over that. Don't let your section of the rope go slack, and have your axe ready for a quick belay in case of trouble." He took a deep breath, feeling the icy air slice into his strained lungs painfully. "Follow me!"

Now Colonel Stuermer was no longer cold. His body dripped, indeed, with sweat: the sweat of tension and fear. Now they were well onto the glacier, strung out right across its dull-gleaming surface, with the colonel in the lead, probing with the tip of his axe before he took a step forward, wondering, when the tip went in deeper than it should, whether he dared risk it.

At regular intervals, Stuermer stopped to give his exhausted men a breather and at the same time to check for the telltale crevasse shadows. So far Edelweiss had been lucky. They had managed to avoid crevasses and there had not been a single serious fall on the treacherous surface of the glacier. But visibility was bad and he knew he had to hurry his men if they didn't want to be caught out on the glacier by the advent of darkness. That would be fatal.

He pushed on, working his way round the hummocks of ice, circumventing the deep ice fissures, taking his life into his hands to spring across the smaller ones and hoping that the thin film of snow on the far side would bear his weight, the knowledge that it was getting progressively darker all the time constantly at the back of his mind.

It was about four that afternoon when it happened. They had just surmounted

the highest point of the glacier and were beginning the descent which would place them directly below Elbrus House somewhere in the gloom a thousand metres above them. Suddenly, completely without warning, the ground gave way beneath his feet. His axe flew out of his startled hand and he was falling at an alarming rate in a great flurry of snow. A jerk, which knocked the breath out of him. The rope around his waist held. But he was still falling. For a moment he panicked. If he didn't stop soon, that would be that. A second jerk. The rope cut painfully into his stomach. He gasped with both pain and fear. Would it hold? The question flashed through his mind. But the stout rope held, and abruptly he was swinging there wildly, gasping for breath, his startled eyes trying to see in the glowing semi-darkness of the deep crevasse into which he had fallen.

He calmed himself and started to work swiftly. He knew that the pressure of the rope cutting into his waist would render him unconscious in a few minutes if he didn't relieve it at once. With fingers that were shaking wildly, he fought the Prusik sling, trying to lever it down his body so that he could get one foot in it, feeling the black waves of unconsciousness streaming back and forth, threatening to swamp him at any moment.

Then he had done it and the pressure was relieved from his chest; his weight supported now by the sling around his right foot, the black waves banished. He took a deep breath and hoping that every one above was obeying the standing order in such circumstances not to unrope and try to help him, he surveyed his surroundings. He had fallen into a deep crevasse – how deep he could not tell in the dim glow. But he could make out that the hole into which he had slipped was of the worse kind: broad at the bottom and narrow at the top. It would be a beast to get out of: the ice walls on either side were far beyond his reach.

Stuermer knew he must get started. The hole was freezing cold. If he didn't move soon, his limbs would grow numb and refuse to function. He breathed out hard and commenced the back-breaking, interminably slow ascent up a makeshift ladder of slings. First the weight off one foot, followed by thrusting the Prusik sling higher up the rope which held him, foot back in the sling and jamming the knot. Now the same procedure with the other foot. Higher and higher, the muscles of his arms and legs afire in an agony of pressure, feeling the strength ebb from his lean, trained body, as if someone had opened a tap and let it drain out.

The climb seemed to take an eternity: a nightmarish eternity, an endless

numbing time of racked, tortured muscles, with the deadly cold gripping at him with icy fingers, attempting to pluck him into that lethargy of inaction which would mean death itself.

With all his mental strength, the source of that power which had made him Germany's finest climber, he forced himself to drain all thought and all emotion out of his tortured body and concentrate solely and exclusively on each new move, turning himself into a climbing machine.

Foot by foot, centimetre by centimetre, he raised himself up the crevasse, the only sound the harsh rasp of his own breath and the metallic scrape of his boots on the sling. Now it was getting lighter. He was close to the exit. He could hear voices, faint and far away, yet somehow anxious. He fought on. His comrades had not abandoned him.

Suddenly his head bumped into something. He looked up, startled. The rope which was holding him had bitten deep into the overhanging snow lip of the crevasse's exit! Now the mound of snow barred his way. He would have to clear it in order to get out. But he had lost his axe. He cursed bitterly and for the first time felt like giving in. Bitter tears of self-pity trickled down his ashen, frozen face. *How could he get through that frozen mass?*

Then, miraculously, the ice began to give. At first it was only slivers which fell onto his upturned pathetic face. But soon the slivers became chunks and he ducked his head into his shoulders in order not to he hurt by the rain of ice.

The voices became clearer. He recognized one of them. It was Jap's.

"*Get the h–*" he attempted to warn the little corporal, but he didn't have the strength to complete his warning. Instead he hung there and let it happen.

A few moments later, Jap had broken through and Stuermer was staring up in numb astonishment at the half-breed's face. For a moment he couldn't understand what was wrong with him; then Jap gasped, "Hurry up, sir. Here's the rope! That big Bavarian barn-shitter is holding me by the feet and I don't know how much longer he can hang onto me."

Gratefully Stuermer accepted the rope and looped it round his waist the best he could. Now two ropes held him just under the lip of the crevasse. Jap disappeared. Ox-Jo's voice commanded, "All right, you bunch of wet tails – pull!"

Next instant Colonel Stuermer, more dead than alive, felt himself being tugged free from the lethal grasp of the crevasse.

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Now it was night,and the utterly weary men, who had managed to cross the glacier just before complete darkness had descended upon them, were squatting in their tents, cooking their evening meal – an appalling mess of oatmeal, cocoa and strawberry jam, generously laced with condensed milk – over the spluttering Tommy cookers.

Stuermer had already eaten, thanks to a concerned Ox-Jo. He had just finished bathing and bandaging Greul's hands, which had been cruelly cut when he had been forced to take Stuermer's full weight at the crevasse, and was now smoking the finest pipe he had ever enjoyed in his whole life.

"I thought I was going to have to look at the potatoes from underneath that time, Greul," he confessed, breathing out a stream of blue smoke pleasurably. "That crevasse was a bitch."

For once the keep-fit fanatic, who abhorred all stimulants, did not object to his C.O.'s smoking in the close confines of the two-man tent. "Yessir, it was definitely dicey." He winced.

"Does it hurt, Greul?" Stuermer asked, concerned. "You should have taken the aspirin."

Greul shook his head firmly. "The new German must learn to accept and bear pain," he announced, trotting out one of those National Socialist clichés which Stuermer detested.

For once, Stuermer did not allude to it. Instead, he said, "Why don't you get into your sack, Greul and try to get some rest? It'll ease the pain. I'll take first duty. I've recovered now." He smiled at the other man, whose face was white with pain, his liquid eyes clearly revealing that his hands were burning like hell. "Off you go, that's an order now."

Without protest, Greul crept into the bag and turned his suffering face to the wall, while Stuermer dressed, took one last long suck at his pipe before putting it out, and crawled into the star-studded, icy velvet darkness of the mountain night.

From the tents grouped behind the overhang, there came the sporadic, hushed talk of weary men, preparing to turn in for the day. For a moment or two, Stuermer listened, reassured to hear that his men were not complaining about their lot, cut off in the middle of enemy territory, attempting to scale an unknown mountain at the idle whim of the Greatest Captain of All Time, as the National Socialist hierarchy called their Führer without the slightest

shame. Instead their talk was that of soldiers everywhere: women, food, duty – and women again. He smiled to himself in the glowing darkness. As long as his mountaineers stuck to 'subject number one', as they called women, there would be nothing to fear.

Slowly he plodded through the deep snow, checking the sentries posted all around the little camp. The men were alert in spite of the murderous gruelling day on the glacier and he spent a few minutes with each man, exchanging the usual meaningless conversation that was customary between a C.O. and an ordinary soldier, yet knowing those few minutes meant something to the soldier; it cemented the bond between superior and subordinate.

Now he knew he could have returned to the tent and slept: everything was under control. But the activity and alarms of the day had left him tired in body, yet alert in mind. In spite of his physical weariness, he pulled himself up and climbed over the top of the ledge which hid their camp.

The snow glittered like diamonds in the bright moonlight, and visibility was excellent. Standing there alone, no sound disturbing the silence of the night save the faint hiss of the wind moving over the surface of the snow, he stared at the heights above him. Again he felt that sense of impotence and unimportance when confronted by the enormous majesty of the high mountains, and the immense velvet-Silver sweep of the glowing night sky. How insignificant he – Man – was in the face of Nature! What did human existence, with its petty, squalid, minute progress, signify in such a world? A man's whole life was nothing but a pin-scratch on the endless wall of history.

With the wind brushing the snow against his immobile body, like a supplicant praying in front of some great altar, Colonel Stuermer wished fervently that the war would be over and he could do the only thing he still wanted to achieve in this life: the ascent of that one remote German Mountain that had been his dream ever since he had begun climbing.

But Colonel Stuermer's dream was an idle one. Even as he stared upwards, dreaming a dream that was manifestly impossible, a long boat-like shape emerged momentarily out of the sparkling gloom. It was Elbrus House, and for one instant before it sailed silently back into the night again, Colonel Stuermer saw that lights blazed from its porthole-like windows. His heart sank. Elbrus House was occupied, and that could mean only one thing: fresh bloodshed.

CHAPTER 22

"Oh my god –" Roswitha Mikhailovna caught herself just in time. She must not frighten her Red Ravens. "Quick," she ordered, "bring her inside!"

A half-dozen hands hurried to help the grievously injured woman. Gently they escorted Sergeant Lermintov to the steel table in the centre of the main hail, blood trailing across the floor from her wounded leg, and laid her there.

Roswitha drew her knife. Swiftly and expertly she slit the blood-stained clothing from the sergeant's gross body, leaving her naked, her terrible wounds revealed to their frightened eyes.

Lydia bent over the sergeant and then drew away, her pretty face wrinkled in immediate disgust.

"What is it?" Roswitha asked, dropping the soaked bloody rags on the floor and looking at the gaping wounds in the sergeant's right leg and right breast, which had been almost shot away.

"Take a smell at that, Comrade Captain," Lydia answered thickly, holding her hand in front of her mouth, as if she might be sick at any moment.

Roswitha bent and smelled the unconscious sergeant's body. The stench was vile. Bile rose in her throat and she pulled her head away hastily. "Gas gangrene," she announced. "God knows how the poor one managed it this far!"

"What can we do?" Lydia asked.

"Nothing," Roswitha said with more conviction than she felt. She knew she must keep her head, set an example. The Red Ravens might well be as courageous as any man, yet they were still women with all their female revulsions at physical dismemberment. The sight of the gross sergeant's terribly hurt body might well panic them.

Sergeant Lermintov's eyes flickered, opened, closed and then opened again. It seemed to take her an age to recognize Roswitha Mikhailovna. "Drink... drink," she croaked. "Drink, please."

Roswitha clicked her fingers. One of the Red Ravens thrust a bottle of vodka into her hand. Supporting the sergeant's neck, she raised her and held the bottle to her mouth.

Lermintov gulped greedily at the bottle, gagging, spluttering, coughing as the fiery spirit trickled down her parched throat. "Good... good," she gasped.

Gently, but firmly, Roswitha pulled the bottle away from her lips.

"Comrade Lermintov," she said speaking very slowly and clearly, "what happened?"

"They–"

"The Fritzes?" Roswitha interjected

"Yes, the Fritzes. We thought we had them pinned down. Our position was so good. I'd–"

"Tell me what happened, please, comrade." On a sudden impulse she smoothed the sergeant's cropped dark hair out of her bleeding mask of a face.

"They caught us... off guard... up on the height." Sergeant Lermintov groaned from deep down in her tortured throat. The moan set Roswitha's teeth on edge. At her side she felt Lydia's hand creep into her own, perhaps with fear. She pressed it hard to reassure the girl – and herself. "Go on, comrade," she urged, trying to keep her voice steady.

"They wiped out the girls... We didn't have a chance... They panicked... ran right into the Fritz fire."

"And you?"

"I stuck it out in my hole, although I was wounded... Then when... when they stopped firing, I... I ran away." She looked up at Roswitha with eyes that were liquid with pain. "Did I do wrong, comrade Captain?" she asked plaintively.

"Of course not, sergeant," she answered. "How brave you were to climb up here with your wounds. Comrade Stalin will learn of this."

"Thank you," the grievously wounded woman whispered. "I tried all my life to be like a man..."

"And where are they now?" Roswitha said when the other woman's words had trailed into nothing.

"Down...down," Sergeant Lermintov tried to raise herself, but she had no strength left. "Down..." Suddenly her frozen, bloody face lolled to one side, forlorn and lifeless like that of a broken doll.

Swiftly Roswitha held the face of her wristwatch close to the sergeant's gaping mouth. The glass remained clear. She wasn't breathing any more. She felt Lydia's hand gripping her own more tightly with fear. "Give me a blanket," she said, forcing herself to keep her voice, calm and unemotional.

"Sergeant Lermintov is dead. She died for her Motherland." Slowly and respectfully she spread the army blanket across the gross body, while Lydia sobbed softly at her side.

"Comrades," Roswitha said sombrely, staring around at their faces, and telling, herself that although they had recovered from the shock of the sergeant's death, they were still nervous and a little apprehensive, "it is clear that the enemy is heading this way. It is, clear, too, that the Fritzes are a determined, experienced group of mountaineers. Only skilled climbers could have managed to surmount that peak and come up behind the pass. So, Comrades, we have a problem on our hands."

"What do you mean, Comrade Captain?" Lydia asked and Roswitha could see that the nervous tic at the side of her pretty face had still not vanished. Hastily she fought back the impulse to rush across and comfort her.

"This. This afternoon the Stavka signalled that the Army is beginning to move troops into the area beyond the Elbrus. Finally the Comrade Generals have taken our warning about the enemy seriously. If those Fritzes manage to penetrate our line and cross the mountains, then they will not only have pioneered a way for more Fritzes to follow, they will also have discovered our new dispositions. They will know that we have weakened the Black Sea front in order to cover the mountains. That might mean their generals may decide to attack through our weakened Black Sea front after all." She licked her dry lips. "Don't you see, my Red Ravens, if we don't stop the Fritzes here, they could be in a position to roll up our whole front and thrust deep into the Caucasus."

"But what can we do, Comrade Captain?" Lydia asked. "There are only a few of us – and they are real soldiers, trained and..." the words trailed away into nothing as she saw the look on Roswitha's face.

"That was unworthy of you, Lydia, unworthy of the Red Ravens, unworthy of us as women. Aren't we trained soldiers, too? Aren't we trained mountaineers?" Roswitha Mikhailovna wagged her finger at the pale-faced pretty girl in the same manner she had seen Comrade Stalin himself use often enough. "No one wanted this terrible war, but in a way it is a blessing for us women. Now we can show that we are every bit as good as our male comrades. We are no longer the stupid housewife of old, her only concern kitchen, cooking and children. We are the new generation of Soviet women. But we must be prepared to take the same risks and the same sacrifices as our

male comrades in the Red Army." Her voice rose. "If necessary we must be prepared – *to die!*"

She allowed the terrible words to sink in, staring around at their young faces with eyes that were both hard and resolute, yet filled with a barely controlled passion, and telling herself that her Red Ravens would not let her down; they had conquered their initial fears. They would fight.

"And now, comrades, the time for talk is over. Now action counts. The Fritzes will be here by the morning, and we have a lot to do this night. *To work!*"

CHAPTER 23

Like a gigantic metallic Pullman car, Elbrus House slid into view through the thick, milky white dawn fog. Colonel Stuermer, at the head of the column of mountaineers, held up his hand for them to stop. "Major Greul," he commanded, "to me, please."

His Schmeisser at the ready, Greul doubled through the snow to his waiting C.O. "Sir?"

"Come on, we'll do a personal recce, Greul," Stuermer answered and set off at once. This time he knew he could not afford to waste a second if his plan were to succeed. Steadily and in silence the two of them plodded up the mountain, their footsteps crunching over the snow, deadened by the heavy wet fog. Finally Colonel Stuermer said, "I think we're far enough, Greul. We don't want to alarm them too early, eh?"

"No, Colonel."

Together the two officers raised their binoculars and surveyed the House. Stuermer, for one, didn't like what he saw. The long low building – it was perhaps three storeys high – was built of some heavy grey stone, covered by *Duralumin*, probably as protection against the mountain storms which raged almost constantly at that height in winter. On its flat roof, aerials whipped back and forth in the wind, and confirmed Intelligence's guess that Elbrus House had been used as a weather station before the war. But it wasn't only the strange house's defensive features to which Stuermer objected: it was the rape of nature that had been carried out so high in the mountains. On the backs of hundreds of men and animals, the material to build Elbrus House had been borne up the mountain – there was even a great pile of coke outside, obviously for the place's heating system. For him, Elbrus House signified the impertinence of Man in his persistent attempt to force Nature to her knees.

"A difficult place to tackle," Greul cut into his thoughts.

"Yes, a handful of determined men could hold that place against a whole battalion," Stuermer agreed, returning to the immediate problem. "And by the look of that roof, the defenders might well be able to summon help or supplies by air. They could hold out there for ever and a day."

"Agreed, Colonel."

"And that's why we are not going to attempt to take it, Greul," Stuermer

said firmly, folding away his binoculars and looking squarely at the other officer.

"What did you say, sir?"

"You heard me, Greul. We are not going to attempt to attack it."

"But how can we move on to the peak, sir?" Greul protested. "There is no other way–"

"There is," Stuermer cut him short. "I made up my mind last night. There will be no more bloodshed on Mount Elbrus. Come on, I'll explain what we're going to do on the way back."

***

Roswitha came out of the shower, completely naked as was her wont. Sitting at the table of the radio room, where she had been on radio watch during the night, Lydia's eyes travelled up and down the other woman's body with undisguised interest.

"You are very beautiful, Comrade Captain," she said, her gaze falling on the delicate triangle of blonde down, which looked to her as smooth and sleek as the wing of some exotic bird. She drew her gaze away by an effort of will and said, her brown doe-like eyes suddenly anxious, "Have I shocked you, Comrade Captain?"

Roswitha Mikhailovna hesitated before she answered, her body abruptly weak, as she was overcome by a sensation she had never experienced before. "No, Lydia," she answered, her voice strangely husky. "I take your words as a great compliment." With fingers that trembled slightly, she picked up the thick woollen Army combinations.

"Must you dress already, Comrade Captain?" Lydia asked, a note of pleading in her voice.

"Why not," she answered, pausing, knowing as she did that she was treading on dangerous ground.

"Perhaps you know." Lydia omitted the 'comrade captain' deliberately, lowering her gaze with mock modesty.

Roswitha stared at the girl's pretty, pale, doll-like face, as if she were seeing her for the very first time. Suddenly she noticed that Lydia's hair was hanging loose, forming a soft frame to her face. "No, I don't know, Lydia."

Lydia rose and came close to her. "You must!" She reached out a hand, as if to touch Roswitha's naked body, then thought better of it.

"We must not indulge in emotionalism," Roswitha answered, feeling her heart racing in a manner that she had never experienced with a man before.

"Why not?"

"The war," Roswitha stammered. "Our mission... our duty to our Soviet Motherland..."

"We have a duty to ourselves too, Roswitha," the girl said softly, persuasively, perhaps already guessing the strange turmoil in Roswitha's brain. "It needs no more courage than the first plunge of the year into a cold-water swimming pool. Convention is easily overcome. And who would know? They are all asleep.... Why not, dear Roswitha?"

"Because."

"Because what?"

"Because..." Roswitha Mikhailovna shuddered violently, as the other girl laid her cool hand on her right breast. She felt the nipple grow erect and the instant trembling of her knees, as if she might crumple and faint to the ground at any moment.

"You know," Lydia said softly, insidiously. "You must have known that it would end like –"

"Comrade Captain!" a frightened, urgent voice called from outside. Lydia withdrew her hand, as if she had been stung.

Roswitha thrust the combination to the front of her naked body. "What is it?"

The sentry flung open the door of the radio room, her pale face flushed hectically at the cheeks, her bosom heaving with the effort of doubling down from her post on the roof. "Comrade Captain," she gasped. "I've just seen them through the fog."

"Seen who?" Captain Mikhailovna snapped, businesslike and in complete control of herself again.

"The Fritzes... they've arrived! They're taking up positions all around the house."

The fog was still thick, but through the binoculars she could see them well enough. They were mountain troopers all right. She recognized the typical peaked cap and its Edelweiss badge easily enough, and even without those two items she would have been able to identify them as trained mountaineers by the way they crossed the snowfield.

"What are they going to do?" Lydia asked, and added, "Comrade Captain," swiftly.

"I don't know, comrade."

Roswitha swept her binoculars from left to right and followed the Germans' progress. It didn't look as if they were preparing for a frontal attack on the House because they were extending their line on either side of the building, its points hooking round in a large, encircling half moon.

"If they're gong to attack, they are a long way off, Comrade Captain," Lydia said, expressing her own thoughts. "Our two machine-guns would soon make short work of them at that distance and with that amount of open ground to cover. Even I can see that."

Roswitha nodded her agreement, her pretty face creased in a puzzled frown. Lydia was right. There were at least three hundred metres between the Fritzes' positions and the House. In order to attack, they would have to cross a stretch of terrain which offered little cover save for the odd boulder. An attack in such circumstances would be a massacre. The Fritzes would have stood a much better chance if they had attacked under cover of darkness instead of advertising their presence as they were doing now. *What the devil were they up to?*

Stuermer blew his whistle shrilly. The men, stumbling and slipping off the snow slope, came to a halt gratefully. Stuermer cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "All right, start digging in now!"

The mountaineers unslung their packs, and removing their ice-axes and entrenching tools, they commenced the back-breaking task of clearing the frozen snow to make shallow protective pits against the odd rifle bullet which was already winging its way towards the extended position.

Stuermer turned to Greul, who had been plodding through the snow behind him, his arrogant face set in a look of both depression and anger.

"Well, Greul, we come to the parting of ways," he announced, flipping back his glove and fumbling in his pocket.

"I don't like it, sir. Give me your permission and I'll clear that pack of Red bitches out of the House within thirty minutes."

"You probably would, my dear Greul," Stuermer said easily. "But unfortunately you'd lose far too many good men doing so."

"But even if we carry out your plan, sir," Greul objected vehemently, as a slug threw up a wild flurry of snow only metres away, "we will still have

them at our backs, forming a potential danger."

"Yes, but that is a calculated risk we must take," Stuermer said, finding what he had been seeking. He placed it on the palm of his hand.

Greul glared down at the little ten-pfennig piece, which in a moment would determine whether he would add Mount Elbrus to his list of 'conquests'. "I don't like it. I don't like it one bit, sir. I must register an official protest."

"Duly registered, Greul!" Stuermer answered, and balanced the little coin on his thumb and forefinger. "Ready?"

"Ready," Greul said grumpily.

Stuermer spun the coin in the air, calling "Head, or eagle?"

"Eagle!"

Neatly Stuermer caught the little coin and showed it to Greul. "Head," he announced. "I go. You stay behind."

"Damn–" Greul caught himself in time. He was not a man given to outbursts of emotion. A good National Socialist had to be as proud as a panzer and as hard as Krupp steel; one didn't give way to one's feelings. "Then you go, sir?"

"Yes, and you take charge here."

"Will you take the flag?" He indicated the crooked-cross flag that was flying from the nearest position. "The photo of your successful ascent will go around the world. Humanity must know that National Socialism has triumphed over Nature."

Stuermer shook his head slowly, knowing as he did so that even if he managed the ascent successfully, there would be trouble – a great deal of trouble – at what he was going to do next. "No, not the swastika. But that." He pointed behind him. Greul swung round.

Sergeant-Major Meier, who together with Jap, had been selected to accompany Colonel Stuermer on the ascent if the latter won the toss, was standing there with the red and white Edelweiss flag of the Stormtroop over his shoulder. He grinned impudently at the major.

Flushed and angry, Major Greul swung round and stuck out his hand. "Colonel, may I wish you every success. *Berg Heil!*"

"Thank you, Greul. *Berg Heil!*"

Five minutes later the three of them, with Colonel Stuermer in the lead left the lines of Stormtroop Edelweiss and began the first leg of the ascent,

while behind them on the roof of Elbrus House, Roswitha Mikhailovna fumed with impotent rage. Five more minutes and the tiny plodding figures disappeared into the thick milk-white fog.

It was now nine o'clock, and it was one thousand five hundred metres to the top of the western summit of Mount Elbrus.

BOOK 5

THE FINAL ASCENT

CHAPTER 24

She had no fear. She thought of nothing, but breaking through the Fritz positions. But Lydia, crouching behind her with the radio on her back, was obviously afraid. Roswitha could hear her breath coming fast and shallow, as if she had just run a race. Without turning round, she reached back and patted Lydia's hand to comfort her. "Don't worry, Lydia. Everything is under control. I can take care of them."

"I'm all right, Comrade Captain – thank you."

Roswitha forgot her companion. Her eyes searched the terrain to her front, probing every dip and cranny for possible sources of danger, once she had broken through. Now the fog had begun to be burned away by the sun and here and there the snow glittered with a white crystalline glare. She knew she must act soon – before the fog had disappeared altogether; she needed its cover.

She took a deep breath and gripped her pistol more firmly. "All right, Lydia, stick close to me. Here we go!"

The first Fritz was a stocky, dark-haired youth, who was working at digging a hole in the snow with whole-hearted, exclusive concentration.

She raised the pistol and fired. The slug hit him just below the rib cage. His eyes bulged and she could hear him grunt audibly as he sat down suddenly in the snow, clutching his stomach, his knuckles white.

His mate, twenty-five metres beyond, looked up, startled. He saw the woman and grabbed for his rifle which was lying on the snow next to his rucksack. She beat him to it. Her pistol cracked again. He doubled up and tell onto his knees, as if he were praying.

The third Fritz was quick. He fired instinctively. Roswitha ducked and the slug whined off the metal side of Elbrus House in the distance behind her. Lydia gave a little cry of fear. The pistol bucked in Roswitha's hand. The rifle flew from the Fritz's fingers. He looked down at it incredulously, as if he could not understand what it was doing there on the snow. She did not give him any time to consider the problem. Her pistol spoke again. The slug caught him in the chest. At that range the impact was so great that it knocked him clean off his feet. He hit the snow with a loud thump, and then they were springing over his writhing bloody body and running up the slope.

From behind there came the first noisy cries of alarm. Bullets started to stitch the snow at their flying heels. A slug ricocheted off the metal casing of Lydia's radio. She stumbled and would have fallen if Roswitha hadn't caught her in time.

"Keep going... keep going," she gasped.

To the enraged mountaineers, who had been taken completely by surprise by this sudden breakout, the two women were just flying blurs against the milk-white background, and accuracy in firing uphill is difficult at the best of times. All the same, their bullets were coming unpleasantly close. White gouts of snow were kicked up all around their feet, and Roswitha knew they would be hit if they didn't make cover soon. Then she saw it. A stretch of dead ground some twenty metres further on. "Faster," she urged. "Faster!"

Fear lent speed to Lydia's feet. She sped forward. She passed Roswitha, the heavy radio bouncing up and down on her back. Roswitha slipped and made a catlike recovery. Some thing slapped against her shoulder. It stung like the devil, but she knew instinctively the bullet hadn't penetrated the thick wadding of her tunic.

Ten metres to go. The massed fire from below started to converge upon the two fugitives. Five metres. Lydia disappeared from sight. She had made it! Roswitha hesitated no longer. Summoning up the last of her energy, she dived forward into the shelter of the dead ground, landing on her stomach, all breath being knocked out of her lungs cruelly by the impact.

Fighting for breath, her lungs emptying and filling with explosive gasps, Roswitha flashed a glance at her wrist-watch. It was ten o'clock. It had taken her exactly sixty minutes to make her decision to break out and realize it. The Fritzes had an hour start.

A little groggily she struggled to her feet and offered Lydia her hand. "Come on, my little pigeon, on your toes. We must push on."

Lydia could not speak; she was still fighting to recover her breath. But she got up willingly enough and slung the radio more comfortably on her thin shoulders. She looked up at the sky, swallowed hard in a final effort to control her panting, and croaked, "We might have snow, Comrade Captain, eh?"

Roswitha flashed a glance at the sky, which was again turning an ominous lead-colour. "Perhaps," she agreed. "If you keep praying, Lydia. We need all the help we can get." She thrust her pistol back into its holster with a gesture of finality.

"March, my little dove, we have an appointment on the mountain."

CHAPTER 25

The little group of Edelweiss men were making excellent progress. The rock face was broken and offered good holds and several convenient stances so that they were able to advance quickly. Stuermer was pleased but all the same, the rock obstructions and snow mounds made it impossible for him to prospect a direct route to the summit; they blocked the view upwards too often.

By mid-morning they had covered a good five hundred metres and were going very strong. Stuermer began to think that they would realize their aim of reaching the summit and starting on their way back to Elbrus House before it grew dark again.

"Come on, the two of you," he yelled cheerfully, his breath fogging the air in a small grey cloud, "we'll make climbers of you yet!"

He was to realize that his sudden euphoria was due to other causes than the sense of achievement; but that was later.

Just before one o'clock the three of them bumped into their first serious trouble of the ascent. They ran abruptly into an almost sheer rock wall, with, as far as Stuermer could see, neither holds nor stances.

"All right," he ordered, his spirits still strangely buoyant in spite of the disappointing prospect in front of them, "take five. I'll have a look at it."

Gratefully, the other two slumped down on the frozen snow and with fingers that were stiff with cold, they began to eat the hard sausage they had brought with them, chewing it with relish as if they were really enjoying the rock-hard meat. They, too, seemed unaffected by the hindrance, chatting away with unusual animation, their bright-red faces very lively, their eyes gleaming.

Stuermer studied the slope. The traverse must have been one of the least attractive he had ever seen, the rock weathered, flaking and clearly unsound in many spots. Yet the realization did not seem to worry the lean colonel. Indeed, his face was wreathed in a bright smile, as if he really enjoyed the prospect of dicing with death on such a dangerous ascent.

"Well," he announced cheerfully to the other two a couple of minutes later, "it's not the best traverse I've ever seen. But I think it can be done."

"Of course, it can be done, sir!" Meier snapped, throwing away the rest

of his sausage carelessly. "But only if we get the lead out of our tails and get on with it." He giggled suddenly, and surprisingly nobody seemed to notice his unusual behaviour, nor the strange unnatural gleam in his bloodshot eyes.

Stuermer took the lead. To the right the ice glittered evilly on the rock face and the wind shrieked about him, as he started the traverse, seeking with his finger tips for the slightest irregularity. Centimetre by centimetre he edged his way along, powdery snow cascading down at each step. But the fact that a foothold might give way and send him tumbling down the mountain to a certain death did not seem to worry him. Once the rock did give way and he only managed to save himself by a lightning switch of his weight to the other foot. Again he remained unaffected. He was not even annoyed by Meier's fresh outburst of giggling.

The sweat pouring from his body, soaking his uniform, he continued across and upwards. He reached a fissure. It was wider and deeper than he had first thought. "Come on, you lucky lads," he called down to Jap and Meier, "this is going to be a walk-over!" Without even waiting to check their condition, he anchored himself on a good rock knob, and started upwards.

"Three cheers for Stormtroop Edelweiss!" Meier called, and followed.

"Three farts for the Führer!" Jap yelled, equally happily, and did the same.

Stuermer climbed steadily, but his strange, good mood was beginning to vanish. His head had begun to ache, and green and yellow stars were exploding in front of his eyes. Still he seemed possessed of amazing reserves of energy. He went at the rock like a man possessed and the other two followed him with the self-same strength and zest.

Suddenly there was a sharp crack. He swung round. Meier, his face abruptly contorted with fear, hands clutching at nothing, was falling!

Instinctively the colonel braced himself, flinging his whole weight against the rock face. There was a mighty tug at his shoulders. He caught himself just in time, knowing there was worse to come. The rope ran out. His waist snap held. The pressure was almost unbearable, dragging him outwards. Still he held on, his face purple with strain. And the rope had not broken!

He flashed a look below. Meier was swinging in the void, three or four metres below him, while further below Jap clung to the surface of the rock, as if his very life depended upon it.

"You all right?" Stuermer called.

Meier called back something in a strangled voice, which Stuermer

could not understand, yet the fear had vanished from his face.

Stuermer acted. He knew that the other man hadn't more than minutes to live, if he didn't relax the pressure of the rope constricting him soon. Gripping the waist loop with both hands and exerting strength he never knew he possessed he swung round and faced the rock. Swiftly he made a bight with the rope and flung it over an anchor rock. An instant later he had freed himself from the rope, leaving Meier dangling there in mid-air, his big boots blindly seeking a foothold.

Taking impossible risks, Stuermer climbed down to the helpless NCO. "Feet – here!" he gasped. Reaching out, he grabbed the other man's feet and guided them to a hold. "Now – up you go!" The big nailed boots scraped against the rock and stuck.

A few minutes later the three of them were lying on the ledge at the top of the fissure, crimson-faced and glaring at each other, as if they were deadly enemies.

"What did you want to do that for, you little yellow shit?" Meier cried at his running-mate, murder in his eyes.

"What did I want to do what?" the other man bawled back at him, his hand instinctively reaching for his mountain knife. "You think I let you fall?"

"Of course you did!" Meier cried, flecks of foam at the edge of his mouth. "You were just your usual shitting careless self. Never worry–"

Stuermer flashed a glance at the altitude meter wrapped around his right wrist. The needle flickered at four thousand, six hundred metres. Suddenly he realized what the cause of their strange euphoria had been – and this equally strange quarrel between the two NCOs. "Stop it," he commanded. "Shut up, will you?"

"But the big bastard accuses me–" Jap began.

Stuermer knew there was no other way. Leaning forward, he slapped the little corporal sharply across his yellow, wrinkled face.

Jap started. "What did you have to do that for," he demanded.

"Don't you see?" Stuermer answered urgently. "We're nearly five thousand metres above sea level – and without oxygen. We've all got the altitude sickness!"

"That explains it," Meier said, shaking his head, as if he was trying to wake up from a deep sleep. "My head's throbbing, as if it's going to burst apart at any moment – and I feel, sort of light."

"Me, too," Jap agreed reluctantly. "It's like not weighing anything, as if

you were made of feathers. But I feel sick with it, too. I could puke any minute."

"All the symptoms of altitude sickness," Stuermer said bitterly. "That's why we took that impossible traverse. Any sane climber wouldn't have taken a risk like that." He shook his head slowly, hating to say what he was going to say next, but knowing he must.

"We can't go on any further this day. We've got to acclimatize to the air at this altitude. Tomorrow it'll be different. Then – God willing – we'll reach the summit."

"But what are we going to do till then," Meier protested, his hectic look vanishing slowly now, exhaustion beginning to take its place. "We'll freeze our nuts off if we spend the night up here in the open."

"I know, I know, Meier," Stuermer snapped irritably, nausea threatening to overcome him at any moment. "We've got to find the Pastuchova Hut. It must be around here somewhere. We'll spend the night there." Wearily he rose to his feet. "Come on, let's get on with it." Wordlessly the two NCOs rose and followed him, all elation vanished now.

Mount Elbrus would not be conquered that day.

CHAPTER 26

"No good... *no good*, Comrade Captain," Lydia stuttered, "I... I can't go on!"

Roswitha removed her clogged-up snow goggles and stared down at the girl, her fingers dug into the snow to hold herself against the wind which boomed and dragged along the face of the mountain. She opened her mouth to speak and the wind blew the breath back down her throat so she thought for a moment she might suffocate. She slumped down next to an exhausted Lydia and with frozen fingers started to undo the straps of the radio still attached to her back. Wordlessly she dropped it into the snow.

"*Leave it?*" Lydia shrieked above the wind.

"Yes. We must find them... without help," Roswitha yelled back, her hands cupped around her mouth.

She stared up at the sky, flickering from burnt ochre to umber, heavy with flying snow, and told herself that even the world's best climbers would have to take cover in such conditions; and for all she knew the Fritzes were alpine soldiers, not professional climbers. But where? Where would they find cover at this altitude?

The hut! The thought flashed through her mind. Of course, it was the only place – and the Fritzes would know about it. She stumbled to her feet and chipped off the clumps of frozen snow that clung to her boots, while Lydia lay there watching her, the tears running down her ashen face and freezing to long icicles on her cheeks. Finally she was ready. "Come on," she shrieked.

Lydia shook her head wearily. "Can't... can't go on, Comrade..." The tired words trailed away to nothing.

"Of course you can. You are a Red Raven, Lydia." Roswitha remembered that exploratory hand that had reached out and touched her naked breast, and the harshness disappeared from her voice. She bent down and took hold of Lydia's hand as tenderly as she could with her thick-gloved hand. "Here, I shall help you."

"But–"

"You can, Lydia. Come on."

Lydia moaned piteously, but she got to her feet and stood there swaying

unsteadily, blinking her eyes at the glowing rushing sky. Swiftly Roswitha re-attached the rope, holding Lydia's eyes with her own. She knew it was no use telling the exhausted girl to look for holds; the only thing she could do was to imprison her comrade with her own gaze, will her to move on and on, dragging her weary feet behind her, as if they were some great weight.

"Here." She gave the girl her own ice-axe; Lydia had lost hers long before. "Support yourself on that. It will help." On sudden impulse she leaned forward and pressed her dry, cracked lips against the girl's frozen cheek. "We will do it," she whispered. "Now march!"

Dwarfed by the mountains, with the wind bowling around them, attempting to pluck them from the rock face with its mighty invisible fingers, the two women, insignificant black dots against the sea of white, plodded ever onwards, hour after hour, their bodies racked with pain, the breath rasping through their tortured lungs in harsh gasps. Pebbles and frozen snow lashed at their faces and ripped open the skin. But the wind was so powerful that the blood could not seep through. Each step became a major effort of will – reach up, struggle against that immense weight which seemed to be attached there, place the foot down and take hold with fingers that felt as if they were bales of wool. On and on, with the snow falling in great wet flakes and the wind booming around the mountains with the noise of exploding artillery shells.

Once Roswitha slipped on snow shale. Desperately she grabbed for a hold and screamed hysterically with pain, as the shale ripped off her thick glove and tore out the nails of her right hand at the roots. Still she went on, her hand afire with agony.

Once a great burst of wind tore at their frail bodies as they stood on a narrow rock shelf, and they clung together like two frightened children, while the wind whipped and lashed at them, as if this time it was determined to fling them to their deaths far down below.

On and on! Step by step, lurching, shaking, stumbling, suffocated by the wind, blinded by the snow, the pebbles whining off the rocks like ricochets. And then the wind began to die down. For a long while, the two pathetic mortals struggling across the face of the great mountain did not seem to notice. Chins sunk upon their breasts, they continued as before, concentrating solely on that next step. Slowly, very slowly, it seemed to dawn on them that the wind had dropped and the fury of the flying snow had begun to let up. Roswitha raised her head with infinite weariness and lifted her

goggles.

Silence fell over the mountains, hurting her ears. She stared at the dying flakes in bewilderment. What did it mean? A hush began to descend upon them, and abruptly she could think clearly again. She turned to Lydia, standing there behind her numbly like a carelessly dumped sack of potatoes, and then looked at her altitude meter. It read four thousand, six hundred metres. "Lydia," she cried, as the snow stopped altogether, "we've done it."

"Wha... what?" the other girl croaked.

"We've reached the hut! *Pastuchova Hut!*" she cried in triumph. "Come on!"

Her headache vanished and new strength flooded back into her legs. Dragging Lydia behind her, stumbling, falling and rising again, she covered the last ninety metres. Then she saw it. The Pastuchova Hut, almost submerged in the new snow. But the thin curl of blue smoke emerging from the chimney into the evening sky told all she needed to know. It was occupied. The Fritzes were in residence!

Meier portioned out the steaming mixture of coffee, cocoa and condensed milk, and the other two clutched the canteens with their frozen fingers gratefully, their feet extended towards the tired blue flame of the Primus cooker, which was as starved of oxygen as they were. They had been forced to burrow their way through the snow into the wooden hut and it had taken them an hour of murderous labour to clear its interior. Thereafter, it had been another hour before Meier had finally managed to get the mixture to boil, and he had added a massive portion of sugar to give them new energy. Now, propped up against their stiffly frozen rucksacks, they sat there, shivering, grateful for the warmth of the mixture and the flickering Primus cooker, which cast strange shadows on the gloomy white interior of the snow-covered little hut.

Stuermer took a sip of the steaming mixture and felt the canteen tear at his lips. He didn't care. The drink was all-important. He could almost feel the new energy, engendered by the sugar and milk, flood into his infinitely weary limbs. "Now, gentlemen," he said hoarsely, "are you still summit-hungry?" He grinned at their tired, frozen, unshaven faces.

"*Teufel und tit!*" Ox-Jo growled, almost his old self again, "of course we are. Aren't we, ape-turd?"

"Clear as chicken-soup," Jap agreed, raising his greedy mouth from the

mixture. "I'm ready to go up alone – now!"

"Get off it!" Ox-Jo said. "Showing off like ten naked Olympic swimmers in a girls' dormitory!"

Stuermer smiled. The two NCOs had recovered their strength, and to all appearances at least, they had overcome their altitude sickness. His own splitting headache and nausea had vanished at last. "Do you know," he said, "we're higher than Mont Blanc, the Emperor of the Alps, now?"

Ox-Jo rubbed a massive hand, each finger split open by the cold like a burst sausage, over his bearded jaw. "Don't know about that, sir. I'm more interested in climbing other kinds of tits than Elbrus's twin peaks."

Stuermer laughed happily. "And you shall have that pleasure too, once we're down again. Undoubtedly the Greatest Captain of all Times will grant Stormtroop Edelweiss a leave in the Homeland to honour our victory."

Jap's dark eyes glinted wickedly. "You're not pulling my pisser, are you, sir?" he demanded.

"No, your – er – pisser is quite safe, Jap."

The corporal looked at Meier. "Did you hear that, Ox? Remember you owe me the price of three jumps, once we get back to civilization."

"I'll buy you a whole private knocking-shop, once we get back to Munich," Ox-Jo agreed grandly. "Now sir, what's the drill tomorrow morning?"

"Well, assuming the snow continues to let up, this is what we do. We dump our rucksacks and weapons here. Everything unnecessary stays behind, except the flag."

"Not–"

"No," Stuermer beat Ox-Jo to it. "We just take our own Edelweiss standard."

Ox-Jo beamed. "That's the stuff, sir," he said heartily. "That'll make some people fill their breeches when they see the photos."

Stuermer knew who 'some people' were, but he didn't comment on it. "I'll take the camera and you, Jap, you take the bottle with our names. We'll plant it up there under a cairn. At least there'll be some proof that we made it."

Jap sniffed. "As you wish, sir. But I doubt if anyone will ever care, especially the Ivans. I bet they won't want to put us in their record books as the conquerors of Mount Elbrus."

Stuermer nodded. "I expect you're right, Jap. All right, we'll rope up

immediately. I think there'll be shale or lava stone up there too and you know how damn slippery that stuff is at the best of times – and tomorrow we'll have snow and ice to contend with as well. We'll take a zig-zag course, first to the north and then once we're in sight of the twin peaks we'll head west to take the higher of the two. We'd better do this correctly, although there is only a difference of a hundred metres in height. I know it's a propaganda exercise, but–" He shrugged and hoped that the two NCOs could understand his concern that even now it should be an honest climb. "Well, that's about it. Any questions?"

The two NCOs shook their heads.

"All right, we'd better turn in. It's going to be a long day tomorrow." He zipped his sleeping bag up and turned his head to one side. The other two did the same. Within minutes they were all three snoring heavily, sunk into the blessed world of sleep, in which there was no pain, no exhaustion and no cold. At their feet the Primus stove flickered blue, as the first air from outside started to enter the hut...

CHAPTER 27

Stuermer was the first to wake. The faint stirring in the snow at the entrance must have alerted something deep down within his bone-tired, sleep-drugged body. His eyes flickered open, closed, and opened again.

A face, hard and commanding, though beautiful, was staring at him from only two metres away. "*What in three...?*" he began, startled.

"Be still!" the stranger commanded in good German. "Don't move."

In the eerie blue flame of the still-burning Primus stove, Stuermer could see the pistol in the stranger's gloved hand, and the glacial menace in the voice told him the newcomer was deadly serious. He froze, while the stranger, pistol held erect, crawled the rest of the way into the hut and shook the hood free to reveal a swath of matted blonde hair.

Stuermer gasped involuntarily. It was a woman! Instinctively he knew that she was one of the women they had left behind at Elbrus House. Next moment another woman had followed the first inside the hut and as the two NCOs struggled awake from a deep, clinging sleep, the first snapped, "Hands behind your heads and back against the wall!"

Awkwardly the three men struggled out of their sleeping bags and wormed their way under the low roof to the wall.

"I know you," Ox-Jo breathed when he saw the first woman's face clearly in the light of the Primus. "You're the–"

"Be quiet!" A grimace of hate distorted the woman's face for a moment, as she shook her head to release the thick blonde hair.

Ox-Jo fell silent. The look in the woman's eyes was enough. Roswitha turned to Colonel Stuermer, who she guessed was the officer. "What is your name?" she demanded, while behind her, Lydia warmed one frozen hand at a time – she, too, held a pistol – in front of the Primus.

"Stuermer."

"Rank?"

"Colonel of the Alpine Corps." Stuermer answered, feeling the grey bitterness of defeat wash through him, a sour taste in his mouth, as he realized just how easily they had been caught when they were so close to the summit.

Roswitha looked at him curiously. "Not *the* Stuermer," she asked, "of

the German Mountain?"

He nodded numbly.

For an instant the hard determined look on her pretty face softened. "I have heard of you, Stuermer. Before the war I would have been proud to have made the acquaintance of a climber such as yourself. In Moscow we all had heard of you and admired your climbs. But now–" She hesitated and her face hardened again. "Now you are a Fritz, just like the rest." Without turning, she rapped, "Comrade!"

"Yes, Comrade Captain?"

"The rope – and start with the big one."

Lydia needed no further instructions. While Roswitha kept the three Germans covered with her pistol, an unwavering look in her eyes, although her injured hand was now throbbing again painfully, Lydia crawled behind a glowering Meier and started to tie his hands together by the wrist, before finally looping the rope around his big neck so that he would strangle himself if he attempted to move his wrists overly much.

"What are you trying to do, you little slit," Ox-Jo growled sourly, "cut my turnip off?"

Lydia, who understood no German, shrugged and turned to the next man, Jap. She repeated the performance, before starting on Colonel Stuermer, who fought off the feeling of heart-sickening defeat, telling himself that he must concentrate solely on the present, be ready to take advantage of any moment of weakness on the part of the two women.

"Now we sleep," Roswitha announced, apparently satisfied with her companion's work. "First my comrade and then myself. But beware, one false move and we shall shoot."

She said something in Russian to the other girl. Gratefully Lydia crawled into the nearest sleeping bag, sighing with undisguised pleasure as she felt its warmth. Within moments she was fast asleep, not even noticing the other sleeping bag which Roswitha draped across her body gently and lovingly.

"Id rather fuck 'em than fight 'em," Ox-Jo whispered wearily.

"You and fucking," Jap whispered back contemptuously. "You didn't do her much good back in Cherkassy, did yer? She must have liked that salami sausage of yours a lot – *I don't think!*"

Colonel Stuermer shifted his position for the umpteenth time, straining at the rope and feeling it cut cruelly into his neck as he tried to get

comfortable and at the same time fight off the creeping icy cold. But no matter how he twisted and turned, he was still chilled to the bone. The little woman must know her rope and knots, he told himself wearily.

"What do you think they're gonna do to us, the girls I mean, sir?" Meier hissed, noting Stuermer's movement.

Stuermer shrugged and wished a moment later he hadn't.

"Kill us?" Meier persisted. "They can't do that. They're just girls after all, even if they are Ivans."

"They say that the female of the species is the more deadly," Stuermer commented drily.

"Stop that talk!" Roswitha said and jerked her pistol up threateningly.

"We'll take the baby-faced bitch," Meier hissed swiftly, and closing his eyes he pretended to sleep.

Now it was two hours later. The other woman was on guard, a shapeless blur in the white gloom of the hut – the Primus had long since gone out. But the three men feigning sleep knew that she held a pistol pointed towards them, and they knew too that the light was good enough for her to blast them to eternity at any sign that they were attempting to escape.

Still Meier worked on doggedly at his task. Half an hour before, Jap had managed to pass him his bridge and now the big Bavarian was attempting to saw through Colonel Stuermer's bonds with the blunt metal loop that connected the false teeth. It was an immensely laborious business and in spite of the freezing cold, Ox-Jo was sweating with effort. All the same he kept at it, urged on by the knowledge that the blonde woman who had once slept with him would shoot him in the morning as easily as she had once opened her wonderful long legs to let him enter her.

Time and time again, Stuermer bit back a cry of pain, as the rope dug deep into his swollen, chaffed wrists or jerked alarmingly at his throat, as Ox-Jo tugged a little too hard. But he knew, too, that time was running out. He didn't know exactly what he was going to do with the women, if and when Ox-Jo managed to free him; but he told himself he would worry about that eventuality once he was released.

Time passed leadenly. Stuermer cocked his ear to one side to check whether the barely glimpsed figure of the woman in the sleeping bag had nodded off. But her breath seemed the same as ever and he guessed she was still awake, unlike her companion who slept the heavy sleep of the utterly

exhausted.

Abruptly he felt a soft crack. Behind him Meier hissed, "Through a bit, sir. Do you think you could use your strength to part more, please?"

"As you asked so nicely, I'll try," he answered through gritted teeth.

With bowed head and hunched shoulders, he made a titanic effort to break the rope, the veins standing out at his temples. The rope gouged deep into his flesh and he bit his bottom lip till the blood came in order to stifle his cry of pain. The damned rope wouldn't give, and in the end, he was forced to say, "Try a bit more, Ox, I can't do it."

Meier said nothing, but Stuermer could guess what he was thinking. It would soon be dawn and then it would be too late. The NCO started to saw at the rope with the blunt curved metal once more.

The minutes ground on. Stuermer felt another soft snap, as yet another strand gave.

This time it was the colonel who took the initiative. "Hang on, Ox," he hissed, "Ill have another go." He took a deep breath, shoulders hunched, the air tight in his lungs. He exhaled and in that same instant raised his shoulders and with all his strength thrust his wrists outwards.

Something gave! He felt the pressure on his swollen wrists relax and it was only with an effort of will that he prevented himself from crying out loud in triumph. He had done it! But in that same moment, the dark figure in the sleeping-bag rose, and behind him Meier gasped with shock, as if he feared that they had been discovered after all.

But they were still in luck. The blonde woman whispered something in Russian to the other woman and struggling into her parka, she crawled through the tunnel outside.

"Going to take a leak perhaps?" Jap suggested in a whisper.

"Perhaps, Stuermer agreed, knowing that it was now or never. With the other woman outside they stood a much better chance and besides, he guessed that she would not go back to sleep again. Now it was almost dawn and she would want to deal with them and get the dirty business over with. He strained once more and felt his bonds flop to the ground behind him. His wrists were free!

For one brief instant, he massaged his hands to restore the circulation before whispering urgently. "Quick, Ox, back to me!" Meier reacted immediately.

With fingers that felt like clumsy, thick sausages, Stuermer fumbled

frantically with the other man's bonds, ignoring the burning stabs of pain as his nail-less fingers snagged and caught on the knots, scattering fresh gobs of blood on the ground.

"Good enough, sir," Ox-Jo hissed. "I can do the rest alone. Take care of doll-face." He grunted and gave a stifled sigh of relief, which told Stuermer he had freed himself too.

"I'll count up to three, Ox," Stuermer whispered, "then I go for her. Get ready to tackle the other, if she comes in. No killing if possible... One... Two... *Three!*"

Stuermer hurled himself forward from the sitting position. His shoulder socketed into the surprised girl's stomach. The thwack of hard muscle hitting soft flesh filled the hut. The girl's breath came out of her surprised lungs with a sound like a deflating balloon. She sank to the ground while Stuermer sprawled full length. But she did not relinquish her hold on the pistol. Much more speedily than Stuermer she sprang to her feet, all breath gone out of her skinny body, but with the pistol raised, finger crooked round the trigger, about to fire.

Meier didn't hesitate one second. He dived forward and collided with the girl. They fought each other for the pistol with the mad fumbling of two virgins left alone and intent on pursuing their first act of love.

The explosion crashed back and forth in the tight hut, as the two of them – girl and NCO – clung together in its middle, seemingly frozen thus for eternity, both their eyes wide and startled with shock.

Stuermer gazed up at them in awed alarm. For a moment all movement ceased, as if it had been cut off by the blade of a sharp knife. There was nothing but the loud, echoing silence which seemed louder than the clamour which had just preceded it.

Meier, the pistol wrestled out of the girl's limp, dying hand, fired again. In that place the noise was deafening and at that range, the dying girl was lifted clean off her feet. She slammed against the wooden wall, her entrails bulging out above her leather belt, arms extended against the planks, as if she had been crucified there. For one incredible instant she remained thus. Then the life drained from her completely. Eyes wide and empty with death, she slowly crumpled to the floor in the same moment that the alarmed voice from outside cried, "Lydia!" and then, obviously in control of her emotions again, harshly and menacingly, "*Stoi, nia dvigatissya!*"

Stuermer did not need to know Russian to understand the threat in

those words. "Quick, Ox, you've got the pistol – through the planks and round the back. I'll draw her fire in the tunnel. You get her from behind."

"But, Colonel–"

"No buts about it," Stuermer rapped, knowing just how completely trapped they would be in the hut once they had lost the initiative. "Get a move on!"

Meier waited no longer. Springing over the still-tied Jap, who looked up at him reproachfully, he rammed his right boot against a plank to the back of the hut. It snapped and broke at once. Reaching down, he ripped it out with his big paws, as if it were made of matchwood. A second one followed, to reveal packed hard snow. A moment later Meier was burrowing into it like some enormous alpine rat.

Stuermer waited to see no more. Gripping the dead girl, his face wrinkled up in self-disgust at what he must do, he started to push her in front of him down the dark tunnel which led to the outside.

"*Stoi?*" the woman outside commanded, her voice a little unsure.

Stuermer sighed his approval. Perhaps the other woman thought doll-face was still alive. He continued his progress towards the patch of milky white, which indicated it would soon he dawn.

Just before he reached the exit, he drew a deep breath and thrust the dead girl in front of him.

"Lydia!" He caught the gasp of surprise and shock.

In the same moment that he pushed her outside to fall limp and lifeless into the scuffed snow, the woman screamed, "You perverted Fritz swine!" and fired a wild volley at the exit.

Stuermer ducked hurriedly. The wood splinters crackled and hissed around his head, as he tried to count the number of slugs she had fired. If she finished the whole magazine, he'd tackle her. If she didn't, and kept him pinned down at the exit, then it would be up to Meier.

Crack! Stuermer ducked low in reflex instinct as another slug hit the planking above his head and splintered it. That was her eighth bullet, he told himself. She must have a nine-slug magazine in her pistol, just as was the case with most German semi-automatics. One more and he'd go for her.

He tensed. There it came. The swift dry crack of a pistol. Another slug hit the wood and splintered it viciously. Stuermer lowered his head and flung himself out across the dead girl's body and into the open.

The blonde cried something he didn't understand. She raised the pistol

and took deliberate aim. Stuermer froze in his tracks. He had miscalculated. *Fatally!* The woman was holding a pistol that was unbalanced by an overlong, ungainly magazine. It was the old-fashioned kind that held twelve bullets! Stuermer tensed and awaited that slug which would rip open his defenceless flesh and end it all. But Colonel Stuermer was not fated to die – just then.

Just as his horrified eyes made out the sickly white colouring of the knuckle of her forefinger curled round the trigger, which meant she was going to fire the next instant, a dark figure hurtled from round the back of the hut. It was Meier. He had done it! Meier's pistol cracked. In his urgency he missed. The slug kicked up a flurry of angry white snow a metre away from her feet. But the bullet sufficed. Her own pistol shots hissed purposelessly over Stuermer's shoulder.

Fighting for breath, her face suddenly flushed in alarm, the Russian woman ripped off the empty magazine and dropped it in the snow. Walking backwards, not seeming to notice Meier's bullets hissing through the air all around her, she grabbed feverishly for the spare mag in the pocket of her heavy parka.

As Meier flung down his empty pistol with an angry curse, and prepared to make a headlong rush at the woman before she had fitted the new magazine, Stuermer saw her danger. He didn't want her killed, whatever she might have done to him: she was a woman after all. He opened his mouth and cried frantically, "Watch out... watch out, the drop behind you!"

The woman did not hear. All her attention was concentrated on fitting the fresh magazine.

"For God's sake!" Stuermer roared, his face stricken, ivory-knuckled hands clenched in desperate futility, "you must watch that–"

The words died purposelessly on his lips. The woman had just rammed home the magazine. He could hear its click quite distinctly above the sound of the wind. Her eyes flashed upwards in triumph as she raised her pistol to kill the two men frozen there into powerless immobility. Her lips opened to say something, which ended in a scream as the ground gave way beneath her feet and the pistol went off purposely into the dirty-white sky and she was suddenly falling into nothing.

Both Stuermer and Meier darted forward. They peered over the edge of the ledge. She was slithering faster and faster, the slither becoming a glissading crazy roll, ever swifter, her scream of fear trailing behind her,

getting further and further away until abruptly the snow fell away altogether and she was riding out far, far into the valley, cascading wild blue-white snow behind her. Then Comrade Captain Roswitha Mikhailovna, the founder of the Red Ravens, was gone for ever, and there was nothing left but a loud, echoing silence, which seemed to go on forever.

CHAPTER 28

Now the clouds had parted, and the cold sun cast its pink light across the slope ahead. It glittered like a myriad rubies. Above, the twin peaks of Mount Elbrus looked down upon the three tiny figures in remote, mysterious silence.

Colonel Stuermer adjusted the rope looped across his right shoulder more comfortably and drew a deep breath. He let it out in a sudden cloud of grey and commanded, "All right, let's get on with it!"

"With you, sir!" Meier answered.

"With you, sir!" Jap echoed.

In silence they moved off. The final assault on Mount Elbrus had commenced.

They had been marching upwards for three hours now. The sun had disappeared and the day was grey, with a threat of more snow in the leaden sky. Not that the three men looked upwards much. Their whole attention was concentrated on the rock. Under normal circumstances the fifty-five degree angle of the slope wouldn't have worried experienced mountaineers such as they, but under the thin film of snow which covered the slope, everything was pure ice, so that in spite of constant use of their ice axes, they slipped time and time again.

But the ice was not their only problem. The altitude was beginning to have its effect again. All of them had splitting headaches, nausea and accelerated breathing. Once, during a five minute break, Colonel Stuermer had checked his pulse and found that it was racing at an alarming rate. He knew what that and the other symptoms meant – they were suffering from altitude fever again. Still they pressed on, climbing steadily along the long humpback ridge which ran southwards from the mountain's eastern peak, down its further side north-westwards in the direction of the western peak, working now by compass and altitude metre, since the twin peaks had long vanished into the grey gloom.

At eleven o'clock, Stuermer halted and wiped his face before checking his compass and altitude metre, while the other two just stood, panting like two ancient, broken-down cart horses.

"Five thousand, two hundred metres," he announced after a minute. "We've got the worst part behind us." He paused and waited for some

reaction from the two NCOs. None came, so he said, "We've got a mere three hundred metres to cover because we're in the dip between the two peaks."

"A mere three hundred metres, the colonel says," Meier gasped with an attempt at his old humour. "It might as well be three hundred kilometres for this old Bavarian barn-shitter! Mrs Meier's little boy is kaputt."

Jap did not even smile.

"All right," Stuermer said, "The last three hundred metres – straight up. March!"

Linked together by their ropes, digging their ice-axes into the almost sheer sides of the peak, they worked their way upwards in a zig-zag course with infinite slowness, clinging to the white surface like tiny human flies.

In the lead, Colonel Stuermer thought he had never been so cold in all his climbing career. The howling wind, which made all conversation impossible save by shouts, slashed like steel knives at their naked bodies beneath the thin clothes, smashed icy fists into their faces, and ripped the skin off their hands and lips. In between the gusts, the light glared and waved against his frozen goggles making it possible to see only through screwed-up eyes: and all the time the white sludge collected at his boots and turned his steps into crippling hobbles.

Now Stuermer and the two other men had forgotten the peak somewhere above them in the flying white gloom. They were fighting death, not the mountain; and they had to keep moving to stay alive. There was no place to move to, save up or down, and for some reason that their numbed brains could no longer fathom, they kept moving upwards.

Now it was midday. Still there was no sight of the summit. Wearily Stuermer wondered if he had made a miscalculation. He stopped and checked his compass and altitude meter, while the other two, their shoulders bent, their breath coming like that of broken-lunged asthmatics, stared numbly at his back.

"Another hundred and twenty metres," he shrieked above the howl of the wind. "Hundred and twenty... perhaps another two hours!" he lied.

The two NCOs said nothing. They waited like dumb animals about to be led into the slaughter house.

"*Aufs geht!*" Stuermer commanded, and they stumbled forward once more.

Now they were working their way upwards with their ice-axes. Step by step,

they hewed out their path to the summit. Their faces were crimson with the effort. Even Ox-Jo's massive frame could not stand the strain. More than once he let his ice-axe fall from his great paw and it was only by sheer willpower that he could force himself to bend and pick it up again.

The vastness of the mountain became an infinity of rock, ice, snow, seen at the closest range, so that one minute piece of ice resolved itself into a mountain, which had to be assessed, considered, conquered.

Stuermer knew they were moving. But when he looked back it seemed that the two bowed figures behind him moved at the pace of tortoises. And all the time the wind howled and shrieked about them, whipping up the frozen snow particles so that they writhed and coiled around their slow-moving feet like white ghosts. *Step by step*.

Midday. They had been climbing for four and a half hours. Stuermer knew they must have a break. He held up his hand and in their exhaustion the two men behind him almost stumbled into him before they realized he had stopped.

"Break," he said through lips which were a mass of bloody, black cracks, "break."

There was no response from them.

Stuermer dug his hands under his armpits for a moment to warm them a little, while they stood there, swaying on their feet, their eyes behind the goggles blank of any emotion. Stuermer felt that he had insufficient life in his fingers to reach into his pocket. Guiding his right hand into it, taking what seemed an age to open the flap, he pulled out the chocolate bar, which he had saved for this last stage. Not only did it contain dextrose-sugar, but there was also a certain amount of the stimulant pervitin in it. It went against his mountaineer's code of conduct to give them it, but without it, he knew, they would never reach the top.

Carefully he broke off a piece of the dark-brown chocolate and shrieked at Meier, "*Open your mouth!*"

Numbly, like a very small and stupid child, the big sergeant-major did as he was ordered.

With thick unfeeling fingers, Stuermer slipped the piece between Meier's terribly cracked and swollen lips. There was no reaction. The dark brown square lay on the red wet tongue unswallowed. Stuermer took the NCOs lips and pressed them together. "Swallow!" he ordered.

Meier swallowed.

With infinite weariness, Stuermer repeated the performance with Jap, before he swallowed a piece himself.

"Now," he bellowed, feeling the fresh energy already beginning to stream into his unutterably weary limbs. "Fifty metres more and we've done it!"

They reached the western peak of Mount Elbrus in a completely undramatic way, by plodding up the incline, their legs lent new energy by the chocolate, until there was no more incline to climb. Abruptly before them was a stretch of wind-flattened snow leading to a gentle cone in the centre with, beyond, the sky that – just as abruptly – was beginning to clear to reveal the vast plain below.

Stuermer sat down suddenly in the snow. "We've reached the summit," he announced, not having to bellow for the first time in hours, for now the wind was beginning to drop too, as if Nature itself was acknowledging that it had been defeated by these puny mortals.

"This is it, sir?" Meier said incredulously, looking down at the C.O. "You mean this is all there is to it?"

Stuermer nodded numbly, while the other two stared around in disbelief.

"Well, I'll piss in my boot," Jap said, "all that shitty carry-on for this! Was it worth it?"

Stuermer stared up at the outraged look on his wrinkled yellow face and could feel with him. Was it worth it, so that the ego of some brown-uniformed dreamer could be flattered? He stumbled to his feet and indicated the panorama. "Out there, Jap, we have Asia – the Caspian Sea, Persia, Afghanistan, India, where our Japanese allies are already fighting. Here, we are as far from Munich as we are from the Persian border. Isn't that something?"

"Give me Munich, a litre of *Löwenbrau*, and a big fat peasant girl with plenty of wood in front of her door, any day," Meier said, and spat drily in the snow. "You can–" He stopped suddenly, his eyes keen and alert.

"What is it, you big rogue?" Stuermer asked.

"Out there in the plain. Like a long black snake moving, sir."

Stuermer focussed his binoculars painfully. At that distance, it was impossible to make out the details of the long column of vehicles but he

knew they had to be military. The average Russian peasant moved by *panje* cart and besides, peasants wouldn't move in such huge numbers.

Now he knew why the woman had attempted so desperately to stop them; the Ivans thought Stormtroop Edelweiss was the recce party for a large force to come after them. Now the Soviet High Command was obviously splitting their army so that they could cover both exits from the mountains. That would be a very valuable piece of information for the gentlemen of the staff with their monocles and purple-striped, immaculate breeches.

He dropped his binoculars into their case and turned to the others. "All right, you two: he snapped, very businesslike now. "Who wants to get his ugly mug into the papers – come on, which one of you am I to photograph?"

Ox-Jo looked at Jap, who was already positioning the bravely fluttering Edelweiss flag of the Stormtroop in a cairn of stones, and then back at Stuermer. "I might not be the answer to a maiden's prayer, sir..." he began.

"Yer," Jap sneered, "that you can say again – twice!"

"Up yours!"

"Can't," Jap retorted, equal to the insult. "Got a 75 millimetre field howitzer up there already."

"Well, as I was saying, sir, before that little owl shit interrupted me, I think I'd be more suited. I mean, what would the Führer say if he saw that half-breed's ugly yellow mug staring back at him from the front page?"

"Three farts for the Führer," Jap snarled.

Ox-Jo ignored the remark. "It stands to reason, sir, that the Führer would prefer to see my own homely-handsome, perfectly Nordic face looking at him, with all due respect, as befits a senior NCO of the High Alpine Corps."

"Oh, my aching arse!" Jap groaned and clapped his hands to his head in mock anguish. "Look at the Prussian prick – *Nordic!* Ow, slap my cheek!"

Stuermer grinned and raised his camera, taking care to ensure that the lens remained covered until the last moment so that it didn't freeze over. "All right, build a monkey in front of the flag, Ox-Jo. Here you go heading straight for history."

Dutifully Ox-Jo built his monkey, throwing out his magnificent chest, his hand clasped rigidly to his cap, staring woodenly, hard-jawed, at the fluttering red-and-white flag.

"Now!" Stuermer snapped and in that instant, he raised his fingers from the lens and clicked the catch down. "All right, let your guts slip down again.

I've got you."

While Jap and Ox-Jo scraped at the frozen earth around the stone cairn so that they could bury the bottle which contained the scrap of paper on which their three names and the date, "21st August, 1942" were recorded, Stuermer stared out into the far distance.

Somehow he knew, this August day, that he would never see that panorama again. With the clarity of a vision, he knew that this would be the furthest point of the German advance into the Caucasus. The Wehrmacht would defeat those unknown Russians down there in the plain time and time again. But in the end the woman (Roswitha had been her name, according to Meier), and the millions of Russian women and men like her, would beat them. The brown tide had reached its high-water mark.

Totally unexhilarated by his conquest of Mount Elbrus, he turned and said, "All right, let's get back."

CHAPTER 29

On that same night, the radio message flashed from headquarters to headquarters. First from Dietl's Corps HQ, then to Army HQ, from there to Army Command, and, finally, in the early hours of the 22nd August, 1942, it reached the Führer HQ itself. Jodl felt it important enough to wake the Leader at ten o'clock, one hour earlier than his normal rising time. Hitler was a little angry at being wakened early, but Jodl's presence convinced him that the signal must be important. Therefore, he smoothed back his dyed black hair and adjusted the gold-rimmed spectacles, in which it was a punishable offence to photograph the Greatest Captain of all Times, and read it. *"Mission accomplished. At exactly fifteen hundred hours on 21st August, 1942, Soldiers of the Alpine Corps planted flag on West summit of Mount Elbrus."*

His sallow, sickly face lit up. In that characteristic gesture of his, he raised his right knee under his nightgown and slapped his hand down hard upon it. "*Grossartig!*" he exploded. "*Grossartig*, Jodl!"

"*Jawohl, mein Führer*," the pale-faced Chief-of-Staff agreed dutifully.

"Now indeed the world will know just what we Germans can do," Hitler cried exuberantly, pacing the bedroom in his ankle-length cotton nightgown, message clutched in his hand as if it were very precious. "In the midst of war, our brave soldiers have conquered their greatest mountain. That will show them, friend and foe, that nobody and nothing can stop the German soldier." He paused in mid-stride. "Bring them back," he snapped dramatically. "Bring them back to Berlin!"

"Bring back whom, *mein Führer*?"

"The men who conquered Elbrus, I want to shake each and every one of them by the hand personally. It will be a personal triumph for my brave Bavarians and Austrians of Dietl's Alpine Corps."

"*Jawohl, mein Führer*," Jodl answered, and went out to prepare the movement order, telling himself that he hoped he would have nothing to do with the Southern German mountain-hoppers and their cousins from Austria. Mountaineers always seemed to smell so dreadfully of serge, sweat and the mule-shit which they invariably seemed to collect on their big boots...

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Thus the survivors left the mountains: first by mule, then by truck, until finally, after a week of infinitely slow progress, they reached the railhead, where the train which would take them to Berlin was already waiting for them in spite of the demands on transport being made by the new summer offensive.

Just before they embarked to the cheers and jeers and cries of envy of the fresh cannon-fodder going up to the front, Colonel Stuermer, his right hand heavily bandaged still, took one last look at Mount Elbrus, nearly a hundred kilometres away. Suddenly it emerged from a far cloud, drifting up against the dark velvet of early night sky, the starlight glittering coldly on its twin summits, looking as icy and as remote as a whore's heart.

"*Alles einsteigen!*" the red-capped guard yelled, and waved his metal disc. His whistle shrilled. The train's wheels shuddered. Steam hissed from the locomotive.

Across the way, the cannon-fodder jeered ever louder, knowing that men heading for Berlin would be saved, while they were bound to die on the remote steppe. "*Alles einsteigen... der Zug fahrt ab?*"

"I shall never see Elbrus again," Stuermer whispered to himself, as Greul closed the door of their compartment, "and I don't want to." The train began its long journey to Berlin.

ENVOI

It was 'Führer weather'.

The sky over Berlin was a perfect, cloudless blue, the sun a bright yellow hell, its heat eased a little by the faint wind which blew tiny dust-devils around the elegant riding boots of the generals and the fashionable hems of their ladies' dresses where they stood behind the rope which marked the edge of the parade ground.

All Berlin was there, high Party officials in the chocolate brown uniforms, the elegant senior officers of the Greater General Staff, representatives of the leadership of the youth movements – the Association of German Maidens, Beauty and Belief, the Young Folk, the ambassadors of Germany's allies, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, Finland. Even the Japanese Ambassador, that bespectacled, grinning, honorary Aryan, had turned up to welcome the heroes.

In the middle of the square, the battalion of the 9th Berlin Guards Battalion, every man of them a giant, looking immaculate in their pressed, be-medalled tunics, contrasted strongly with the handful of mountain troops, bronzed and tough-looking, yet awkward and out of place in their brand new, ill-fitting uniforms. In the midst of that great, smart assembly, the 'Heroes of Mount Elbrus', as the Ministry of Propaganda had been calling them these last few days, looked distinctly out of place.

But not all of them were awed by their surroundings. Major Greul was thinking, *it will be an honour that my grandchildren will recall. They will say, "Once Grandfather actually touched the Führer's hand – he really did!"*

Colonel Stuermer, on the other hand, was telling himself, *What if I threw his damned medal in his face? What would the Greatest Captain of all Time make of it?*

Ox-Jo's thoughts were less idealistic. His wicked Bavarian eyes were roaming the front ranks of the youth movements, quickly eliminating the ugly, frumpish 'folk comrades' of the Beauty and Belief movement – *all belief and no beauty*, he told himself scornfully – and fastened onto a particularly well-endowed member of the Association of German Maidens.

He jabbed Jap in the ribs, "Get a load of them lungs, ape-turd. By the Great Joker and all his triangles, I'd like to put–"

"*Stillgestanden!*" the hoarse voice of the Guards Battalion Commander cut into his words.

The Guards snapped to attention, their gleaming black boots raising a cloud of dust as the steel-shod heels smashed to the ground. To their rear, the band crashed into the Deutschlandlied in a flash of silver and gold.

In the same moment that the last note of the anthem had died away, the hoarse voice of the Guards Commander shrieked, "Present – *arms!*"

As one, eight hundred pairs of arms completed the intricate drill movement, the slaps of the hard hands against the oiled stocks of the rifles coming in well-drilled unison, a thrilled Major Greul was standing rigidly to attention, his right hand glued to his peaked cap, eyes fixed in fanatic fascination on the well-known, well-beloved figure advancing towards Stormtroop Edelweiss. Dwarfed as he was by his elegant, huge, black-uniformed SS adjutants and bodyguard, there was no mistaking him. It was the Führer!

The band broke into the Führer's favourite march, der Badenweiler, as he presented the first medal, the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross to Stuermer, taking, as was his custom, Stuermer's right hand in both his after the presentation.

Stuermer did not hear the Leader's words. He was remembering the sense of destiny which had once been the mainspring of his life. Now after all its triumphs and tragedies, it appeared he had lived it only to become this man's instrument: to conquer great mountains in order to further the vulgar, brown dream of this little, sallow-faced, pudgy Austrian.

"You will eat with me this evening, my dear colonel," Stuermer heard the words, as if they were coming from a great distance, "I have a bold new project for you and your brave men," and the Greatest Captain of all Times was passing down the row to Major Greul.

One by one they all received the various forms of the simple black and white cross, then the band was playing the Fredericus Rex march, the Guards Battalion was goose-stepping past the saluting base in perfect, mechanical unison, raising great clouds of dust, and that elegant assembly was clapping and cheering and crowding around the handful of shabby mountaineers. Colonel Stuermer stood looking down numbly at the medal hanging from its red and white ribbon from his neck, not hearing the congratulations raining in on him from all sides, not feeling the colonels and generals pumping his hand, not seeing the flash of the cameras of the men from the Ministry of

Propaganda. All that enthusiasm, that human determination, that self sacrifice – and hadn't that Russian woman been possessed of the same qualities that made mountaineers a different breed? – for this. A cheap piece of metal around one's neck. With sudden determination, Colonel Stuermer pulled the bauble from his neck and stuffed it in his pocket. He must get away from this mob and take a drink to wash the unpleasant taste out of his mouth.

***

Ox-Jo and Jap were in their element.

The General's wife, who had kept calling them 'my dear, brave boys' and had fumbled with Ox-Jo's flies in the lift, had vanished into the elegant throng; but it didn't worry them. Everywhere the upper-class, expensive room tinkled with medals, champagne glasses, chandeliers; even the tall languorous women, who were everywhere in their afternoon gowns, seemed to the awed soldiers to tinkle, as they moved in that slow way of the rich, who knew that they could buy even time with money.

"Devil and a tit!" Ox-Jo exclaimed to his companion, who was feasting his eyes on the mass of powdered bosoms all around him, roughly at the level of his nose. "All you need is the band of the SS Leibstandarte and yer'd feel they wanted yer to come, Jap!"

"I'm coming already!" Jap whispered in awe, "I've had ten pairs of knockers pushed in my mug in the last hour. I'll swear one of those girls just put her nipple in my mouth a minute ago."

"Shouldn't walk around with yer snout open," Ox-Jo commented. "Yer can catch a cold that way. Come on, let's get our paws on all that lovely grub – and I don't mean the smoked salmon sandwiches."

But the two NCOs didn't get far. A tall emaciated woman with dark circles under her eyes, who had once been very beautiful and who was wearing what appeared to be a negligée trimmed with ostrich feathers, put a restraining hand on Ox-Jo's sleeve and giggled, "The mountain-boys have come down from the hills then." She giggled again. "You want champers, or do you backwoods men prefer beer?" She indicated the tableful of drinks behind her. "Always the best place to be at these affairs."

"Champagne!" the two NCOs said in unison.

The woman handed them a bottle each and shrieked with laughter when they popped the corks and sent a stream of foaming wine high into the air.

"How symbolic!" she cried to someone else in the thick, sweating throng that smelled of power and expensive perfume. "I bet that's the way it is with you mountain boys. Go on, don't bother about glasses. Take it straight from the bottle. *Prost!*"

"*Prost!*"

Delicately, his little finger curled, as if he were drinking tea from a fragile piece or porcelain, Ox-Jo took a tiny sip of the bubbling wine and said out of the side of his mouth, "Make dust, owl shit, she's mine."

"Make dust yersen," Jap snarled back, and beamed at the woman. "She's just my collar size! How good of you to offer us a drink and your excellent company, my dear countess," he said without a trace of his normal thick Munich accent.

Ox-Jo's mouth fell open stupidly.

"Not countess, just a common-or-garden baroness," the woman replied, and filled her beer-mug with a mixture of champagne and cognac that would have felled an army mule. She downed halt of it in one go.

"For me, you are one of nature's aristocrats," Jap replied, sipping delicately at his champagne.

The baroness did not seem to hear. "I hate summer, you know," she said, apropos of nothing. "It plays hell with your hair, and the damned sun makes one feel so guilty about staying in bed most of the day." She downed the rest of the potent mixture and didn't even blink an eyelid. "You don't think it is a sin to stay in bed, do you?" She looked at them under fluttering lashes in mock innocence.

"Oh, no," Ox-Jo cried excitedly, finding his tongue at last. "Bed's always a good place to be."

"They say he who sleeps does not sin, my dear baroness," Jap said with his new-found gallantry, his wicked dark eyes darting a fast glance down the drunken woman's startlingly low-cut gown.

"All, but my dear little mountain-boy," she touched his wrinkled cheek in drunken affection. "I do love sin. It is the only thing which keeps one sane in this crazy world." Her eyes swept the brilliant assembly of Party members and military. "Don't you think?"

Jap was beside himself with excitement: nobody needed to send him a telegram for him to realise he was being given an open invitation. "Of course, my dear baroness, if we are talking about it in a medical sense, I am forced to agree." He grasped her pale hand, tipped with red nails, as if it were dripping

blood. "Would you like, gracious lady, to... *sin* with a poor common soldier?" He gulped.

"I have been waiting all this long dreary hot afternoon for someone to ask me that question. Come, my little mountaineer." She offered him her arm graciously. "I shall, show you some peaks that you have never seen before."

And thus they swept out, leaving an astonished Meier staring after them open-mouthed wondering just how the little half-breed had pulled it off.

So the men of Stormtroop Edelweiss spent their day in the capital, not seeing the cracks in the facade of the National Socialist 1,000 Year Reich – the yellow, half-starved faces of the shabby workers, the bitter, limbless ex-soldiers everywhere on their crutches, the bombed buildings and piles of brick rubble, the amateur prostitutes in widow's black at every street corner – not wanting to see the misery and the inevitable defeat; savouring greedily their time out of war in the drunken, whoring fashion of soldiers all over the world, knowing as they did so that the call to duty and violent, lethal action must come again soon enough.

Just how soon that would be, Colonel Stuermer, still sober in spite of his decision earlier in the day to get drunk, learned that night.

He had been unimpressed by the cheap neo-classic splendour of the new Reich Chancellory, where the dinner in their honour had been held; he had been unimpressed by the forced frugality of the evening – "We consume the same rations as the man at the front," the general, who was his table neighbour had whispered self-importantly, washing down his length of blood-sausage with a vintage burgundy; he had been unimpressed by the high-level talk on cosmic strategy, full of great armoured sweeps into the four corners of the earth, as if these were still the greatest days of May 1940 and not the autumn of 1942; and he had been unimpressed by the cheap, tawdry political designs of the golden pheasants who hoped to build on victories that had still to be won.

But Colonel Stuermer was impressed by the plan that Adolf Hider began to unfold to him and Greul in the sudden solitude of his study, once the guests had departed, full of drunken bonhomie, to return to their homes to eat a proper meal. At first Hitler had indulged himself in one of his typical rambling monologues, which eventually turned to the recent murder of *SS-Obergruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich.

"Men of his kind must know that murderers are always about, with one

idea only in their heads – assassination!" Hitler hissed the word. "Although that crook Churchill is drunk most of the day, when he is sober he will stop at nothing. Human life means that much to him." He clicked his fingers together sharply and Stuermer glanced swiftly at an entranced Greul, as if asking him what the devil the Führer was leading up to. "But two can play that particular game. In '39, the British Secret Service attempted to assassinate me. Now they have succeeded with Heydrich. My patience is exhausted. It is their turn now." He paused, wiped the flecks of foam from the corners of his mouth and looked curiously at the two officers.

"Meine Herren," he said, his voice suddenly very low, "the Abwehr has information that all three of them, that bloody murderer Stalin, the drunkard Churchill and the arch-Jew Roosevelt, are to meet together in the coming months, probably in the Persian capital Tehran." Adolf Hitler paused to let his words sink in. "Now, a handful of determined men *could* cover the thousands of kilometres over mountain and plain that separate the Persian capital from our lines in Russia and be waiting for these devils in human form, who are out to destroy our beloved Homeland, and then–"

"Then, my Führer?" Major Greul breathed, his eyes glittering fanatically.

"Then there will be a reckoning, a *great* reckoning..."

– THE END –

DEATH'S HEAD

DOGS OF WAR – VOLUME SIX

by Leo Kessler

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WOTAN II

C.W.

"So we National Socialists take up where we broke off six hundred years ago. We stop the endless German movement towards the south and west of Europe and turn our gaze towards the lands of the East... When we speak of new territory in Europe today we must think principally of Russia and her border vassal states. Destiny itself seems to wish to point out the way to us here... This colossal empire in the East is ripe for dissolution, and the end of the Jewish domination in Russia will also be the end of Russia as a state!"

Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*

BOOK 1 – WIR FAHREN GEGEN ENGEL-LAND!

"Our flag waves as we march along.
It is the emblem of the power of our Reich
And we can no longer endure
That the Englishman should laugh at it
So give me thy hand, thy fair white hand
Ere we sail away to conquer Eng-el-land!"

Marching Song, Autumn 1940.

CHAPTER 1

Fertigmachen!

The Vulture's thin nasal voice carried across the still water. There was a soft clatter of entrenching tools, gas mask cases, weapons as the men of SS Assault Battalion prepared to disembark.

"Heaven, arse and twine!" Sergeant Metzger cursed urgently. "Do you want the shitting Tommies to know we're here!" The engines of the motorboats had been stopped now. There was no sound save the sidling hiss of the wavelets at their bows and the tense breathing of the young troopers waiting for the order to move in the soft, September darkness.

Captain von Dodenburg, C.O. of the 1st Company, took a last glance at the steep, white cliffs in front of them – silent, harsh and infinitely menacing. Then he took a deep breath and dropped over the side of the boat, his pistol held high above his head. "After me," he hissed. One after another his men followed him in. Everywhere along the long line of requisitioned Belgian boats the other companies were doing the same.

Von Dodenburg stumbled forward, up to his waist in water. The white cliff ahead remained silent. The Tommies hadn't heard. The Captain quickened his pace. Once they had reached the top of those cliffs, nothing would be able to stop them. General Kurt Student's paras would follow, consolidate the bridgehead and hold it until the infantry came ashore. Thereafter, he knew, they'd make short work of the ninety kilometres to the enemy's capital. Thirty-six hours of fighting at the most and the Bolshevik-Jewish pack who ran the country would be fleeing for their precious lives and they'd be stringing up the fat, cigar-smoking prig who called himself prime minister from the nearest lamp post. The handsome, young SS officer felt the gravel crunching and rolling under his jackboots.

Behind him his men quickened their pace, weapons held high. Obviously they preferred to face the unknown dangers of the land ahead than be sitting ducks in the water. Von Dodenburg stumbled ashore. He was on enemy soil at last! All around him the men of the Wotan were coming ashore, stamping their big boots on the pebbles to force out the seawater. Von Dodenburg stared up at the cliffs. As the intelligence men had told them back at Calais, it had a retreating face and not a vertical one as it appeared to have

on the Luftwaffe photos.

Behind him Sergeant Schulze, the battalion's comedian, said in that unmistakable Hamburg accent of his, "I think I'll go back now, sir. I even get dizzy when I stand on a box."

"Knock it off, Schulze," von Dodenburg said without asperity. He knew that at moments like this, Schulze's remark helped to lower tension.

He grasped the first tussock on the cliff face. There was a slight shower of chalk rubble but when he put his full weight on it, it held. Almost parallel with him the Vulture was going up the cliff too, monocle jammed firmly in his eye, his one weapon the thin riding switch which he always carried. Together they clambered up swiftly. Towards the top, the chalk rubble was very loose. Once von Dodenburg slipped and hung precariously, fifty metres above the stony beach, his heart beating like a trip-hammer; then he regained his foot-hole and a few moments later he was over the top and lying full length in the grass, gasping for breath.

Nothing moved. A faint breeze rustled the grass, but that was the only sound. The men behind came scrambling over the edge of the cliff and flung themselves down, weapons at the ready. Von Dodenburg rose to his feet and, unslinging his machine pistol, doubled over to where the Vulture squatted with Lieutenant Schwarz, the CO of the 2nd Company.

"Everything all right, von Dodenburg?"

"Yessir."

"Good." Under the too large steel helmet the Battalion Commander wore all that von Dodenburg could make out was the great beak of a nose which had helped to give him his nick-name."I'll set up my command post here. You take the right flank, Schwarz the left. If you do bump into any resistance for God's sake don't bog down. Move, and move fast."

Schwarz's face contorted into a sneer. "What have the Tommies to stop us with? They ran like the rabbits they are at Dunkirk. They'll run again here."

"We shall see," the Vulture began. "Now –"

He stopped abruptly.

To their front a silver spurt of light rose in the night sky. "Freeze!" the Vulture yelled. For one long moment it bathed them in its icy white light, casting their shadows behind them in monstrous distortion.

A hoarse voice shouted the alarm in a language they couldn't understand. Another took up the cry. A red flare rose into the sky and a

machine gun began to chatter.

"Don't stand there waiting to be slaughtered," the Vulture cried, springing to his feet. "Attack!"

"Attack!" von Dodenburg echoed the cry. He fired a wild burst from the hip and rushed forward towards the enemy. A faster machine gun opened somewhere on the right flank. A line of troopers collapsed like marionettes in the hands of a puppet-master gone crazy. A heavy potato-masher grenade sailed through the air. The machine post disappeared in a vicious red ball of flame.

They hit the enemy's wire. Von Dodenburg found himself clawing frantically at the barbs. Schulze grabbed him and tugged hard. The wire gave. "Satchel charges!" von Dodenburg yelled. A trooper doubled forward, the heavy parcel of grenades tucked to his chest. Suddenly he screamed, flung up his arms and fell flat on his face. Another man doubled towards him, kicked the dying man round, and, tugging the parcel over his neck, doubled for the wire.

He dropped the charges and began to run for cover, but a burst caught him before he had gone five metres. He dropped with a strangled scream. Automatically von Dodenburg noted his name; his next-of-kin would receive the Iron Cross.

The explosion shattered the night into a thousand fiery splinters. The wire disappeared. They were up the next instant, charging through the gap.

They ran on. Behind them the sounds of the first skirmish began to die away. They'd broken through the first line of defence.

***

"Sir." It was Schulze, running at the head of about a dozen men he had collected from the disorganised 1st Company.

"Yes?"

"The stink... it's gas."

"What are you talking about?"

"Can't you smell it? It's every–"

He never completed the word. The next moment the field in front of them exploded in a great roar of red flame. The horizon erupted from end to end. They dropped instantly. In front of them some of the troopers were too slow. One broke away screaming, desperately seeking for some way of

putting out the flames.

"Over there – water!" Schulze screamed, his hands cupped around his mouth, trying to make himself heard above the roar.

The trooper followed his directions and flung himself in the shallow pool of water that lay just in front of them. But it was too late. Before their eyes he began to burn away in the wet mud.

His arm pressed across his face to shield it from the heat, the Vulture yelled, "Back! Everybody back!"

They needed no urging. The wall of flame was advancing, burning away everything in front of it. They began to run back the way they had come, clawing at each other in their panic, and stumbling over the bodies of the dead Home Guards.

From somewhere behind the fire screen an enemy mortar opened up. Mortar bombs began to fall in their midst. In his panic a man threw away his rifle. "Stop that!" von Dodenburg cried. "Pick up that weapon!" The man ignored him. Another followed his example, and another. The withdrawal was becoming a rout. He lowered his machine pistol and raced after the rest.

A man bolted past him, his eyes wild with fear, flames licking up about his body. Schulze grabbed at him but the panic-stricken trooper evaded his grasp. Before anyone could stop him, he had jumped over the edge of the cliff and his blood-curdling scream followed him to his death on the rocks below.

He wasn't alone. More and more men followed him. In vain Schwarz and the Vulture tried to stop the rout but they were swept aside by the stream of fleeing soldiers, as the wall of flames grew ever closer and the enemy mortar bombs rained down upon them. Von Dodenburg ducked as fist-sized pieces of red-hot metal hissed through the air about his head. Below the white foam swirled around the rocks, its colour now turned blood-red by the fiery flares bursting above them.

"The boats – the boats are going to leave us behind!" a voice screamed hysterically. Scores of SS men started to clamber down the cliff towards the dim outlines tossing on the waves. Schulze grabbed von Dodenburg by the arm. "Come on, sir," he yelled. "Let's get out of this shit!"

The young officer's eyes turned towards the wooden sign on the edge of the cliff. 'SOUTH CLIFF DOVER – SIX MILES!' "But we're running away," he shouted. "We can't!"

"We can, sir. Everybody is!"

Together they lowered themselves over the edge of the cliff. A body sailed over their heads and dropped like a hawk to its death, followed a second later by a great echoing scream that seemed to go on for ever. Frantically they clambered down, while above them the roaring flames teetered on the edge of the cliff.

Schulze dropped the last six metres or so and von Dodenburg followed suit. His legs felt as if they were being thrust up into his guts. Ignoring the pain, he pulled his Schmeisser and levelled it at the men around him. They were fighting and clawing at each other to get into the water. "Stand fast," he yelled at the top of his voice. "For God's sake – stand fast!"

They brushed past him, their eyes empty with fear, as they scrambled into the water and plunged towards the boats. Beside himself with rage, he lashed out at the nearest man with the butt of his machine pistol. "Get back... get back and fight, you rotten bastards," he screamed. "We've got to hold them. We've got..."

His words ended in a groan of pain. He had a momentary glimpse of a blinding light. Then his head was jerked back and his helmet slipped over his eyes. He sank to his knees in the cold water. He fell flat on his face and a blessed blackness overcame him. The long-planned invasion of England had failed even before it had started. What was left of the shattered SS Assault Battalion Wotan streamed back to the boats in panic-stricken defeat. Within minutes the sailors of the Kriegsmarine had the motor boats underway, leaving the burning beach to the dead and dying.

CHAPTER 2

The long, white room stank of ether, sweat and fear. The floor was greasy with blood where the two surgeons were working at a furious rate, the sweat pouring down their faces. Von Dodenburg twitched his head in an effort to shake away the darkness. A skewer of pain dug into the back of his right eye. He repressed a groan of agony. Carefully – very carefully – he turned his head.

There were wounded men everywhere. They lay in long lines right up to the door, naked save for their boots, their wounds exposed to the critical looks of the civilian nurses who were moving between the lines sorting out those who would need surgery first. Von Dodenburg turned his attention to the surgeons. The one nearest to him was working on the leg of a young blond trooper from his own company, vainly trying to stem the flow of blood which kept spurting out every time he removed his gloved fingers. In the end he gave up. "Hold his leg," he said to the bespectacled orderly.

On the table the young soldier groaned. Whether he had heard the surgeon's words or not, von Dodenburg did not know. But the surgeon did not give him a chance to protest. With two swift slashes he cut even deeper into the mangled limb. Blood swamped his fingers. He dropped the scalpel into the kidney-shaped tray at his side and picked up a small saw. The young soldier murmured something and tried to raise his head. With his free hand the surgeon pushed him back. He began to saw. Within a matter of seconds it was all over and the orderly was left holding the dripping leg in his hand. Von Dodenburg looked away. Suddenly he became aware of another smell than that of ether. Perfume. He opened his eyes, and looked up painfully. A pretty, young woman was staring down at him. The fact that he was completely naked did not seem to worry her. She bent down and he could see the white of her flesh above the tops of her black stockings. Her hand felt his head. It was cool, firm and capable. "Close your right eye please – now your left," she ordered in accented German. "Now turn your head." She straightened up and watched him curiously.

He did as she had ordered. His face contorted with pain.

"It hurts – yes?" she queried, but there was no compassion in her voice, just professional curiosity.

"Yes," he said through bloodied lips. "A lot. Back of my head. What hit me – a tank?"

"I see," she said, not answering his question. She bent down once more and again he could see the flesh above the stockings.

Out of her pocket she took a little bottle and a brush and painted the number '2' on his naked chest. "What does it mean, sister he asked.

"It means you will live to fight another day for your Führer. I hope the knowledge pleases you.

And with that she moved on to the next man, lying completely motionless on the floor, a yellow bandage over what had once been his genitals. Without a moment's hesitation she reached down and ripped it off. The man shot up and screamed with pain. At that same moment the male orderly who was following the nurse slid a long needle into von Dodenburg's arm and he slipped away once more into that long night full of frightening violet flames, horrified screams of fear and pain – and a thin white woman's hand, clasping a knife, which kept reaching out for his genitals.

***

"What an absolute ballsup!" the Vulture rasped, closing the door of von Dodenburg's hospital room behind him so that the civilian nurses outside in the corridor couldn't hear. "A complete, utter crock of crap." He put down the bottle of champagne he had brought with him and tossed his overlarge cap onto the bedside table angrily. "Virtually the whole battalion wiped out in ten minutes. You can take it from me, there'll be no sodding tin in this one for any of us."

Von Dodenburg stared up at his red-faced commanding officer. With his monocle and baggy, light-grey riding breeches, complete with broad leather inlet, there was no mistaking Major Geier for anything else but what he had once been – a regular Wehrmacht cavalry officer who had transferred to Himmler's Armed SS because promotion was quicker in the new formation.

"What were the casualties, sir?" he asked with unusual slowness. Although it was two weeks since he had been admitted to the commandeered Belgian civilian hospital, his head still hurt and any sudden exertion resulted in blinding headaches.

"They've classified it, naturally," the Vulture said sarcastically, stroking

his monstrous beak of a nose. "The powers-that-be obviously want to cover up. You'd think even those rear echelon stallions in Intelligence in Berlin would have tumbled to the fact that the Tommies would come up with some primitive weapon like that wall of burning gas. The casualties?" The Vulture gave a quick look at the door to check that it was really closed. "Half the battalion dead or seriously wounded. So we've got to start the whole shitty business all over again. It's heart-breaking."

Von Dodenburg nodded his head carefully. He knew that his CO was not concerned with the deaths; his sole concern with his men was for the promotions they could bring. Von Dodenburg thought of all the fine young men who had sailed so confidently from *Ostend* bellowing that song of triumph, *Wir Fahren Engel-land*. He bit his bottom lip sadly.

"It's no use looking like that," the Vulture said severely. "Nothing has been published about our failure, fortunately, and nothing will be. As far as the world will ever know, there never was a German attempt to invade England."

"But what about the British, sir?"

"That fat drunk Churchill is cunning," the Vulture said, almost in admiration. "He's been screaming out for Ami aid ever since we kicked the British out of Europe, and that Jew Roosevelt will only give him it if he thinks Britain is really seriously threatened by the Wehrmacht. So Churchill does not want to publicise the fact that his pathetic excuse for an army has been able to ward off a German invasion. But next time, I promise you things will be different."

"Next time, sir?"

"Yes. At the divisional conference yesterday General Dietrich let us into the secret. We are to be mechanised at once – heavy tanks. Mark IVs, I think. The next time we have a crack at the Tommies, we land in tanks."

Von Dodenburg's pale face lit up enthusiastically. "That's great news, sir," he breathed. In spite of the pain he sat up. Gently the Vulture placed his hand on the younger officer's shoulder and forced him down again on the pillow. "My dear boy, take it easy. The medics – cheap quacks as they are – tell me it will be another two weeks before you can return to duty. A complicated concussion or something. They probably don't know themselves what's wrong with you, but like the fakes they are they're throwing up a smokescreen of infallibility." He picked up his cap with its shining, silver death's head badge. "You rest as much as you can. I'll have need of you in the

weeks to come." He sighed. "Well, I suppose I'd better go and visit the men." He wrinkled up his great beak of nose in disgusted anticipation. "Are there many stomach wounds among them?"

"There are two in my company, I know that sir." The Vulture slapped his jackbooted leg with his riding cane. "How unfortunate. Stomach wounds do stink, don't they?" He touched his cane to the peak of his cap in salutation and was gone. Von Dodenburg frowned after him. He knew Geier had absolutely no feeling about his men; his sole concern was to become a general as his father had once been in the old Imperial Army. He wished the Major was not so transparent about it.

***

Simone Vannenberg, the Belgian nurse who had painted the number on his chest that first terrible night after the failed invasion, looked at him carefully. Her beautiful oval face was cold, contained and completely professional. But there was something about her eyes which was disconcerting, as if she were watching him for other than professional reasons. Suddenly she said, "Why are you looking at me like that, Captain von Dodenburg?"

"Like what?" he asked.

"As if you are trying to analyse me."

"I'm not trying to analyse you. I don't try to analyse pretty girls. I just like looking at them." He reached out a hand to take hers, but she slipped it away quickly.

"Then you must not look at me," she said coldly in her precise accented German. "I am your enemy, after all."

The grin vanished from his face. "What do you mean – your enemy?"

"I am a Belgian and I am not like those spineless traitors in Antwerp who have fallen over for the Germans. You have occupied my country; therefore you are my enemy."

"But we haven't really occupied you," he protested. "We've come here to set you free – free from the mediocrity of your past form of government. All small countries are doomed to be mediocre – look at the Swiss, for instance. Nov you are a member of the Greater German Community. Now things are different. Your people will have a chance to rise above the pettiness of their former existence. To be great!"

Simone did not answer. Instead she picked up his slops from under the

bed and poured them into her pail. She walked to the door. Von Dodenburg could not help noticing that she had a delightfully rounded figure. "And what if we don't want to be great?" she asked as she opened it, a little smile on her beautiful face. Von Dodenburg had no answer for her question. But as she closed the door behind her, he could not help thinking that she liked him a little.

***

Two days later he had confirmation of that belief. That afternoon a big, broad, well-remembered face poked itself round the door of his room and Schulze asked cheekily, using the old-fashioned impersonal form of address when speaking to officers: "Has Sergeant Schulze permission to enter the Gentleman Captain's room, sir?"

Von Dodenburg grinned. "Come on in, you damn rogue. I thought we'd lost you in Tommyland."

The big ex-docker from Hamburg squeezed his way through the narrow door, his shoulders as wide as the packing cases he had once handled in Hamburg's Free Port. "Old weeds never die, sir," he said, grinning all over his weathered face."Though for a while I thought the Tommies really had us by the knackers, I really did. And when you started back for the beach and I had to lay you out, I..."

"You what?"

"Lay you out, sir." Schulze held up his hand. "After that rock hit you on the nut, you started back the way we'd come, shouting your head off. I mean, I know most officers and gentlemen are a bit cracked in the upper storey, but that was going too far. So I clobbered you."

Von Dodenburg felt his jaw. "It feels like it." He indicated the bedside chair. "All right, sit down and tell me about the company."

"It's not good, sir. Another couple of the lads died this morning. That makes about forty died or posted away on account of serious wounds. One good thing, though, Metzger has gone to the Battalion. He's going to be the Regimental Sergeant Major. He got hit in the balls and that's the kind they always use to run things in the Army."

Von Dodenburg opened his mouth to protest. But Schulze did not give him a chance. He pulled out a bottle of clear spirits and two glasses which didn't look too clean. "Let's have a gargle with this, sir" he said, swiftly

pouring out two glasses. "Best Dutch *Genever*."

"Those glasses don't look too clean."

"Don't worry about that, sir. This stuff'll kill any germ – it'll probably take the lining off yer guts too. *Prost!*"

Obediently von Dodenburg tipped the fiery liquid down his throat. Schulze refilled his glass immediately and launched into the first of the jokes which had gained him the reputation of being the Battalion's comedian. "Do you know why it takes three stupid Polacks to fit a new light bulb, sir?"

"No, why?"

"Well, sir, they need one to hold the bulb and two others to turn him so he can screw it in..."

***

Three hours later the bottle was empty and Schulze was involved in a long and complicated story about circumcision. "Of course Jesus being a Jew had had it docked too. They say that the Pope keeps his foreskin in a silver jug on his bedside table in Rome, any Roman Candle will tell you that." Then the door opened and Simone Vannenberg came in.

"My God," she exclaimed. "What the devil's going on here?" Her eyes fell on the bottle of *Oude Maastricht*. "What are you trying to do, sergeant?" she challenged. "Trying to kill Captain von Dodenburg?"

He rose to his feet, swaying. "Only trying to cheer him up, miss. That's all. The cup that cheers – and all that."

"Get out!"

Schulze picked up his cap and let himself be pushed towards the door.

She turned to von Dodenburg. "And why are you giggling like a silly schoolgirl?" she snapped.

"At the way you look."

"The way I look! Don't you realise you could have a relapse drinking like that! God, Captain von Dodenburg, what a fool you are!"

She leaned forward to take the glass out of his hand and he grabbed her around the waist. "Let go," she commanded. He didn't. Still holding her tightly with his right arm, he ran his left hand up her skirt. It was something he had been wanting to do ever since the day he had been admitted to the hospital. "Stop it," she yelped. "I'll scream." But he tolerated no denial. He pressed her close to him, dragging her down on top of him, forcing his tongue

between her lips. She struggled wildly, her body writhing from side to side, her nails scratching his face.

He did not notice. His nostrils were full of her odour, natural and artificial. It made him crazy. His greedy fingers slid up beyond the black woollen stocking top. They touched the crisp knot of hair. Then something else – hot, wet and yielding.

Suddenly she went limp. Her struggling stopped. In triumph he flung back the bed cover. She did not attempt to stop him. "Don't be afraid," he gasped in a voice that was out of control, as he opened her legs.

"I'm not afraid –"

Her voice broke abruptly. She gave a little yelp of pain. Suddenly she was seized with an almost frightening, frenzied energy. Everything was forgotten – the war, the hospital, the fact that she had sworn to kill him and his like. The world was a crazy, hot, red frantic movement that threatened to destroy both of them.

Forty-eight hours later he was discharged from the hospital to return to SS Assault Battalion Wotan.

CHAPTER 3

It was a wet, grey, October day. A fine rain was being swept in from the North Sea and falling on the old Belgian cavalry barracks which housed the Wotan Battalion. But Sergeant Metzger, his face gleaming with damp, did not seem to notice the rain. He took up his position in front of the new draft from Germany, boots wide apart, chest and jaw thrust out, fleshy butcher's hands on his hips. It was a pose he had once seen in a film and one that he had practised many times in front of a full-length mirror since he had become an NCO. For another moment, he savoured it, apparently not noticing the four hundred pairs of anxious young eyes watching him expectantly.

Suddenly he sucked in a huge mouthful of air and yelled at the top of his voice, as if they were a thousand metres away from him and not a hundred. "Draft – draft, attention!"

Four hundred pairs of nailed jackboots crashed to attention, the sound echoing back and forth across the cobbled parade ground.

Metzger ran his eyes up and down their rigid ranks to check if any one of them was daring not to maintain the prescribed position of attention: fingers stretched down the sides of their field-grey pants, chin thrust out, eyes fixed woodenly on some distant horizon. But not one of the recruits deviated from the required norm. Disappointed that he couldn't 'make anyone to a sow', as he phrased it in the Sergeants' Mess, he bellowed, "Stand at ease – stand easy!"

Four hundred right feet shot out at the regulation angle as one. Someone coughed. In the rear rank a man broke wind.

Metzger's red face flushed crimson. "If I catch the man who made that obscene noise," he roared, "his shitty feet wont even touch the deck, do you understand that?"

"Yes, Sergeant-Major!" four hundred voices bellowed back. Metzger sniffed and relaxed a little. "My name is Butcher – a butcher by name, a butcher by training – and," he leered at them, "*a shitty butcher by inclination!* So remember that, you shitty green-beaks. One wrong move and I'll cut the eggs off you before you know that I've whipped them off." He clapped his big hand on his NCO's dagger as if to emphasize his point and let his words sink in.

"Now let's get this straight right from the start. You think you're trained infantry already. But you're wrong. As far as SS Assault Wotan is concerned, you're a lot of green-beaks, wet-tails, common stubble-hoppers, still wet behind the spoons. At this historic moment in your horrible lives, you don't know yer balls from a bayonet! Do you hear that – you don't know your balls from a bayonet! What don't you know?"

As one they roared back, "We don't know our balls from a bayonet!" Metzger sniffed, apparently a little mollified by their prompt reply. "Here then, you shitty green-beaks, you've got to start forgetting all you think you've learned up to now – that kind of crap is all right for common, or garden stubble-hoppers, but not for the Wotan. Here you start learning all over again. And woe betide any of you horrible wet tails, if you forget that for one single minute. You're the Führer's elite and in his infinite wisdom Adolf Hitler has appointed me personally to make a sow of any one of you crapheads who slips up. As soon as you can say 'piss up the kitchen bull's sleeve', I'll have you by the knackers and your shitty paddlefeet won't touch the deck on yer way to the guard house – don't you forget that."

"Yessir!" they yelled.

Slowly, he walked down the front rank, his pig eyes searching every gleaming young face suspiciously, as if each one concealed some form of dumb insolence. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the Vulture striding across the square, slapping his riding cane against his boots. He stamped to attention. In a voice thickened with years of cheap ten pfennig cigars and Korn, he bellowed at the top of his voice: "SS Assault Battalion Wotan – attention!"

Casually Major Geier touched his crop to the gleaming peak of his cap. Without preliminaries he began his set speech: "You men are the third draft I have received into this Battalion since 1939. A lot of good men have preceded you and have suffered a hero's death on the battlefields in the East and West. But this Battalion has survived its tremendous casualties. Why? Because this Battalion is more than each individual one of you. You may die in the months to come – you probably will. But when you are long forgotten, this Battalion will he remembered. Now you must learn to prove yourselves worthy of such a great unit, worthy to die for it. And you must do so quickly for again time is running out for us. There are great tasks ahead.

"Down!" he said suddenly, without a change of inflection in his voice. The young men obeyed without hesitation. As one they flung themselves on

the cobbles and lay there rigidly as they had been taught at the Armed SS training school outside Paderborn.

Geier did not speak for a moment. He let the chill penetrate their uniforms and the wetness soak into their bodies. "Do you feel it?" he yelled. "The coldness of death creeping into your bones Well, do you?" he raised his voice.

"Yes," they yelled back at him.

"Then savour it, for it will be the only rest you will ever have now that you have joined Wotan."

He stood there staring at their inert bodies, the rain dripping on their backs. His hard eyes fell on their buttocks outlined so temptingly by the tight wet material. He licked his lips and thought of other places and other young men – soft, shaven bodies of young men with plucked eyebrows, whom he met in the magic exciting shadows behind that station.

But as quickly as it had come he dismissed the vision. He shook his head. "It hurts me to see pain inflicted on you soldiers. But it must be done. Your first duty to me, the Battalion and the Führer is to learn how to bear pain and harden yourself for the great tasks to come. On your feet!"

Like the automatons they were already becoming, they rose – four hundred young men, the finest National Socialist Germany could produce, already dedicated to death.

The Vulture turned to the NCO. He snapped, "Take them away. Training must begin at once!"

***

Lieutenant Schwarz, his burned skin healing a bright pink and making his face look even more like that of the crazy man he was, drew his pistol out of its clumsy wooden holster and clicked off the safety. "On that hill up there," he lectured the draft, standing shivering in the cold wind, "there is a Tommy machine gun nest. They are armed with Brens, range four hundred metres – and accurate with it."

His eyes swept their ranks to check whether they had understood. Satisfied, he continued, "You could stroll towards that MG nest – like a bunch of shitty civilians, but you'd never make it and the only tin you'd win would be your first and last wound medal – in black." He touched his skinny chest as if to reassure himself that his own 'tin' – black wound medal, Iron

Cross, infantry close combat badge in bronze – was still there. "You could even run like those stubble-hoppers in the Wehrmacht. But we of the Armed SS do not do things like that. We crawl." He raised his thin voice suddenly. "*Down!*" he yelled.

They fell immediately.

Schwarz tapped the butt of his pistol to check whether the magazine was firmly in place. "In a moment I am going to give you the order to crawl. But to ensure that you do so, I shall be walking in front of you with this." He raised the pistol. "And I shall fire at anyone who raises his head higher than ten centimetres. Now – crawl!"

Faces lathered with sweat and white with strain, they came closer and closer to the top of the hill, its surface a greasy slippery mud-bath in the rain which had suddenly begun falling. To their front, Schwarz swung his eyes from left to right, pistol held at the ready, finger curled tightly round the trigger. Suddenly an exhausted boy, his uniform black with mud, eager to get it over with, raised his head above the prescribed limit. Schwarz did not hesitate. He aimed and fired in the same instant.

The boy screamed. He clapped his hand to his wounded shoulder, a look of utter disbelief in his eyes, as the blood began to seep through his fingers. Then he fell flat on his face in the mud, twenty metres from the top of the hill.

***

They clawed their way up the wet sandhills From the white-flecked sea the harsh north-easterly thrashed their exhausted faces with flying sand.

It was the third time they had practised a company attack and still the Butcher was not satisfied with it. "Come on you wet tails – you sacks of shit! Move it!" Waving from side to side like drunks, their shoulders bent under the forty kilos of stones their packs contained, they staggered up the hills, their breath coming as if from torn leather bellows.

"Can't you give 'em a rest, Metzger?" Schulze said. "They've had it. A few more minutes of this and you'll have 'em keeling over on you."

"Did I hear you say something, Sergeant Schulze?" Metzger asked with unnecessary formality. With any other NCO in the Battalion he would have swung round angrily and bellowed: "Did I hear you open your gap, you poxy tail you?" But he knew he couldn't do that with Schulze; Schulze had seen

him cowering with abject fear during the attack on Fort Eben-Emael. Schulze knew too much about him. He had to be treated with some respect.

"Yes, Sergeant-Major. I think they've had enough."

The Butcher creased his stupid face as if he were considering the statement seriously. "So you think they've had enough, Sergeant Schulze. Well, then, let us see what we can do about that?" He pulled out his whistle and blew a shrill blast on it. Then placing his hand on the top of his helmet, fingers outspread in the infantry signal of 'rally', he yelled: "All right, that's enough. Everyone back here."

Gasping and wheezing like asthmatic old men they stumbled down the hillsides and grouped themselves around Metzger. The Butcher beamed at them in fake friendliness. "Very good, lads," he said encouragingly. "We'll make soldiers of you, yet. Now then, off with them packs."

Groaning with relief, they removed the fur-backed packs and dumped the heavy loads in the sand. Here and there a boy worked his shoulders or thrust a sand-caked hand inside his tunic to rub the torn skin. But Schulze did not take his eyes off the Butcher. The big bastard was being a little bit too friendly.

"Sergeant Schulze here thinks you need a bit of a rest," the Butcher said with a false smile. "Perhaps he's right. So what I'm going to show you now will let you have a breather. Now let's say you're in a bit of trouble – a big, buck-teethed Englishman is charging at you with his bayonet. What do you do?"

Their exhausted faces remained blank of any other emotion save relief that they were no longer being forced to double up the hills.

"You don't know? Then I'll have to show you, won't I?" He pointed to a thin-faced boy with dark shadows under his eves."You – come at me as if you were rushing me with your side arm."

"Me, sir?"

"Yes, you sir," the Butcher mimicked his tone maliciously. "Come on, pretend you're going to stick your bayonet in my guts. Perhaps you'd like to do that in reality. Come on now – move."

The boy lumbered forward slowly, but Metzger stopped him before he'd gone a couple of metres. "Get back there and do it again. Too much of the old five-fingered widow – that's your trouble lad. It'll fall off in yer hand one of these days if you don't give it a rest."

The boy flushed hotly and the rest laughed dutifully; it always paid to

laugh when Sergeant Metzger thought he'd made a joke.

Metzger's grin vanished. "Now come on, lad, rush at me as if you wanted to stick it right through me!"

This time the thin-faced boy needed no urging. He rushed forward madly, his eyes suddenly gleaming with rage. just when it seemed the two of them would collide, the Butcher side-stepped with remarkable neatness for such a large man. His hand reached out and caught the boy below the belly. He jerked – hard.

The boy screamed in agony. The next instant he was doing a wild somersault to land heavily on his back, writhing in pain, his legs trampling the air.

"They tell me them Tommies don't have much to grab on to," the Butcher chortled, pleased with the effect of his trick. "They let the Yids dock it for them. But they've got enough for you lot to grab hold, believe you me." He turned his attention to the boy writhing in the sand. "Now come on," he snapped impatiently, "don't be so soft."

Schulze clenched his fists. He felt himself trembling all over with rage. As Metzger ordered them to put their packs on once more for another go at the sand hills, he promised himself that he would pay for this afternoon – tenfold.

***

As October gave way to November, the brutalisation continued – a systematic calculated planned brutalisation designed to turn the draft into cold-blooded, unthinking killers who seemed to have laid aside their code of morals as easily and as neatly as they had done their civilian suits now hanging underneath the roof of the 'clothing bull's' store.

Their hectic days, full of hoarse, bellowed commands, curses and cries of rage, were measured out in hastily smoked cigarettes, the greedily gobbled midday meal followed by the bottle of weak wartime Stella Artois beer, and the evening's furtive visit to the five-fingered widow in the solitude of the stinking wooden-seated thunder-boxes located at the end of each corridor.

Their nights were no different. They were full of sudden alarms and surprises. Thunder-flashes slung through the open windows of the barrack rooms and abrupt awakenings to the chatter of tracer stitching frightening patterns through the blackness outside. The NCOs hinging open the doors

and bellowing at the men sunk in exhausted sleep, "All right, hands off cocks – *masquerade!*" An order which would be followed by a crazed scramble into the prescribed uniform complete with necessary equipment, which would have to be changed for another one as soon as they had put it on. The choking gas grenades, followed by white smoke, flung in just before dawn and the panic-stricken fight for the door to be followed by a five kilometre run in their bare feet, dressed as they were in their knee-length striped nightshirts.

Once they were marched into Ostend and told to fall out in the dingy cobbled street just behind the fishing harbour, with the hard-faced whores hanging half-naked out of the windows of the tall, dirty houses and Metzger, hands on his big hips, shouting, "You've ten minutes to get the dirty water off yer chests. Have paybooks, five marks and your Parisians ready. Virgins – only four marks." And under the hard contemptuous eyes of the 'chain dogs' they had made love as if it were a military manoeuvre.

In the second week of November Captain von Dodenburg and a small group of selected men from what was left of the original battalion were sent to the Ford Works at Cologne to pick up the new Mark IVs and be trained in driving them.

Six days later they returned, bringing with them the squat gleaming new vehicles, the skeleton key of the Adolf Hitler Bodyguard Division painted on their rears near the twin exhausts. Proudly the six tanks with their monstrous 75-mm guns rattled from the nearest railhead at Bruges into the barracks, to he surrounded by a crowd of curious young soldiers.

"Look at that 75mm," someone said enthusiastically. "Wait till the Tommies see it – they'll fill their breeches as soon as we get oft the boats!"

"Not off the boats," a familiar voice said behind them. They stiffened to attention. On the lead tank Captain von Dodenburg touched his cap in salute. The Vulture raised his cane in acknowledgement, then he brought it down hard on the side of the nearest Mark IV. "These beauties won't come off the boats when we strike against the English," he said. "But out of the water." Chuckling, he passed on, leaving them standing woodenly at attention, mouths open in surprise and bewilderment. "Out of the water?" someone said. "What's he mean by that?"

***

But for the time being most of the Wotan Battalion had to remain in the dark

about the real purpose of the new tanks. During the next few days, which brought the first snow of the winter of 1940, von Dodenburg concentrated on demonstrating to them how to take the 30-ton monsters up and down steep banks.

Every morning, with the snow falling softly on his shoulders as he stood high above them in the turret of the demonstration tank, and a fresh driver in the seat at his feet, he would say: "Behind you you will see a bank. It's about six metres high. Beyond it there is a steep ditch and a similarly high bank. Your problem is to get up, down and up once more without stalling the engine." He would let the information sink in and then add: "If you do, your next-of-kin will no doubt receive the telegram concerning your 'hero's death' within twenty-four hours."

At that the young soldiers would smile wanly, their minds full of the frightening vision of a tank falling on top of them and crushing the life out of them.

The Mark IV would lumber forward, with the wind tearing at its goggles. Up and then down, rushing for the bottom with a feeling of wonderful exhilaration until the driver realised he would have to get up the other slope.

The engine would grow more laboured. The black knob on the gear lever would rise in the driver's anxious eye until it seemed to fill the driving compartment. Von Dodenburg in the turret would let the trainee sweat a little and then when it appeared that the tank engine would stall at any moment, and hurl them all to their deaths, he would order: "Keep your foot hard down on the throttle, driver. Bang the clutch out twice. Quick now! And at the same time – the gear lever right across the gate! Rush it!"

For a moment there would be an anxious silence broken only by the breathing of the young driver coming over the intercom before the engine would burst into a firm-throated roar once again and the tank would press forward smoothly up the hill without a single falter.

By the first week of December every man in the Battalion had gone through the frightening experience without a single casualty, save for one young soldier whose bowels had failed him in the middle of the change down. Thereafter the tanks were driven into the workshops for the next stage in the preparations which mystified most of the Battalion.

Under von Dodenburg's supervision the Mark IVs' bellies were rasped clean and painted with an evil-smelling, colourless paint. Inspection plates

were sealed with a rubbery solution and long funnels fitted to the vehicles' twin exhausts. Yards of balloon fabric – and what looked like the inner tubes of a bicycle – were glued in position around the turret rings, the drivers' visors and the gun mountings.

As the rumours mounted inside the barracks, army experts came down from Brussels and sealed long cords of explosive charging under the balloon fabric. Wired by their skilled fingers, they were linked by electric detonators and the wires run to the tanks' right headlight sockets.

"You know why they've done that?" they whispered excitedly to each other that night as they stretched out gratefully in their high wooden bunks. "If we don't pull it off this time, we press the headlight switch – and boom! The tank goes up and the Tommies all around the sod – *and us too!* It's going to be a real old Ascension Day Operation this one!"

That night there were many of the new draft who slept very little indeed.

***

A week later they learned why Captain von Dodenburg had insisted that each of them should drive the Mark IV up and down the steep slope and the purpose of the lengthy session in the workshops. In the middle of a snowstorm they were driven across the Franco-Belgian border to be assembled on the sombre mud banks of the River Somme, shivering in the cold, their shoulders white with snow as they waited for the important guests to arrive from Paris.

In due course they were able to catch a brief glimpse of their divisional commander himself. "Old Sepp," the whisper went from mouth to mouth, "it's old Sepp himself." The burly swaggering divisional commander, who had been a tank corps sergeant himself in the old war, passed swiftly through their ranks, followed by his staff and the black-uniformed officers of the Death's Head Corps. He gave them a quick, toothy smile, his jaw stuck out as always, as if he were expecting someone to punch at it, and passed on to the hill from which he was going to observe the demonstration. He picked up his binoculars and focussed on the river. The Vulture spoke hurriedly into the microphone he was holding. Suddenly the river's surface was disturbed by a series of bubbles. A metal tube broke the surface. The gleaming black surface of a tank turret followed it. Like some mysterious prehistoric amphibian, the

Mark IV, a long metal tube protruding high above its turret, started to drive towards the bank. It hesitated for a fraction of a second. They could hear the crash of the gear lever being forced right across the gate. Then it started to mount the muddy bank, the water dripping from its belly in torrents. It breasted the bank. The right headlight flickered on and off swiftly, as if in signal.

In that same instant there was a soft plop. The rubber cap which covered the muzzle of the big overhanging Seventy-Five flew high in the air. Inside the turret the gunner let the air out of the balloon fabric. The tank lurched forward. Seconds later it skidded to a stop in the mud in front of Dietrich. Von Dodenburg opened the turret hatch and saluted the Commandant.

"Oh my aching arse," Schulze groaned on the bank, as the rest of the tanks came streaming out of the water. "Now they want us to become sodding submariners!"

CHAPTER 4

The blonde whore lowered herself over Schulze on the rumpled bed, her loose breasts dangling down in invitation. Wearily he pushed up his naked arm and thrust it between her naked legs. He felt the upper part of his hand brush against the warm, wet crease. But he did not stop there. He extended his long forefinger and poked it into the black whore who was kneeling behind the blonde one.

She groaned pleasurably.

He stifled a yawn; they had been at it all the long wet winter afternoon. He'd had enough, but he didn't want to offend them. For the two cans of coffee, three bottles of oil and a large slice of beef he had talked out of the kitchen bull, they'd really worked hard and given him a lot of pleasure.

"All right," he said to the black whore, raising his head slightly from the crumpled pillow, "put your hands on her tits."

The black whore, who was slightly cross-eyed, did so dutifully. Her tobacco-brown fingers sought and found the blonde's nipples. Eagerly she began to play with them. They flowered under her expert touch. The blonde, whose ample breasts contrasted with her bony ribs, giggled.

Satisfied that they were happily engaged with each other, Schulze withdrew his forefinger and wiped it on the bed sheet "Put it back." the black whore protested.

"What?" he asked.

"You *know* what, you bastard," she exclaimed.

"Don't you know that you can't call a member of the Greater German Wehrmacht that," he said mildly, watching them play with each other. "What would the Führer say? Bastard indeed!"

"Fuck the Führer," she retorted, squirming round so that the blonde could get at her lower body.

Schulze shook his head in mock sadness. "Have you no respect for the greatest captain of all times?"

The blonde whore bent down over his stomach, mouth open like a sparrow chick ready to receive food. Gently he pushed her head away. "No use, dear," he commented. "That particular bird wont be singing any more this afternoon."

The black whore took her hands off the blonde's nipples. They were very erect. "When the Tommies were here," she hinted darkly, "they didn't give up so easily, I can tell you."

"I'm not surprised," he said without rancour and yawned again. "Have you ever seen a flat-chested, buck-teethed Englishwoman? Well, I have. Legs permanently crossed that kind and a padlock on it as well, I bet. Those Tommies might have been saving up their dirty water for years. Now a handsome bloke like me..." He broke off suddenly.

From the next room there came a sharp crack, as if from a whip, followed by a stifled groan, which had a hint of pleasure about it. "What was that?" he asked.

The black whore reached out for a cigarette with her free hand and lit it with the same hand. "That'll be the pig, working up one of her dirty old men."

"What do you mean, working them up?"

She shrugged. "She's the punishment type. You know, flogs those old men who can't get their arm up without a bit of pain." He nodded.

"I think she likes beating 'em," the blonde girl said conversationally as the sounds from the next room intensified. She pulled a scornful face. "But God knows who would want to stick it in her. I wouldn't if I were a man, even with a rubber dick."

"You mean that she beats them to make them potent?" Schulze asked, his big brow creased in thought, as the idea began to form in his mind.

"Potent–" the black whore said scornfully. "That's a big word for a soldier, isn't it? You'll be telling me next that you once read a book."

"I'll be doing something else if you're not careful," he threatened in mock anger.

"That'll be the day."

He overlooked the remark. "Listen," he said as the sound of the beating rose in the next room. "I wonder if we could get the – er – Pig to take part in a little trick I'd like to play on a – a friend of mine?"

The plan appealed to the whores' sense of humour. When he had finished, both of them were giggling on the rumpled bed, completely intrigued by what appeared to them to be an ideal opportunity to score off a man. "This I must see," the black whore giggled, "the Pig and your friend. She'll really have the balls off him, believe you me. Stella here, she and me are in this business for the money. But the Pig, she's different."

"So it seems," Schulze said as a sudden scream rang out next door,

followed by silence, disturbed only by a soft blubbering. "Likes her work, doesn't she?"

He stood at the window and pulled on his underpants thoughtfully. Outside it was still snowing steadily. The cobbled backstreet was deserted save for a lone couple huddled in coats – a girl and a soldier, plodding silently side by side through the white flakes. As they turned the corner, Schulze caught a glimpse of the man's face. It was Captain von Dodenburg. He looked grim, but Schulze misunderstood the look. His face broke into a smile. His company commander was obviously out to get a bit of the other from the Belgian girl that afternoon. "And bed's the best place for anybody on a sodding miserable day like this," he told himself.

He changed his mind suddenly. He pulled at the buttons on his knee-length underpants and dropped them on the floor. "All right," he said to the two whores huddled together in the centre of the big bed, "move yer fat Belgian arses! I'm coming back in again."

***

The snow had changed to rain, a steady persistent dreary rain which dripped down the panes of the little window like tears. They sat opposite each other in the chill dark room, full of heavy overstuffed furniture, and listened to its sad drip-drip.

"Why did you come?" she asked, her beautiful face as cold and as inscrutably contained as it had been that first day in the hospital.

"Come? To see you." He attempted a smile but failed miserably.

"No," she said. "I don't mean that. I mean you Germans – why did you come here?"

"Because," he began confidently, then he saw the sudden look of contempt in her eyes. He shrugged. "I don't know – because it was part of the plan."

"Part of the plan! What does that mean? Cancer is part of the plan, consumption is part of the plan – and we accept it, eh?"

From outside there came the rattle of her mother preparing the coffee in the kitchen which smelled of raw chopped beef and onions like everything seemed to in Belgium.

Suddenly he saw Simone for what she was. She was not a white tormented body on the bed, her mouth open and gasping like a dying fish, the

sweat streaming down between her tiny taut breasts; she was a pale, hard face, naked of any other emotion but hate. And with the abruptness of a vision he knew there were others – many others – all over Europe like her. "You hate me, don't you?" he said tonelessly, as if he were asking about the weather.

"Yes, I hate you. But not as Kuno von Dodenburg, a man with whom I've slept three times. But as a German, a man belonging to a race which has taken over my country by force."

He rose to his feet. Very formally he said: "Then I shall go." She rose too. "I think it would he better." He gave her his hard hand. "I won't see you again," he said.

"No, I don't suppose you will." He could see her thin shoulders hunch as if she were having difficulty in finding the right words. Then she dropped them helplessly.

"I'll go to the door myself," he said. "Please say goodbye to your mother for me."

The door closed behind him and she was left standing there in the middle of the darkening room.

But not for long. There was an urgent tapping on the window. She swung round. It was Jean. He was soaked, in spite of the heavy raincoat he was wearing. Hurriedly she opened the catch and let him in. "Shit weather," he exclaimed and shook himself. But the rain had not dampened his spirits. His pale consumptive's face was filled with enthusiasm and his eyes blazed. He dug his hand in his pocket and pulled out a pistol. "Now what do you say to that?" he exclaimed. "Took it off some big pig of a German NCO only thirty minutes ago. It was like this, you see..."

He launched into an excited account of his attack on the German, the words tumbling out in hectic, short-winded gasps. He did not notice the tears in the girl's eyes.

***

The Vulture was crimson with rage.

"My God, Metzger, you the senior NCO in the Battalion and you go and let some fool of a Belgian hit you over the head and take your pistol! Don't you realise that this is a court-martial offence, man!"

The Butcher looked down at his CO miserably. Why the hell had he

ever gone to the knocking shop in the first place? None of the fat-arsed whores there could get it up for him anyway! He had told the MO that he had been hit in the balls at the landing, but that had been a lie. Ever since that great wall of violent flame had threatened to collapse on him something seemed to have gone out of him. He had seemed empty between the legs; and nothing seemed to be able to get his Peterman up again. And when the shitty-fat-arsed whore had failed to put any stiffener in it, she'd had the gall to laugh at him and call him her "poor little worm"! That to a man who in his prime had been keeping four women happy at one time, including a doctor's wife – and everybody knew that it took some to satisfy their itchy cracks. No wonder he hadn't heard the Belgic sneak up behind him and bang him over the back of the head.

"Well, Metzger?" the CO persisted. "How did it damn well happen? Come on man, you must have some explanation."

"He was a pretty big fellow, sir," Metzger lied. "I was just tying up my bandage which had come loose," he indicated his hand which was still festering from the burn he had received on the top of the cliff, "when he sneaked up."

"Are you sure there was only one of them?" Geier asked in heavy sarcasm. "In the most of the reports I've had on this score from the chain dogs this month, two men are mentioned. Or perhaps there were three involved," he added with a sneer.

Metzger blushed. "I don't know about that, sir," he mumbled.

Geier swung his leg over the cavalry saddle which he used as an office chair and stood up to face Metzger, who towered above him. "Listen Metzger, you did me a favour once and so I'm going to do the same for you."

About time, the Butcher thought miserably. *If I hadn't have kept my trap shut, you and your liking for pretty boys would have landed you in Dachau right smartish*.

"Thank you, sir. Good of you, sir," he said automatically.

"I'm not going to report the loss of your pistol. It so happens that I have a spare. You can count yourself lucky that I have. You can have it. But for Christ's sake, don't go wandering down the backstreets late at night again." He adjusted his monocle more firmly. "What the devil were you doing there anyway? It was long after curfew."

Metzger hung his head like some great overgrown schoolboy found dipping his finger in the jampot. "It was that business on the cliff, sir. It

affected my sex life." He broke off suddenly.

Geier looked at him curiously. "What do you mean – affected your sex life?" The CO was interested in spite of himself.

"I can't get my Peterman up, sir."

"Can't get your Peterman up!" Geier echoed, just preventing himself from laughing at Metzger's hangdog look in time.

"Yes sir," he said miserably. "And I daren't go home on leave, sir, till I can. God knows what would happen if I did and my wife couldn't have her bit."

***

"Sergeant Metzger."

The Butcher turned miserably as he stepped out of Geier's office with the new pistol in his holster. Schulze was standing there, rigidly at attention like some shitty green-beak. "What do you want?" he asked morosely.

"I couldn't help overhearing what you said at the door inside the CO's office – trouble with getting your pecker up."

Metzger looked at him in silence for a moment. He was too downcast to 'make a sow' of the man for talking to a senior NCO like that and listening at keyholes. "So," he grunted.

"Forgive me for poking my nose into this, Sergeant Metzger," Schulze said, trying to prevent himself from laughing out loud in the Butcher's stupid face. "But I think I know someone who could help you to put a bit of lead in it."

Metzger shook his head and started pulling on his grey dress gloves. "Nobody can help me," he said miserably. "I've tried every knocking shop in the place and got my head bashed in for my pains." He adjusted his cap. "Nothing's going to help me any more."

Schulze held up his big hand to prevent him leaving the outer office, then laid it on Metzger's sleeve sympathetically. "Don't take it so hard. There are ways."

Metzger stared at him, his stupid red face a mixture of belief and disbelief. "They'd need a couple of splints and a suction cup to get my Peterman up these days."

"Don't you believe it, Sergeant-Major!" Schulze said. "I know one of them Belgic whores who can put a bone in an elephant's trunk. She even got

that fat bastard of the kitchen bull laid and everybody knows that he's not been able to get it up ever since he accidentally slashed his finger off when we were alerted for the Belgian campaign and he had to give up visiting the five-fingered widow."

"Him!" Metzger said incredulously.

"I'd gladly take you to meet this incredibly skilful lady."

A new light of hope crept into the Butcher's eyes. "You really mean that?"

"Of course."

The Butcher licked his lips. "Schulze," he stuttered, "I won't forget this, honest!"

You bet your life you won't, you bastard, Schulze thought to himself, but he didn't tell Metzger.

***

The downstairs of the brothel was thick with blue smoke and the steam from damp grey uniforms. A three-man band with litre mugs of beer beneath their chairs was playing *bal musette* music with energetic clashes on the cymbals and plenty of hefty bangs at the big drum. At the zinc-covered bar the silk-clad madame with frizzy dyed hair and rouged cheeks was watching her girls carefully, as they sat giggling on their German NCOs' laps, their skirts thrown back to reveal the customary black underwear that their clients expected from them.

Hesitantly Metzger followed Schulze through the big felt blackout curtain which covered the doorway.

"It's all right," the Hamburger reassured him. "NCOs only in here. I wouldn't take you into any trashy place. Once there was even a couple of officers in here when I was – *SS officers*."

"That's all right then," the Butcher said and followed him through the press towards the two whores Schulze had told him about.

"Where is she?" Schulze asked trying to keep his face straight.

"She's upstairs – ready and waiting," the black whore with the squint answered.

"Come oil then, what we waiting for?" Metzger said. He attempted a smile. "I'm going to be a glutton for punishment tonight." He rubbed his big hands in anticipation.

Schulze bit his lip; the stupid bastard had never said a truer word.

Together they went up the stairs and crossed the landing to her room. Metzger put his hand on the door to open it, hardly able to restrain his eagerness.

"I wouldn't do that," the blonde whore said. "I'd knock – she's very fussy."

"Oh, I see."

Metzger knocked and a deep voice, which sounded as if its owner was on sixty cigarettes a day, boomed: "Come on – I'm ready for you." Metzger turned to Schulze, his look of anticipation replaced by one of doubt. But the big Hamburger did not give him a chance to back out now. "In yer go, sir. It'll be like dipping yer wick in warm cream, believe you me."

Slightly reassured, Metzger opened the door and went in, followed by the other three.

The Pig was waiting for them in the middle of the dingy room, her head nearly touching the naked bulb. Schulze could not quite catch his gasp of surprise. She was enormous, half a head taller than he was himself. And he could see why she was called the Pig. Her face looked just like that of the sow his grandfather had kept out at his farm in Oststeinbek – save the sow had not possessed the well-developed jet-black moustache which adorned her face.

Metzger's mouth dropped open in awe as he looked up at her. His lips tried to form the words to express his amazement, but failed miserably. Mouth hanging open stupidly, his eyes ran down her enormous body: the upper half squeezed into a lace-fronted corset in black from which her tremendous breasts, like over-ripe melons, threatened to escape at any moment; the bottom, clad in gleaming black boots right up to her thighs. Suddenly they came to rest on the leather dog whip which hung down the side of her right boot. "What's tha... that?" he quavered.

The woman did not answer his question. "Is this him?" she asked the blonde whore in a gruff bass voice. "Is this the one for treatment?"

"Treatment!" Metzger whispered to Schulze."What's she mean – treatment?"

Schulze opened his mouth to reassure Butcher, but the Pig was quicker. "All right," she snapped in a voice that would have done credit to an Imperial Army drill sergeant, "you can go now and leave him to me. I'll take care of him." And to emphasise her point, she slapped the whip against the side of

her boot.

Hurriedly Schulze and the two whores made for the door. Metzger tried to do the same but the Pig was quicker. Her heavy muscular arm shot out, to reveal a thick tuft of black hair in her armpit, and grabbed him by the tunic. "*Hiergeblieben!*" she commanded. "We don't want to run out on the doctor when we've got this far, do we? We've got to learn how to take our medicine like a man."

With her booted foot she kicked the door closed. "Now then, let's have those trousers off for a start." As if in a daze, Sergeant Metzger began to unbutton his braces.

Schulze and his two friends, watching the beating through the voyeur holes in the wall, had to stuff their handkerchiefs in their mouths to prevent themselves screaming out loud with laughter. But they need not have worried that Metzger might hear. The Pig kept him far too busy polishing her boots, slashing his buttocks with her black whip and threatening him with even more dire punishment if he didn't "concentrate and stop being such a naughty boy!"

Finally, when her boots gleamed like mirrors and the Butcher's sweat-lathered back and buttocks were covered in angry weals, she ordered him to stop. Throwing her whip on to the sagging brass bed in disgust, she looked at him disdainfully and said gruffly: "Well, one can see that pitiful thing you've got down there is in a really bad way. It's not going to be easy at all." With an impatient gesture, she stuffed one monstrous breast which had escaped from her corset back inside. "Of course you realise you'll need more treatment."

Metzger mumbled incoherently.

"All right," she snapped, "you can get dressed now. Put the money on the bedside table and then run along. But I'll expect you back next week for more treatment." She picked up a chee-root and lit it, striking a match on the sole of her boot.

Metzger flew into his clothes. Not even waiting to finish his dressing, he flung the money on the bed and bolted down the stairs, buttoning up his flies as he went, as if the devil himself were after him. Crashing the door behind him, he fled into the night.

Schulze knew there would be no next time for 'treatment', but for a week he took a malicious pleasure in seeing the Butcher limp slowly and painfully on to the parade ground each morning "like somebody had stuck a metre rod up the fat bastard's arse," as the young soldier whose testicles

Metzger had twisted so cruelly remarked in the presence of his unknown benefactor.

CHAPTER 5

The big Mark IV waddled out of the sea. "Blow the insulation," von Dodenburg said over the intercom. The gunner flicked on the headlight and there was a soft plop. Von Dodenburg waited a moment, then pushed open the turret. A wave of cold air flooded the tank's interior, driving out the smell of burned Diesel. He breathed in gratefully, and swung round to check that the rest of the squadron was following him.

To his left he could see Schwarz's tank clear to the turret and Schulze's twenty-foot snorkel tube had just broken the surface of the water. The last exercise of the year had gone off completely successfully. Now the whole Battalion had completed its 'sea trials'. As the Vulture had commented the day before, "If Doenitz runs out of submarine crews, he knows where he can come looking for them."

"All right," he said to the driver, satisfied that the squadron was surfacing in good order, "take her up between those two big rocks and let's get back on..."

He broke off suddenly.

To his right a light winked, disappeared momentarily, then came on again. On instinct he kicked the driver on the right shoulder and yelled over the mike, "Head for that light over that big rock at two o'clock. I think somebody's watching us."

The driver crashed home a higher gear. The tank lumbered ashore in a shower of wet gravel. Churning up sand, it roared along the beach towards the unknown watcher.

Suddenly the man realised that he had been spotted and von Dodenburg saw him break cover and start running through the sand towards the coastal road.

"Step on it!" he yelled at the driver. "I want to find out what the bastard was doing here!" But the terrain was on the unknown civilian's side. He dodged in between the dripping boulders and it was difficult for the big tank to follow him without risking throwing a track.

"He's a smart bastard," the driver said to himself, sweating over his tiller bars, as he flung the tank from side to side to avoid the boulders. "He'll get away if we don't..." His thoughts were interrupted by the chatter of a

high-speed machine gun from behind them. Red and white tracer zipped across the beach and the fleeing man flung up his arms. He staggered another couple of steps, then fell flat on his face.

Schwarz's tank braked to a halt next to von Dodenburg and Schwarz stared at him with blank, crazy eyes.

"Have you gone off your shitty head?" von Dodenburg roared. "What the hell use is he to us dead?"

"He would have escaped," Schwarz said woodenly. "I had to kill him."

Von Dodenburg dismissed him with an angry wave of his hand. He knew no one would ever penetrate Schwarz's skull: he lived in a world of his own. He turned his attention to the dead civilian again. "Find anything, Schulze?" he said to the big Hamburger, who was kneeling at his side. "His identity card makes him out to be a Jean Goudsmit, student, but he must have thought the sword mightier than the pen," Schulze laughed.

"What do you mean?"

"This." Schulze held up a pistol, its butt wet with the dead man's blood. "Wehrmacht issue, sir."

Von Dodenburg took the Luger and looked at it curiously. It was the standard issue to senior NCOs and officers. "He's obviously one of those terrorists the British are paying to annoy us," he said.

"And look at these, sir!" It was the youth whose balls had been twisted by Metzger at the unarmed combat session. "I found them behind the boulder. He must have dropped them."

The young soldier handed him a pair of binoculars. "This is what must have reflected in the sun," von Dodenburg said to no one in particular. "Now why the devil was he watching us?"

Schulze pointed to the arrow, clearly engraved on the binoculars' side. "Tommy equipment, sir. The Tommies have that arrow on all their gear. I've seen it before." He took them out of von Dodenburg's hand. "And look at the date, sir."

"What about it?"

"It's August, 1940 – after we'd run the Tommies out of France."

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But in the bustle of preparations for the second Christmas of the war, the incident on the beach was forgotten and the Gestapo men and their colleagues

from the Abwehr's IIIF counter-intelligence who came to investigate it, disappeared on Christmas Eve without having made any new discoveries.

Christmas passed in an alcoholic haze. The Battalion was kept on alert status and only local leave was allowed. Schulze staggered off to his two whores, laden with bottles and half a side of beef he had managed to get out of the 'kitchen bulls', swearing that he wasn't going to get out of bed for three days. But most of the Wotan men spent the free days in the local pubs, getting steadily and deliberately drunk, gorging themselves with the extra rations which the Führer granted the whole of the Wehrmacht and snoring on their beds thereafter.

The Führer's traditional New Year speech was looked forward to with unusual expectancy, and many were expecting him to announce that the Army would have a real crack against the Tommies before the spring. Why else the intensive training with the amphibious tanks? And in the evening when the drunks had returned from the smoky local pubs, the barrack rooms would be loud with the drunken bawling of that proud song *Wir Fahren Gegen Engel-land*:

> "Our flag waves as we march along.
> It is an emblem of the power of our Reich
> And we can no longer endure
> That the Englishman should laugh at it
> So give me thy hand, thy fair white hand
> Ere we sail away to conquer Eng-el-land!"

But when the Führer's speech finally came it was strangely enigmatic. "It is the will of the democratic war makers and their Jewish capitalistic wire-pullers," he roared at the crowd in the Berlin Sportpalast, "that the war must be continued. We are ready!" he bellowed.

The huge audience exploded into a frenzied "Sieg Heil". The band of the Berlin Guard Battalion crashed into the Horst Wessel Lied, the anthem of the Movement. A thousand voices took it up.

Kuno von Dodenburg looked across the mess table at his companions. They too had been caught up in the excitement of it all.

Schwarz sprang to his feet, his face burning. He raised his glass of champagne to the third button of his tunic as military custom prescribed, elbow extended at a right angle to the glass. "Meine Herren," he said

exuberantly. "To the great German victory of the year to come!"

They flung back their chairs. Clicking their heels together excitedly they echoed his cry: "To the great German victory of the year to come!"

With a crash their champagne glasses shattered against the big marble fireplace.

Only the Vulture seemed not to share their enthusiasm. His eyes cynical and not a little contemptuous of such a display of emotion, he walked over and switched off the pear-shaped `People's Receiver'.

"I've always thought that the Horst Wessel Lied was such a vulgar tune," he said provocatively. "Deutschland über alles was good enough for the regular Army." He took his seat again. "Besides I'm told the Horst Wessel chap was a pimp, though," he added, "they too have their uses, so I'm told. Now he's the Party's greatest martyr."

They glared at him in silence. As party members and former Hitler Youth leaders, they had been brought up to regard the Horst Wessel Lied as almost holy; yet they knew they would lose if they took up the Vulture's challenge. Like his namesake he was a wily old bird, and few would dare, as he did, to call their divisional commander 'that ex-sergeant who directs our destiny – thanks to the protection of the greatest captain of all times' without running the risk of being dragged away by the Gestapo. Major Geier had powerful protectors in high places and both he and they knew it. So they held their peace.

"What did you think of the Führer's speech sir?" von Dodenburg asked, feeling that as senior officer he had to bridge the gap between his CO and the others. "Does it mean England in the spring – and victory?" The Vulture did not answer for a moment; finally he unscrewed his monocle and looked at them with mocking, cynical eyes. "One wonders," he said, "if the Führer of the Greater German Empire in his infinite wisdom, will be satisfied with such a puny prize. Just little England and then the war fizzles out like that!" He snapped his fingers together. "Why, gentlemen, I'm not even a colonel yet. Could the Führer do that to me? Surely he has greater plans for us all!"

"What do you mean, sir?"

But before the Vulture could answer, the first drunken chorus of Stille Nacht came floating across the frozen courtyard outside. The Major pushed back his chair and they all rose. "Gentlemen," he announced, "I think it is time to go and wish the men a Happy New Year."

Dutifully they trooped out into the night. Von Dodenburg looked up at

the black infinity of the sky and shivered slightly. Where would that sky see him on next New Year's Eve? As they stamped across the frozen snow towards the central dining hall, his face creased into a puzzled frown. What did the Vulture mean by even greater plans? Did he know something they didn't? And if so, what? Suddenly he shivered again. But this time it wasn't with the cold; it was with an uneasy feeling of apprehension.

***

"You buggers run after rumours like randy fifteen-year-olds after a bit of arse," Metzger said thickly. "You want to live for the day. Besides the Army doesn't pay the likes of you to think."

"Well who does it pay to think then, Sergeant Metzger?" Schulze asked cheekily. "You?"

Metzger, his cheeks almost crimson with beer and Korn, did not notice the sarcasm; he never did. "Naturally. That's why I'm this battalion's senior NCO – you might even say the most senior NCO in the whole Bodyguard – and you lot are ordinary hairy-arsed stubble-hoppers." He took another slug of Korn and followed it with a hearty drink of beer. "As far as you're concerned, you'll go where they send you and that's that."

"But we're going to England, aren't we?" someone asked.

"Yer," a blond youth next to Schulze said. "I've planned to dip mine in some English duchess' twat like you see in the pictures. Give her something to remember the SS by."

"A nice dose of clap perhaps?" suggested Schulze. The Butcher looked at the blond youth contemptuously. "You and your Tommy Duchess!" He took a deep gulp of his beer and poked a finger at the youth. "What do you know, eh? What about the fur jackets they've been delivering to those thieving storeroom 'clothing bulls' all week, what about them?" He swayed drunkenly and would have fallen if Schulze hadn't grabbed him.

"Metzger!"

He spun round. The Vulture looked at him menacingly. "Enough of that," the CO snapped.

"Yessir," the Butcher shouted and raised his glass. "Let's have a toast for the CO lads. And none of those heel taps. *Ex!*"

"*Ex!*" they roared back.

Korn followed Korn. A heavy, grey mist descended before Kuno von

Dodenburg's eyes through which he could vaguely make out the sweating faces around him. As a result it seemed natural that he should follow Schulze into the night after the latter had suggested with drunken formality: "Would the Captain have the goodness to come with me in order to indulge in some pleasure?"

The fresh air did nothing to clear his head. The thick blue haze of the brothel didn't help either; and later the events of that last night in the old year seemed to him in retrospect like the flickering vague pictures of an old newsreel: a huge old woman, who spoke neither German nor French, grabbing at his flies and in a frenzy of drunken passion flinging up her wide skirt to reveal the obscene folds of her belly and the shaven gash below; a younger woman in a soldier's cap and jackboot but otherwise naked, trying to do something with a banana to a giggling, drunken blonde; a girl – perhaps sixteen at the most – climbing on a squeaky brass bed on her hands and knees and wiggling her buttocks at him as he tried to get out of his clothes; and finally the last night of the year slipping away from him in the arms of the young girl.

It was a cold, grey New Year's morning and von Dodenburg, creeping out of the now silent brothel, felt dirty and unshaven. He took a deep breath and shivered. Then he set off briskly towards the barracks, his feet crunching over the frozen snow.

The little Flemish coastal town was still not awake and he wanted to get back to his quarters before anyone saw him. But he was not to do so. He had just turned into the Parklaan when he bumped into Simone as she trudged wearily through the snow, pushing her pre-war bicycle.

"You," he said stupidly.

"Kuno!"

"Happy New Year," he said, noticing how thin and pale she had grown since he had last seen her.

"The same to you, Kuno."

"You're out early," he remarked awkwardly, avoiding her eye.

"You too. I'm on early shift at the hospital."

"I see."

For a long moment they stood there in the snow, not knowing what to say to each other. Then she swung her leg over her saddle. "I must go," she said. "I'll be late otherwise."

"Of course. Goodbye, Simone."

"Goodbye, Kuno."

Her rusty chain squeaked in protest as she pedalled away, while he stared after her, feeling angry with himself for not having asked to see her again.

He had almost reached the barracks when he realised that hers was the only track on the surface of the fresh snow and that it ran out into the countryside beyond. He stopped and pushed back his cap in bewilderment. Simone had not come from her home – it was on the other side of the town. He stared at the lone track running through the snow and asked himself, not for the last time, where the hell she had come from.

CHAPTER 6

The first bullet whizzed through the window which splintered into a sudden spider's web. In the corner of the compartment a newly joined cadet-officer, from the Bad Toelz training school, clutched his throat. Without a sound he fell on his face across the seat opposite – dead.

"There's somebody out there shooting!" Schwartz shouted somewhat superfluously. Bullets were pattering against the side of the train, which was bringing them back from training on the Somme, like a heavy summer rain on a tin roof. Another sawed its way through and struck the nozzle of the fire extinguisher. As they struggled to draw their pistols, thick white foam spurted all over them. Frantically wiping the muck from his face, von Dodenburg let loose a burst from his machine pistol at the firs on the side of the incline up which the heavily laden troop train was climbing.

Ugly stabs of red answered him. He caught a glimpse of a hunched figure running awkwardly over the snow. He squeezed the trigger.

Suddenly there was a great heave. The wall of the compartment swung up in front of von Dodenburg and he was thrown off his feet into the confused mess of men and equipment on the foam-slippery floor, the fire extinguisher gurgling its last like a man with a throat wound.

"Get out – out everybody!" the Vulture ordered from the next compartment. "Take up defensive positions!"

They fought their way up the sloping, splintered floor of the wrecked train and dropped into the deep snow. Up ahead the locomotive reared up on its tender like a toy train derailed by some mischievous child, but the cries of pain from the shattered leading carriages were proof that this was no game.

A small round grenade came wobbling through the air. Von Dodenburg could see it quite clearly, black against the blue winter sky. He ducked and it exploded behind him with an ugly crump. Splinters hissed through the wrecked train and a man screamed in agony. He fired a wild burst into the trees and a civilian pitched forward out of a bush and lay still in the snow. Behind him a woman appeared and seemed about to run out to him but a pair of hands grabbed her and dragged her hack. In that split second von Dodenburg recognised her face.

All spirit drained out of him, as if he had suddenly been kicked in the

stomach and he let the Schmeisser drop. Behind him the Vulture yelled an order and nearly a hundred men opened fire as one. The volley struck the firs like a great wind. Twigs flew everywhere and suddenly the firs were flecked with white spots, where the bark had been chipped off, like the symptoms of some particularly unpleasant skin disease. A civilian staggered into the field, his hands held high in surrender. Schwarz ignored the gesture and let him have a burst. At once his face looked as if someone had thrown a handful of strawberry jam at it. He fell screaming.

Then the locomotive's boiler exploded and the firing from the firs stopped. The civilians were making good their escape, dragging their wounded with them. "Stop firing," the Vulture shouted, standing upright in spite of the fist-sized pieces of red-hot metal hissing through the air. He could have been on some peacetime firing range.

Now there was no sound save the groans of the wounded and the drip-drip of oil escaping from the carriages' ruptured axles. The troopers got up, rubbing the snow off their knees, but von Dodenburg remained where he was staring stupidly at the shattered firs from which the ambush had come. There was no doubt in his mind that it was Simone he had seen.

***

"I'd like to thank you for the tip, Captain," the fat Gestapo man said, without removing the cigar from his thick lips. "The woman had been in it from the start. The hospital was an ideal place for her. Fellows in hospital always talk to the nurses, don't they?" He relit his cigar with elaborate ceremony. "I believe," he said with the typical insinuation of cops the world over, "that you met her a couple of times?"

"Yes, she nursed me when I was wounded."

"Did she try to pump you?"

"With England three hours away, everybody here knew what we had been up to," von Dodenburg said curtly.

"I see." The Commissar made a careful note in his little black notebook. "I see." Then he clapped it to with an air of finality. "Well, that's that, Captain von Dodenburg. And once again many thanks for your help. Now we've got the lot of them, you'll have a bit of peace around here again while you train for – er – England." He smiled suddenly, as if at a private joke.

"And the woman?" von Dodenburg asked, ignoring the smile.

"The woman?" The fat Gestapo man stopped at the door. "Your Death's Head chaps are taking care of her for us."

"What do you mean?"

"At Henri Chapelle near Liège. They're going to shoot her on Thursday with the other two. Do you think I could get a rum grog at your mess? It's cold enough outside freeze the eggs off you!"

***

An old woman, with a shawl over her head, was pouring a pail of slops into the open gutter. A man in wooden clogs was chopping wood in the garden next door. A couple of middle-aged workmen, cigarettes glued to their bottom lips, heads buried in the collars of their shabby coats, stamped by in the snow. But none of the civilians took any notice of the German officers in their black dress uniforms getting out of the official cars.

"We're here for the spy thing," one of them said to the corporal standing in the red-and-white sentry box, his feet protected against the freezing cold by great felt boots.

"Through the gate and over there in the quadrangle, sir. Executions begin today at ten." He said the words as if he were announcing the next performance of the local cinema.

Silently they marched across the dirty square and on to a field. A fat captain in the Death's Head was waiting for them there. He was quite young and the only decoration he wore was the War Service Cross, second class. As if this were a social occasion, he shook their hands formally, asking them if they had had a good trip.

"I suppose you understand about the censorship regulations, gentlemen?" he asked. "No letters home. No reference to the executions in writing in any form. We don't want to make heroes of these people. Nor do we want to alarm our folk comrades back home in the Reich, do we?"

The officers from the Armed SS, picked from every battalion of the 'Bodyguard' to witness the executions, nodded and murmured their understanding.

"All right, shall we go?"

They walked to another field, rough and uneven with frozen footprints. Beyond the high barbed wire which bordered it, the ground dropped abruptly to a snow-filled valley. But their eyes were not on the valley; they were fixed

on the three posts in the middle of the field and the black-uniformed squad of Death's Head men smoking and chatting among themselves as if they were called on to carry out executions every day of their lives.

Von Dodenburg looked around, as if it were somehow important to imprint the place on his mind's eye. It was a landscape meant to die in – the ground harsh and barren, the grass thin and grey, the sky a leaden white, heralding more snow to come.

There was the sound of boots crunching over the frozen ground. He turned. It was Simone, deathly pale and clad in a grey prison overall. On either side of her walked two homely-looking Flemish boys, their hands hanging below the sleeves of their shabby jackets. They looked pathetic and there was no dignity in the manner of their last walk. The Death's Head Captain acknowledged the salutes of the guard as if they were on a parade ground, then directed that the prisoners should be tied to the posts. The guards moved quickly and efficiently – they had done this often enough before – while the three stared rigidly ahead like nineteenth century woodcuts of an execution.

An ancient Belgian padre in a rusty robe came out and mumbled a few words, a prayer book trembling in his skinny hands. "Hired killers," a young officer at von Dodenburg's side murmured, "why all the fuss? Should have shot them out of hand."

Von Dodenburg stared at Simone and remembered the perspiration streaming down between her breasts and the ecstatic contortions of her body. She would never do that again; she would never do anything again.

"Hab acht!" the Death's Head captain ordered.

The firing squad stiffened. He gave another command. The front rank dropped on one knee. The padre moved away.

"Take aim!" the fat Captain commanded.

"Fire!"

"*Vive la*..." The girl's cry was cut off by the volley.

She sagged against the rope and her hair tumbled down the side of her face.

BOOK 2 – OPERATION BARBAROSSA TOP SECRET

The Führer's Headquarters
18 December, 1940

"The German Armed Forces must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign before the end of the war against England. For this purpose the Army will have to employ all available units with the reservation that the occupied territories will have to he safeguarded against surprise attacks... Preparations are to be completed by 15th May, 1941. Great caution has to he exercised that the intention of an attack will not be recognized.

Adolf Hitler."

CHAPTER 7

For two days they had lain hidden in the Polish wood, two kilometres from the river. During the day there was little movement and they slept or played cards. Only after dusk were they allowed down to the stream to wash and collect the one warm meal of the day.

"Like a Hitler Youth summer camp, eh?" von Dodenburg said to Schulze.

"I wouldn't know, sir – I was in the Communist Youth myself."

Von Dodenburg smiled. "Well, it's a holiday anyway."

Schulze looked behind him at the tanks hidden in the trees. "No such thing in the Army, sir," he said. "Just when you think you're onto something good, the Army gets you by the short hairs and drags you back to reality. What do you think we're doing here, sir? You think we're going to have a crack at the Ivans?"

"I really don't know," von Dodenburg said slowly, for in truth he was just as puzzled as Schulze, and had been ever since they had been suddenly pulled out of Belgium, transported right across Germany at night and dumped here on the side of the River Bug opposite the Russian-held fortress of Brest-Litovsk, which had been in the hands of the Russian allies since Germany and the Soviet Union had split Poland up between them in September, 1939. I don't think we're going to attack the Popovs. More likely, Stalin is going to allow us to move troops through Russia to attack the Tommies round the back. Through Persia perhaps. I mean, think of those jerricans stacked on the tanks – ten twenty-litre cans per tank. You don't start a battle with that much gas strapped to your fighting vehicles, do you?"

"I'd like to believe you, sir, but I don't think that cunning old arsehole Stalin would buy that. He won't want anyone poking his nose behind his lines." Schulze indicated the general direction of the River Bug with a movement of his head.

"Who knows, Schulze? Let's just enjoy the sun and wait and see."

***

On the evening of 21 June, 1941, the mystery of their sudden move was

solved. The order was passed from platoon to platoon. "Battalion to fall in at twenty-two hundred hours in the large clearing... Battalion to fall in..." The rest of that evening was spent in excited chatter and some of the veterans of the Eben-Emael attack stripped off, washed all over and put on new underwear. When asked why, they answered grimly: "Gas gangrene if you're wounded." But the new draft only laughed at their serious looks.

It was dark when they assembled in the clearing. The Vulture strode into the centre, followed by his officers and switched on the little blue lamp attached to his tunic.

"Battalion," he rasped, "I shall now read to you an order from the Führer."

The coughing and shuffling stopped at once.

"Soldiers of the Eastern Front!" he read from the paper held in front of him.

"Soldiers of the Eastern Front!" the words struck them almost physically.

"At this moment, a build-up is in progress which has no equal in world history, either in extent or number. Allied with Finnish divisions, our comrades stand side by side with the victors of Narvik on the Arctic Sea in the North. You stand on the Eastern Front. In Romania, on the banks of the Prut, on the Danube, down to the shores of the Black Sea, German and Romanian troops stand side-by-side united under Head of State Antonescu. If this, the greatest front in world history, is now going into action, then it does so not only in order to create the necessary conditions for the final conclusion of this great war, or to protect the countries threatened at this moment, but in order to save the whole of European civilisation and culture.

"German soldiers! You are about to join battle, a hard and crucial battle. The destiny of Europe, the future of the German Reich, the existence of our nation, now lie in your hands alone. May the Almighty help us all in this struggle."

For what seemed a long time they stood there in silence. Finally Sergeant Schulze said, "Well, I'll go and piss up my sleeve!" But no one laughed.

***

The Vulture rubbed his monocle and looked around the circle of serious

young faces illuminated by the flickering light of the long-burning Hindenburg Candle inside the command tent.

"Gentlemen, I am sorry to have kept you in the dark for so long, but I didn't know our exact objective myself until the day before yesterday and that Sergeant who commands our destinies was also not informed of the Division's target until the beginning of last week." He grinned maliciously. "Though in his case, I doubt if it made any difference. Thank God he's got some capable staff officers."

The Vulture tapped a map pinned to the tent's wall. "You all know our position here at Pratulin opposite Brest-Litovsk. At zero four hundred hours precisely, Colonel-General Guderian's 2nd Panzer Group will cross the Bug here with the 12th and 18th Divisions and establish the bridgehead for the Group."

"And Wotan, sir?" Schwarz asked.

"Don't worry, Schwarz. You'll get all the action and as much tin as your chest will bear. We will cross the Bug thirty minutes before the two panzer divisions jump off, and protect them against any Red counter-attack. This is a tremendous honour for Wotan. We are to lead the attack. But it is not enough for my Battalion. We have not trained so long and so hard to play wet-nurse to a lot of stubble-hoppers. As soon as I am satisfied that there is no serious danger to the bridgehead, I intend to take the Battalion into the attack on Brest-Litovsk. The honour of capturing the place will not be left to those big-footed idiots of the 45th Infantry."

"But what of Colonel General Guderian, sir? Won't he object?"

"My dear von Dodenburg, I am surprised at you, a National Socialist officer, asking such a question." He grinned bleakly. "There are rules for the regular army and there are rules for the Armed SS. I shall obey the Army's rules as long as it suits me. Thereafter only those of the Armed SS count. You understand me, gentlemen?"

"*Jawohl!*"

"Good." The Vulture turned his head. "Metzger, bring the glasses."

Metzger entered at once, as if he had been waiting at the entrance to the tent for this command. He had too, his ear glued to the canvas, his stupid face contorted with ever-growing horror at the CO's disclosure of his plans and the frightening possibilities they raised.

The Vulture picked up a bottle from the trestle table.

"French, gentlemen." he said."If we are going to die this dawn, let us

have good liquor in our stomachs, not that rotgut the Führer has had the goodness to distribute to the men!"

***

It would soon be dawn. Already the darkness was beginning to break up on the horizon. Standing in the turret of his tank, von Dodenburg kept finding himself looking at the second hand of his wrist watch. Every minute he expected the Russians to open up with all they had and catch them completely exposed on the riverbank. Surely they must have learned that an army of three million men was about to attack them? Were they really asleep? Or were they waiting behind their machine guns on the stork-legged wooden towers that marked their side of the river? Would the crossing be one great massacre?

The minutes slipped by. The hands of von Dodenburg's watch showed 3:15. A faint white light had begun to streak the horizon. He could make out the tense faces of the young soldiers waiting all around him, their eyes fixed on the opposite river bank, as if with longing. Suddenly he noticed that one of them was not wearing his helmet. He opened his mouth to order him to put it on, but he never spoke the words. As though some invisible hand had thrown a gigantic power switch, a great flash of light split the sky. Behind them, four hundred guns fired with an earth-shaking roar. Closer at hand other weapons joined in. Mortars belched. Machine guns chattered. Red, white and green tracer stitched a flat pattern across the water. In front of the tanks, the waiting infantry fired their rifles. From the Russian positions, flares hushed into the sky, as the new war drew its first fiery breath.

The Vulture stretched himself to his full height and roared: "Let's go!"

"Lets go," the cry ran from tank to tank.

The Vulture waved his arm three times rapidly in the direction of the water, the cavalry signal for advance.

The turret flaps fell immediately. The tank engines coughed and burst into life. Streams of blue diesel smoke spurted out of their exhausts. With a rumble of tracks, the first one moved off. A second followed. The infantry lining the bank hurriedly got out of their way. In a long line the metal monsters waddled to the edge. Then the first one entered the water, shooting up gravel and mud behind it. Tank after tank followed, to disappear into the river. SS Assault Battalion Wotan was going to war again.

CHAPTER 8

The tanks moved towards the silent village like metal ducks waddling towards a pond. Against the dawn sky, it was outlined stark black, a collection of low, straw-roofed cottages grouped around a white-painted, onion-towered church. But in spite of the shells still crashing down behind it there was no sign of movement. Von Dodenburg, standing in the open turret, ran his eyes from one side of the village to the other. Was the place deserted or were the Ivans waiting for them to walk into a trap?

The Vulture must have thought so. His voice crackled over the air. "Sunray here... sunray here... swing to the left flank immediately... Do you read me?"

Then his words were drowned by the boom of metal striking metal. A hundred metres away one of his tanks came to a sudden halt. For a moment nothing seemed to happen. Then a searing flame leaped into the air and huge red-hot metal splinters flew in all directions.

The Russian infantry burst out of the village in a long brown line, yelling encouragement to each other.

Schwarz, leading 2nd Company, did not hesitate. As machine-gun bullets pattered against the sides of the tanks, he gave the signal for advance. His company rolled straight into the Russians. The first Mark IV hit the front rank and rolled right over them. A second and third plunged through the bloody paste. Over the intercom von Dodenburg heard someone give an involuntary scream of horror as Schwarz's tanks turned left and right and began working down the line, their treads stuck with the horrible remains. A bareheaded young Russian ran directly towards Schwarz's tank, waving his hands like a farmer trying to wave off a bull. But the iron bull was not to be deflected. Sticking unswervingly to its course, it bowled him over and then swivelled round, grinding his body to pulp under its metal treads.

Within a matter of seconds it was all over and the handful of survivors were streaming back the way they had come, throwing away their weapons as they ran. Behind them they left the dead and dying, their bodies crushed by the tanks.

But the Russian counter-attack was not over yet. The next moment the air was torn apart by the high-pitched whistle of an armour-piercing shell. A

tank in Schwarz's company came to a sudden stop. Its broken track flopped out in front of it like a crippled limb. Another shell hit it in the engine. Smoke started to pour from under the engine cowling and the crew baled out and pelted for the rear, with tracer stitching a vicious trail at their heels.

"Enemy tanks – one o'clock!" the Vulture's voice crackled over the air. "Fire at will!"

Von Dodenburg glanced through the periscope. Four T-34 tanks were rattling across the field towards them, their 75s directed at the invaders.

"One o'clock!" he yelled at the gunner, but the man had beaten him to it. He was already cranking the turret round to meet the new danger. Von Dodenburg grabbed an armour-piercing shell and thrust it into the breech. The gear lever shot up with a clang.

The gunner pressed his eye against the eyepiece. His fingers curled round the firing lever. "On target," he said.

"Fire!" von Dodenburg answered.

The gunner pulled the lever. The tank shuddered. The breech flew open and the cartridge case clattered to the floor. A wave of acrid smoke struck the young officer in the face but his eyes were glued to the periscope, watching the flat white trajectory of the armour piercing shell. It struck the glacis plate squarely in the middle and the shell bounced off like a ping pong ball. In the next moment another German AP shell did the same on another tank.

"Not the glacis plate," a voice yelled in over the air. It was Schulze. "It's no good. Try the engine – sprocket or something!" His voice was drowned by the eruption of his own gun. The shell struck the nearest T-34 in the rear sprocket and it stopped immediately like a boar hit behind the shoulder. But the other three came on, determined to attack in spite of the overwhelming odds. Von Dodenburg rammed home another shell. Again the Mark IV shuddered. This time they were luckier. The shell hit the second T-34 just beneath the turret. A series of explosions followed, ripping off the left track, and thick black smoke started to pour from it.

"Look out!" the driver roared.

Von Dodenburg caught a glimpse of a glowing, white armour-piercing shell heading straight at them. He ducked instinctively and the tank gave a great shudder. There was a frightening hiss of melting metal and the interior of the tank was suddenly full of the stink of burning cinders. The shell penetrated the turret, ran round the interior, tracing a deep furrow in the metal like a finger through butter and disappeared out of the other side.

Von Dodenburg shook himself. "Gunner," he said shakily. "Twelve o'clock – enemy tank!" He stopped short. The gunner hadn't moved. He grabbed at the man's shoulder and he fell back dead.

***

The rest of that first morning of the attack passed, for von Dodenburg, in a confused series of murderous episodes. A Russian field kitchen – a gulash canon – towed by four farm horses, disappearing in the explosion of one of his 75mm shells, with bits of horse, man and food slapping the sides of his tank; a dead Russian soldier pressed flat by the tracks of a tank; a burning *panje* cart with a peasant woman sprawled in its back, her legs thrown open in the shameless abandon of death; and flames, noise, screams everywhere. Just after noon, the Vulture ordered a general halt and they took up hull-down positions in a great semi-circle based on a low ridge while the officers ran across the field to where the Vulture crouched in a shell-hole.

Behind them an Ivan, in a dirty earth-brown uniform, was crouched on its rim, trembling all over, his lips moving continuously. Schwarz jerked a contemptuous thumb at him. "An officer – a red officer!" He wiped the oil off his face with the back of his sleeve. "Caught him hiding up the road next to that ruined barn."

The Vulture turned to Lieutenant Fick, CO of 3rd Company. "Fick," he said, "you speak Russki; see what you can get out of this Popov."

The young officer with the unfortunate name – a crude word for sexual intercourse – nodded and spoke to the Russian prisoner in halting Russian. For what seemed a long time, he could not make himself understood; but when Schwarz pulled out his knife, the terrified man started talking.

"Ask him where his battalion is," the Vulture said.

Suddenly the prisoner shut up, his lips pressed firmly together. Schwarz pushed Fick to one side and grabbed the Soviet officer by the hair. Yanking him forward, he thrust the blade of his knife under the prisoner's nose.

"Look at that," he hissed, his eyes gleaming. "If you don't talk, I'll use it on your filthy face!"

The Russian spat directly in Schwarz's face. Schwarz gave vent to a volley of obscenities and slashed his knife down on the prisoner's ear. The Russian gave a scream of agony as his ear flapped down against his neck and blood spurted out.

Schwarz wiped the spit from his face. "Tell him it'll be his nose next," he said.

Von Dodenburg felt the sweat start up all over his body. A man was being tortured to death in front of him and he was doing nothing. He bit his bottom lip.

"Well?" Schwarz threatened, after Fick had translated.

No more threats were needed. While the blood trickled down the side of his face unheeded, the Russian told them all they wanted to know. When he was squeezed dry, the Vulture nodded to Fick and made the gesture of working a trigger with his forefinger. Fick understood and as von Dodenburg gave his company the order to mount, there was a single shot from the direction of the shell-hole. Fick clambered out of the crater and ran towards his tank. He was alone.

But the brutality was unnecessary. Later that afternoon they met what was left of the dead officer's battalion – a long snake slowly winding its way down the dusty road towards them. The smell that came from them was terrible, like the stench of a long uncleaned animal cage.

They pulled over to one side and held their noses as the shaven-headed, stumbling Soviet prisoners came by, village dogs yelping and barking at their legs. But the guards of the 45th Infantry, who had taken them prisoner, did not need the dogs to herd the beaten Russians. Using their bayonets and rifle butts, they drove them to the rear. When one man broke out of line to urinate, he was beaten back. He could not contain himself and drenched the prisoner in front of him. The other man did not even turn.

"Look at that shitty-arsed Ivan – he's just pissed on his mate!" someone jeered.

"Shut your mouth and give your arse a chance," Schulze said. "Poor bastards!" Standing on the turret of von Dodenburg's tank, having taken over the post of the dead gunner after his own tank had been brewed up, he shook his head sadly.

"There are a lot of mothers' sons there who'll never see their mother again."

Von Dodenburg did not answer. Many of the prisoners looked like undernourished sixteen-year-olds; they would never survive the journey back to the Reich. He knew that Schulze was right; but he knew, too from his racial anthropology classes that the Russians were an inferior race. It would be better if they were wiped out completely.

A moment later one of the village dogs got under the feet of a 45th Infantryman. He kicked it and, as it ran off yelping, dispatched it with a shot from his pistol. Before the guards could react, the nearest Russians had broken ranks and were pulling the dying animal to pieces. They stuffed the bloody pieces of meat into their pockets as a kind of iron ration while the guards kicked them back into the slow moving column.

But von Dodenburg was not given time to dwell on the sight. The Vulture appeared behind the column, cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted, "Mount up – we're moving!"

"Where to, sir?"

"The bridge-head is secure." He grinned. "Colonel General Guderian is about to lose SS Assault Battalion Wotan. We're moving to Brest-Litovsk!"

Towards the end of the day their pace quickened. The Russians were surrendering in tremendous numbers pleading at the roadside to be taken prisoner. As they clattered into decrepit straw-roofed villages, elderly peasants and young girls in country costume came running out of the miserable little houses bearing the traditional peace offerings of vodka, bread and salt.

Kilometre after kilometre sped by. One of von Dodenburg's tanks broke a track and had to be abandoned; the Vulture would tolerate no stopping. They were even forced to relieve themselves over the edge of the turret.

At sunset they passed a large stone sign bearing the legend, deciphered with some difficulty, 'Brest-Litovsk – three versts'.

The Vulture stepped up the pace. The noise of the artillery duel grew in intensity and they started to pass evidence of severe fighting – knocked-out German half-tracks and self-propelled guns, their crews sprawled out among the ruins. In the cornfields rifles stuck into the earth by the muzzle with a German helmet decorating the butt indicated where an infantryman had met his death.

Suddenly the fields, which up to now had been so full of life, both Russian and German, were empty. They had reached the front. Von Dodenburg nudged Schulze and shouted above the noise of the tank's engine. "This is it!"

"Yes, I know, sir. Look up there."

Von Dodenburg peered in the direction indicated. Like a ship appearing suddenly out of a fog, a dark shape rose from the yellow-brown smoke of the artillery, to disappear again almost immediately. It was the citadel of Brest-

Litovsk.

***

"The place was built in the Middle Ages," the Vulture explained, tapping the model that Intelligence had sent up to them. "But as you can see, it has been extensively modernized and is quite formidable, even with modern weapons." The officers stared down at the model set out on the table of the village headman's cottage which Geier had taken over for his HQ that night.

The place was surrounded by moats and arms of the river, and artificial water courses had been used to subdivide the fortress into four small islands, covered by what looked like extensive anti-tank positions.

"What is the Russian strength?" von Dodenburg asked.

"According to Intelligence, they've got five regiments in the area – two of them equipped with artillery. But with their penchant for only being able to supply half-truths, the Intelligence stallions can't tell us whether that includes anti-tank weapons."

"I see."

"One thing is sure: Colonel-General Guderian, that great master of armoured warfare, does not think the place can be taken by tanks." The Vulture could not help sneering at any other commander than himself. "Hence the role assigned to the 4th Infantry. However, Colonel-General Guderian does not know Wotan. If we cannot use our tanks, then we shall revert to the infantry role. Understood?"

"Yessir," they said wearily.

"Good." He bent over the model again. "This is my plan then. Von Dodenburg and Schwarz will take the weight of the attack. Fick here with his third and Moewe with the fourth'll make a feigned attack to the centre and flank – there and there." He stabbed his dirty forefinger at the model. "I'm hoping the Russians will think our armour is attempting to by-pass the place, leaving it to the infantry to do the fighting."

"What about the infantry, sir?" Fick asked.

"The infantry?" the Vulture smiled cynically. "The infantry attack at dawn, start-lines, artillery softening up – the lot."

"And do we help them, sir?"

"Help them? Since when has the Armed SS concerned itself with the

infantry? We let them carry out their show and we do ours. It's up to them what they make of it. All I know is that I want this Battalion to be inside that Citadel by this time tomorrow. Understood?"

"Understood, sir."

"Good; you can dismiss."

They went out into the flickering darkness. Already the 45th's howitzers were beginning the softening-up for the attack, and the earth shook with the explosions. But they were too tired to notice; they sank down where they were and fell into an exhausted sleep. The first day of Barbarossa was over.

CHAPTER 9

The attack regiment of the 45th Infantry had broken. That was obvious. Hordes of panic-stricken soldiers were streaming back through Wotan's lines, their faces black with smoke.

A few Wotan officers tried to halt the rout, but the Vulture signalled them to stop. Contemptuously he said, "Gentlemen, please don't dirty your hands on that rabble. They aren't worth it."

"But they're German soldiers," von Dodenburg protested. We can't let German soldiers run away."

The Vulture looked at him cynically. "German infantry – indestructible, eh? Don't you believe it, my dear fellow. I've seen them run before and undoubtedly I will see them run again before I am awarded my general's stars and leave for the staff."

The battle for the Citadel was raging directly ahead. Russian artillery was raking the ruins of the 45th start-line like a monstrous plough, drowning the screams of the beaten infantry stampeding for the rear. The 4th attack regiment was being systematically slaughtered and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Half an hour later the German positions were completely overrun by Soviet infantry and the time had come for the enemy to counter-attack in force.

It was murderously hot. Buttoned up in their tanks they oozed sweat as they waited, their uniforms black with perspiration.

Still nothing had moved in the Russian positions. If it had not been for the dull red glow over the citadel, silhouetted against the grey sky, it might well have been a peaceful summer day with a thunderstorm in the offing. Von Dodenburg glanced at the sun. It was a dull copper colour. When the Russians had it directly behind them and glaring into the eyes of their opponents, they would attack. He licked his cracked parched lips. "What's your oil reading?" he asked the driver.

"Over two hundred, sir," the answer came back.

"Schulze – everything all right?"

"Sure. I'm bursting for a piss. I can't touch the sodding breech, it's that hot, and I've a funny feeling that we're not welcome here. Otherwise everything's all right, sir."

"Very funny," von Dodenburg said. "With such enthusiasm, you'll go far in the Armed SS."

Suddenly all the thoughts of Schulze vanished from his mind and the heat was forgotten. The Vulture's voice cracked over the radio. "Here they come... well in range... estimate figure one five or six."

Von Dodenburg pressed his eye to the periscope. A long arrowhead of T-34s was rattling towards them, their headlights full on, the storm clouds darkening the sky behind them and obscuring the sun. A flash of lightning split the sky, followed a moment later by a huge clap of thunder. The T-34s came on, apparently without a sound, the clatter of their tracks drowned by the wind that followed the thunder. Cramped in the hot turret, von Dodenburg swept the silent line of their advance. Ten... fifteen... twenty of them.

The radio had gone silent, but von Dodenburg knew that all of them were crouched with their eyes pressed to the rubber of the periscopes waiting for the command to fire. The T-34s grew closer and closer. He could see their squat outlines quite clearly and the red stars on their turrets. Their short-barrelled 75-mms were now beginning to move from side to side. The lightning crashed again. Heavy thunder rolled after it. The first spots of rain splashed against the turret. Still there was no command from the Vulture. The Battalion waited, hull down, as if they had been mesmerised by the heat and were no longer capable of movement. Then the Vulture's harsh voice was rasping, "Engage now... engage *Now!*"

As the storm broke upon them with a furious howl, the rain beating a thunderous tattoo on the turret, the T-34s' lights went out. They were replaced an instant later by others – ones which flickered a vicious violet as the first AP shells left the Russian guns.

"Schulze," yelled von Dodenburg above the roar of the rain, "traverse left." Schulze fired immediately. Fascinated, he watched as their shell hit the side of one of the T-34's and went soaring straight into the sky. Von Dodenburg slammed home another shell.

"Fire!" he roared.

To their right front a T-34 came to an abrupt halt, sank on its nose and bounced back. A sharp spike of flame stabbed out of the turret. It reared back on its hind sprockets, its nose lifting off the ground, as if it had been rocked by an internal explosion. Then suddenly it exploded outwards, the metal walls falling apart. Exploding tracer ammunition zig-zagged through the cloud of white smoke.

"We've got him!" the driver yelled. "Right up the arse!"

"Fire!"

Blinded by the curtain of water sweeping across the steppe, Schulze pulled the firing bar. Whether they were hitting the enemy or not, they didn't know. In that nightmarish howling darkness, shaken by titanic thunder, the sudden spurts of violet red flame might be lightning or the end of yet another enemy tank.

Inside the turret, the suction pump could not with draw the smoke quickly enough and they worked in a thick yellow fog, the brass cases falling in piles at their feet.

Once the wall of water cleared for an instant and a T-34 roared towards them, its driver as blinded as they were, Schulze fired first and the T-34's turret flew high into the air, as if it were a piece of paper. A cloud of escaping oil followed. Next instant, it exploded, spewing a lava of lead skywards against the crimson background of burning oil. Seconds later the blackness descended once more.

And then they were hit. A blinding white light exploded in the turret. There was a kind of breathless suction, and von Dodenburg could smell the stink of burning flesh and hair. A current of hot air whined through the hole which had been gouged in the side of the turret and the tank came to a halt.

Still blinded by the light, von Dodenburg felt himself being lifted by the armpits. His knee knocked against metal. He yelled in agony.

"Knock it off," a voice snapped. It was Schulze. Then he could feel the rain on his face. "You're on the side of the turret – drop to the ground – sharpish."

He could see it now. To his right something was burning furiously, throwing a blood-red hue over every thing. He jumped and sprawled awkwardly on all fours. Little tongues of angry yellow flame were beginning to shoot from his tank.

"Schulze," he screamed. "Jump for Christ's sake!"

"The driver – the sodding driver," Schulze screamed back. "I can't get the bastard out!"

"I'll help you." He tried to get up but his legs buckled beneath him. He crawled forward on his hands and knees, feeling the heat grow in intensity as the flames grew higher and higher.

"I've got hold of..." Schulze's cry ended in a gasp of horror. In his hands he held the driver's head.

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Metzger looked at the hard slab of Dauerwurst and the chunk of black army bread with bits of straw sticking out of it. Even the bottle of vodka he had in his pocket wouldn't make that very palatable. A soldier should be fed properly after a day's combat in which he had risked his life for the Folk, Fatherland and Führer.

Morosely he stared at the Vulture's back as he crouched at the radio set they had set up by the side of the tank. The CO, as usual, had forgotten that there was such a thing as the human stomach; he was too busy fighting the war, working for a precious piece of 'tin'.

A Russian shell howled over his head, but exploded harmlessly several metres away. By now the front was well ahead of them in the yellow haze that covered the battlefield. But Metzger had no eyes for the landscape of battle. His stomach rumbled ponderously and all he knew was that he was hungry.

He glanced at the Vulture who was still occupied with the radio. Swiftly Metzger calculated the risk. It would take him five minutes at the most to get down to the group of wooden farm buildings below. There'd be eggs there. Half a dozen fried eggs, mixed with the Dauerwurst and a couple of slugs of the vodka – that would be a meal fit for a soldier. His stomach did a back flip at the thought. Taking a chance he slipped out of his foxhole, walked over to the nearest bush as if he were going to take a leak and the next instant was off down the track to the farm.

Unslinging his machine pistol, his mind dwelt lovingly on a vision of frying eggs, broken here and there by the bits of the Dauerwurst, giving off a light fragrance of garlic. Besides, he told himself, in an attempt to dismiss the sneaking feeling that technically he had just deserted his post 'in the face of the enemy', "eggs is good for me. If I could get my hands on half a dozen eggs a day, I'd bet I'd have no more trouble with my Peterman. That's the real cause – I'm not getting enough proper fodder!" As he walked cautiously into the cluster of shacks, Made of rough wooden planks, he had a sudden memory of the old soldiers' pornographic postcard entitled the leavemen which showed a soldier coming on leave, pushing a wheelbarrow in front of him on which rested an enormous erect Peterman, while at the door of his home, his wife waited, her face flushed with excited anticipation. He

remembered how Lore, his wife, had been like that when he'd first married her. Of course she still liked her bit, but what would she say when she found that...

He broke oft his train of thought abruptly. The farm was not deserted. A fat woman was coming out of a cottage, a bucket in her red ham of a fist.

He jerked up his machine pistol. "You, Polack," he ordered, "where are the men?"

The woman smiled, revealing a mouthful of bad teeth, and said something unintelligible. "Men," he persisted. "Where men?" He grabbed the front of his pants and made an obscene gesture.

"Men, you understand, you stupid Polack sow."

The big woman came closer, smiling broadly now, making gestures he couldn't understand. Yet his eyes told him that she was alone in the farm; the Ivans had fled like the shitty-arsed cowards they were, as soon as they smelt the first whiff of German gunpowder.

"Eggs. I want eggs." He went through a dumb show of a chicken laying an egg. "Do you understand?"

She nodded and crooked a finger at him to follow, laughing and rolling her eyes at him. He followed her across the dirty farmyard. She stopped at a rickety wooden ladder propped against the side of an open barn. Again she made the sign for him to follow and pulling up her skirt started to climb the ladder which looked as if it would collapse at any moment under her weight.

He followed. Her vast buttocks seemed to fill the view. As she clambered into the barn, he caught a glimpse of her drawers. They were made of a loose woollen mixture, as if she had knitted them herself.

The woman scattered the scraggy white chickens with which the upper storey was filled. She bent down, giving him another close-up view of her enormous buttocks, and started picking up the eggs which were lying in the dirty straw, clucking all the time as if she were going to lay one herself.

When she had picked up a dozen she advanced on him, her stomach thrust out, her hands resting on it as she offered the eggs. Suddenly, before he could stop her, she had slipped a hand containing an egg deep into his pocket. He could feel its warmth through the cloth. Her face wore a look of bovine ecstasy. Her lips parted and she did not attempt to hide her blackened teeth.

"Hey," he protested angrily. "Give over!"

But she wouldn't give over. Her dark eyes rolling, she thrust another egg in his pocket. But this time she did not stop there. Her thick sausage

fingers grabbed him as if she were about to wield a rake handle.

With his free hand, he tried to push her away. "Get off, you Polack bitch," he yelled. "What the hell do you think that is – a sodding pump!"

But she wouldn't be pushed. She was clearly out to ravish him. There was a mad gleam in her eyes and her massive bosom was jerking back and forth excitedly as they swayed across the floor of the barn, scattering squawking chickens everywhere. The eggs broke and his pocket was filled with warm, wet egg. But still her fingers did not desist. With her free hand she was fumbling energetically with his flies, her breath coming in excited gasps.

And suddenly under her hard hands, Sergeant Metzger felt another hardening, one that he had not felt for many a month. His mouth fell open in awe. He stopped his struggling.

With a delighted chuckle, the big Polack ripped off his fly buttons and pulled it out, tugging at it as if she were drawing up a bucket from a well. With her free hand, she was pulling at something between her legs. The next moment the ancient woollen drawers had slipped about her ankles. She was ready for action. An amazed, awed Metzger looked down and saw that he was too. It was like in the old days.

"*Dobja...dobja!*"the big woman breathed hoarsely and suddenly sank down on the straw, her big, dirty-kneed legs falling apart in anticipation.

Metzger caught a glimpse of a thatch of black hair. He moved forward, carrying it to her in his hand as if it were a very precious gift. She adjusted her buttocks, preparing to take his weight. But it wasn't to be. At that moment a high-pitched voice broke into the rural idyll. "Metzger, what the devil do you think you are doing? We're supposed to be fighting a war, you may recall!"

It was the Vulture. Metzger looked down. The long-awaited erection had vanished as if it had never been there, while the fat Polack squirmed in the straw to cover up her charms like some teenage wallflower from a boarding school.

CHAPTER 10

Cautiously the survivors of the 1st Company advanced across a piece of ground so heavily pitted with shell holes that it was hard to imagine that anyone who had to defend it could have survived. The yellow mist parted momentarily and they could see the first artificial waterway, and beyond it the ruined landscape of Brest-Litovsk. The red spurts of flame told them that the fortress was holding out, but von Dodenburg could see no signs of the survivors of the 45th nor anything of Schwarz's 2nd Company which, he hoped, had broken through the line of T-34s.

They waded into the water. It was cold and dirty-red from the blood of the corpses floating in it. They knew they were sitting ducks if the Ivans caught them, but they reached the other side without a shot being fired. When they had clambered up on the top they saw why. It was littered with dead Russians and Germans. A couple of German half-tracks were burning steadily among the dead, their crews hanging out over the sides of the cabs. Von Dodenburg saw that they didn't bear the skeleton key divisional sign of the 'Bodyguard'. Where was Schwarz's 2nd Company?

There was a soft groan behind him. He swung round, to see a dying Russian was propped against a shattered gun wheel, a bloody stump where his right leg should have been. "*Voda,*" he croaked. "*Voda, Gospodin.*"

Schulze grabbed his water flask and went over to him. He bent down, but when the dying Russian saw the badge on his collar, his eyes grew wide with terror. "SS," he gasped. Then his head fell back against the iron wheel and he was dead.

Schulze stared down at him in bewilderment."What did I do" he asked. "I only wanted to help the sod."

"It's your big mug," someone offered. "You frightened the bastard to death, sarge."

"Hold your snout," von Dodenburg snapped.

They breasted a little rise, and a group of 2nd Company soldiers were huddled just below it, their eyes empty of any emotion save that of fear. "I ask you, sir," Schulze spat. "What the hell can we do with this hunch of green-beaks?" He swept his hand round the survivors of the 2nd Company. "Take 'em back to the lines? Gives us an excuse to get out of here too."

"I'm sure Lieutenant Schwartz has broken through. Knowing him he'll be in there somewhere." von Dodenburg nodded towards the faint signs of battle closer to Brest-Litovsk. "We've got to find him and link up. And as far as I'm concerned, I'm more scared of Major Geier than I am of the Russians. They can only kill us, Major Geier'll have the balls off us if we fail – with a blunt can-opener."

Schulze sniffed. "Well, don't say I didn't warn you, sir," he said darkly. Von Dodenburg overlooked the remark. He gave the infantry signal for advance. The survivors of his company spread out in a skirmish line on both sides of the dusty road that led to the Citadel, illuminated every now and again by the red flashes of the guns. Cautiously they began to advance, their weapons at the ready. But there was no sign of the enemy, save for the equipment they had thrown away in their headlong flight before the 45th's first surprise attack. The road and the fields on both sides were strewn with helmets, gas masks, long grey overcoats, capes, cooking pots, even round-barrelled Soviet tommy-guns. Yet von Dodenburg knew that not all the Russians ran away at the first sight of a German. The very determined T-34 counter-attack that morning had proved that. Their tactics might be stupid, reckless, even wasteful, but no one could deny that they were brave.

Almost instinctively he crouched lower at the thought. The movement saved his life. A bullet whined past his head and ricocheted off the side of shattered tank behind him. Von Dodenburg spun round, aimed and fired at the same moment. The bullets tore the leaves of a tree. Someone screamed and a dark green shape tumbled through the branches and crashed to the ground, raising a sudden cloud of dust.

"Hit the dirt!" von Dodenburg yelled.

They dropped as one. "Schulze to me," von Dodenburg yelled from the ground, his eyes searching their front for other snipers. Schulze scurried towards him and flung himself down. Somewhere he had found a haversack of German grenades and held a potato masher in his right hand. "Spotted you as an officer and a gentleman straight off, didn't they?" he gasped. "Not bad for sub-humans."

"Yes, you're right, the Russians are not as stupid as the people back home like to think. Cover me, I'm going up to have a look-see."

"Not without me, you aren't, Captain. Those green-beaks'll give us both the covering fire we need. They'll only he too happy to stay where they are while we do the dirty work. Come on." He began to crawl forward and von

Dodenburg followed.

They wriggled past the sniper. "Well, I'll be a currant-shitting quartermaster!" Schulze gasped. "Look at that – it's a dame!" The sniper's helmet had rolled off to reveal a mass of bright red hair; and although the figure in the sniper's coveralls was dumpy, there was no mistaking the fact that it was a woman.

"Always liked redheads," Schulze panted as they crawled on. "They've really got pepper in their pants. You can always rely on a redhead to give you a good roll for your dough..."

He broke off. Voices were coming from behind the next slope – many voices and, although they spoke in a strange tongue, there was no mistaking the fact that the speakers were drunk. They inched closer and looked on the tableau before them. "Did you ever see the like?" Schulze gasped. "All the sods are blind drunk!"

Von Dodenburg took in the scene in open-mouthed silence. What seemed to be a whole Russian infantry company was staggering about in the dead ground, their peak-caps with the big red star on them thrust to the backs of their heads, weapons held carelessly, while a handful of others in a darker-coloured uniform were shepherding a group of civilians to a spot in front of the troops. The civilians obviously did not want to go, but the men in the darker uniforms threatened them with their pistols and when one of them reacted too slowly, the man received a kick in the seat of his baggy black pants for his tardiness.

"What do you make of it?" Schulze asked.

"I don't know," von Dodenburg answered. "But one thing is certain; that infantry company is in our way."

As they slipped back the way they had come, the men in the darker uniforms had begun forcing the infantry into a sloppy drunken line behind the frightened civilians.

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The last howl of the Russian mortar stonk died away and the SS men cautiously began to raise their soil-littered helmets. Schulze and von Dodenburg had hardly made it back to the Company's position before the mortars had begun their bombardment.

In front of them the wind was blowing away the brown smoke of the

explosions to reveal the field and road pitted with holes. But there was nothing else to be seen. The drunken Russians had not advanced under cover of the bombardment. Puzzled, von Dodenburg shouted, "All right, watch your front and every second man stand down!" Next to him, Schulze lit a cigarette and said, "What now, sir? Where do we go from here?"

"I wish I knew." He bit his lip. "I can't make out what those crappy Russians are up to."

Cautiously he peered over the edge of their hole. Still nothing moved to their front, so he sat down next to Schulze and pushed back his helmet.

"Like a couple of stiff ones in a convent," Schulze commented sourly. "No use whatsoever." Thus they squatted there in morose silence.

"Sir," a frightened voice alerted them. "They're coming!"

Von Dodenburg tugged at his helmet, grabbed his Schmeisser and stuck his head above the hole. In the ruddy gleam of the setting sun, he could see the ragged line of Russian infantry stumbling drunkenly across the littered field. But it wasn't the Russians who caught his attention. It was the group of civilians being herded in front of them, their ancient wrinkled faces contorted with absolute terror.

"Oh, Jesus," Schulze groaned. "That's the clock in the bucket!"

And von Dodenburg realised with sudden horror what he meant.

There was no sound save for the breathing of the waiting SS men and the steady tramp of the Russian infantry behind their civilian shield. Now they were only 150 metres away. Close by, von Dodenburg heard a bolt being driven home. "Hold your fire," he ordered. "Don't fire till I tell you to!"

One hundred metres. He could see the civilians' faces quite clearly. They were the faces of men who had worked all their lives in the outdoors – humble, honest faces, void of any emotion save abject fear. Fifty metres. Around him he could sense his men preparing to fire. He had to make a decision soon.

Suddenly a drunken voice gave a command. The advance came to a halt. A long stream of Russians came from somewhere behind the civilians. He caught the word "German", and the order, "Davoi – move!"

An elderly civilian stepped forward, his hands raised as if in supplication. Then he stopped and said, "Masters. harken to me."

The German was strange, archaic, akin to the German spoken by a Swabian peasant but it was the language of the Fatherland all right. "Ye must give up, otherwise they will slaughter us."

Von Dodenburg suddenly recognized the costume the old man was wearing. He had seen it in the racial museum at the Bad Toelz officer-cadet school. It was the traditional outfit of the Volga Germans, a group of peasant farmers who had emigrated to that region of Russia in the fourteenth century; the terrified civilians standing between them and the Russians were as much German as they were – perhaps even more so.

"Can't you break away?" von Dodenburg shouted.

"No, sir, it is impossible," the wrinkled old man said. "Ye must give up. Ye must save us. All we want is to return to the homeland..."

"*Davoi*," a voice yelled from the rear.

"They'll slaughter us," the old man said in terror.

"Christ," Schulze groaned. "The Ivans've got us by the short and curlies! What the sodding hell are we going to do, sir?"

Von Dodenburg did not answer. What was he to do? The humble peasants stared at him, their shoulders slightly bowed in expectation.

The voice shouted "*Davoi*" once more.

The drunken soldiers prodded their bayonets into the backs of the peasants and they began to march forward. The peasants stumbled on in front of them, their eyes wild with fear.

All along the line the troopers levelled their weapons. The Russians were only forty metres away now. One or two of them did not even bother to hold up their rifles. They carried them at the port, confident that the Germans would surrender.

Von Dodenburg looked at the old man's face for the last time. Then he brought up his Schmeisser. "Fire!" he shouted. With his first burst he tore the old German's head from his shoulders. Then the massacre started.

CHAPTER 11

It was the third day of the battle for the Citadel. The Vulture had moved his mobile HQ into the area of the beleaguered fortress which still held out stubbornly against the full weight of Guderian's artillery, supported by the Stukas. But even at that close distance he could not raise his companies successfully. Young Fick was coming through sporadically. Schwarz had reported that he had penetrated the Citadel itself, but that was it. 3rd Company had disappeared into the maws of the battle, as had had the survivors of 1st Company, whom the Vulture had dispatched to make an infantry reconnaissance on foot. *It was a pity*, he thought to himself. Von Dodenburg had been a useful officer, if somewhat too sensitive for a field command. He would have made an excellent staff officer though. Staff officers could afford to enjoy the luxuries of emotions.

"Metzger. I think the time has come for us to have a look at the battlefield and earn our pay, what?"

Metzger swallowed hard. "At your command, Major!" he snapped, using the required military formula as a good senior NCO should.

The Vulture screwed his monocle more firmly in his eye. "You can carry the radio. Perhaps we'll be able to raise Schwarz when we're closer to the fighting. There are far too many sets being used back here." Then as an after-thought, "Oh, and you'd better hand me that rifle. One never knows."

"At your command!" Metzger rapped, but as he turned to fetch the rifle, thrown away by some fleeing stubble-hopper, his legs threatened to give way beneath him. Things must be bad if the Vulture wanted to take a weapon with him!

***

"Would you believe it, sir?" Metzger gasped as they crouched in the undergrowth at the side of the artificial waterway, watching the Russians splashing about in the water. "Those Popovs can't have all their cups in the cupboard! Swimming in the middle of a fucking battle!"

The Vulture did not answer. His heart was pounding, his lips were dry and his nostrils were gripped as if by a great hand. But not with fear. The

emotion which overpowered him was desire. He wiped away the sweat which had started up on his brow and stared at their bodies. How delightful they were, broad of shoulder, slim of hip, supported on great hairy pillars of legs. They were unlike German bodies, softened by good living and reliance on machines. These were peasant boys, hard and primitive.

"Sir." Metzger was staring at him curiously. "What are we going to do?"

The Vulture's finger curled around the trigger of his rifle. "We must get across that waterway," he said. "When I give the word, fire." He slid the rifle through the bushes.

The young Russian soldiers went on playing in the water, seemingly unaware that they were in the middle of a battlefield. One of them bent and started scrubbing himself between the legs. The Vulture swallowed hard. Almost without knowing he had done so, he jerked the trigger of his rifle.

The boy jumped in the air and fell forward into the shallow water. Beside the Vulture, Metzger's Schmeisser roared into action. A stream of slugs hissed through the air.

"Look out!" the Vulture yelled.

One of the Russians was running towards them, completely naked, a bayonet in his hands. Metzger pressed the trigger of his Schmeisser, but nothing happened. A stoppage! Then the Russian was on top of him. Next to him the Vulture was grappling with another naked Russian. He was on his own.

The Russian's stink engulfed the Butcher. He saw the man's open mouth, his horror-filled eyes, the sweat pouring down his pock-marked face. He brought up his fist and smashed it into his face. Blood spurted out of the Russian's nose. But big hands gripped Metzger's throat. The fingers thrust into his flesh. Stars started to pop in front of his eyes. A couple of moments more and he would be out. Desperately he brought his knee up hard into the Russian's crutch. And all of a sudden there was blessed air streaming into his lungs again.

The Russian was on the ground beside him, squirming in pain. Metzger did not give him a chance to recover. He brought the metal butt of his pistol down into the centre of the Russian's face. Metzger grabbed the bayonet and with the remembered skill of the butcher he had once been, he ran his eye over the boy's body. The guts were best. Drawing a deep breath, he plunged it home. The boy reared up. His hands fixed on the bayonet, its sharp edges

cutting his palms. Metzger pulled it out. The boy stared up at him like a dumb animal, the blood running through his dirty fingers. Metzger raised the bayonet once more. Beside him the Vulture had finished off his assailant. Carefully, almost as if he were back in the cutting-up room of Braun & Sons, and was worried that he might make a mess of some prime cut, he slid the bayonet into the boy's guts. The Russian without another sound.

***

Two hours later they came across what was left of von Dodenburg's company, dug in around a shattered train shed, together with a group of men from the 45th Infantry. Five hundred metres along a road to their front was the centre of the fort's resistance – the eighteenth-century church, its gilded onion-shaped tower holed by the German artillery; but still holding out and preventing the Germans from advancing any further.

The Vulture dropped his rifle and took his riding cane from the top of his boot. "Come on, Metzger," he urged. "They're our chaps." While Metzger advanced with his body crouched, the Vulture strode jauntily along the tramlines towards the Company's embattled positions as if he were taking a peaceful stroll.

"Jesus, Mary, Joseph," a thick Bavarian voice called, "it's the Vulture – I mean the CO," it corrected itself hastily.

The battle-grimed defenders of the shattered train shed stared round at the CO in open-mouthed awe. A Russian sniper-bullet kicked up a spurt of-dust a metre away from him. Metzger jumped, but not the Vulture. He slapped the side of his boot with his cane.

"Awful bad shots, these Popovs, what!" he commented, the very caricature of the traditional Prussian officer.

Spontaneously a ragged cheer rose from the defenders. The Vulture smiled thinly and strode inside the shed, its shell-twisted girders hanging down everywhere like grotesquely bent limbs. Crouching beside von Dodenburg, he listened to the traditional report.

"First company, one officer, one NCO and twenty men, five wounded. Fifty other ranks attached from 4th Infantry, sir."

"Good, von Dodenburg, you've done well. Now what's the situation?"

Von Dodenburg pointed through the shattered window at the twin concrete bunkers two hundred yards up the road, the heat shimmering over

their roofs. "Those two anti-tank bunkers are holding us up, sir. If we'd some means of getting by them, I think we'd make short work of the church. One of my lads found some Russki satchel charges, but those anti-tank bunkers are a tough nut. And they've got plenty of ammo. They use solid shot on us as soon as we make a move."

"Typical hedgehog defensive position," the Vulture commented, raising his glasses to have a look.

"Look out, sir," Schulze warned.

The fiat crack of a Russian 57mm drowned his words. A solid white block detached itself from the left-hand bunker, hissed over their heads and clanged into the metal side of the nearest tram with a resounding echo like some gigantic gong. The Vulture put down his binoculars. "I see what you mean, von Dodenburg." His hands were shaking slightly. "That was close!" He raised his voice. "What about Schwarz, Fick and the others?"

Von Dodenburg shrugged. "I haven't been able to raise them, sir. There's so much metal and radio interference around here that they could be at the other side of that church and we wouldn't know."

"Yes, I see. Well, perhaps they're dead." He looked around the exhausted faces in the train shed. "We'll have to make do with this bunch, won't we?"

"Do what, sir?"

"Take the Church," the Vulture said calmly.

"But those anti-tank positions, sir! Without armour we can't..."

"But we have the armour, my dear von Dodenburg," the Vulture cut him short.

"Where, sir?"

Without taking his eyes off the Russian positions, the Vulture pointed his cane behind him. "The trains," he said softly. "The trams."

***

For the next two hours they worked like crazy men. Ignoring the solid shot which streaked through the train shed at regular intervals, they stacked two of the one-deck Russian trains with whatever they could find in the way of protection – chunks of girder, a pile of fire buckets, mattresses from the train crews' dormitory. Then under the Vulture's personal direction they collected their own and the Russian dead and propped the ghastly corpses in the seats.

While the SS men and the infantry of the 45th pushed up the third car to link it with the other two, the Vulture strode down its length smashing windows with the butt of a borrowed rifle. Finally he was satisfied that there would be no danger from splintered glass. "Any of you men know how to drive a tram?" he asked. There was a stony silence broken only by the sound of the heavy artillery, the ever-present background music of war.

"Well, come on! Holy arsehole, there must be somebody!"

Schulze raised his hand. "I'll have a go, sir."

"Good," the Vulture beamed, then turned to the men of the 45th. "Nov listen. My battalion will attack in the train. I know you're tired and you've been here longer than we have, but I'm relying on you to support us." He pointed his cane at a tall corporal."What's your name?"

"Meier, sir."

"All right, Corporal Meier, you're in charge of the 45th chaps."

"Sir!"

"Once we're underway, I want you to take your men and cover our flanks. We'll bear the brunt of the operation, but you've got to give us support, do you understand?"

"Sir!" Corporal Meier shouted, thrusting out his chest smartly.

"Stupid shit!" the Vulture said *sotto voce* to von Dodenburg, as they turned away. "That sort really is designed as cannon-fodder."

"What do you mean, sir?"

The Vulture smiled. "Do you really think I'm going to sacrifice what's left of the Wotan? When we start up that track, the Reds are going to fire at the leading cars. Once they discover their mistake – that they're full of dead men – what will be their reaction?" He answered his own question. "They'll turn their attention to the only live men they can see – the men of the 45th."

"But sir," von Dodenburg protested in horror, "it'll be a massacre!"

"Naturally, my dear von Dodenburg," the Vulture said. "What a naïve young man you are."

"All aboard, who's coming aboard!" Schulze shouted with the light-headed humour of the exhausted. "No fare on this one, lads!" He rang the bell furiously. The Vulture took his place next to him in the driving compartment. "All right, Corporal Meier," he shouted through the shattered window. "When the Russians start banging away at us, move out!"

"Sir!"

"We're ready to move out, sir."

"All right, von Dodenburg, off we trot!"

Schulze whirled the twin brass handles in opposite directions. The ancient train cars groaned in rusty dismay and shuddered. Up front the dead bodies planted in the wooden seats trembled. One fell forward with a clatter of equipment. And then the cars began to move out of the shed.

"We're trotting now, sir," Schulze announced unnecessarily. At the rear, Metzger took a last swig at his vodka bottle and flung it out of the window. The sound of breaking glass was drowned by the crash of the Soviet artillery.

Back on the ground, Meier turned smartly and addressed his new command. "All right, move out men." Dutifully like the cannon-fodder they were to be, they rose from their holes and began to spread out on both sides of the battle-littered road. The attack had started. The victims were ready for the slaughter.

***

Tangles of telephone wire hung down both sides of the street. On both sides the shattered houses were burning again. A roof collapsed, sending burning beams and broken tiles clattering down. Swaying to and fro between the houses, which looked like blazing scenery on a stage, they rattled forward. A shell hit the front of the lead tram. It rocked like a ship at sea. Von Dodenburg grabbed a support just in time as Schulze's hands tightened round the brass handles. The car filled with choking dust. On both sides the houses swayed like loose backdrops, but the strange convoy of vehicles kept on going.

Again the Russian guns tired. Another anti-tank shell rammed into the lead tram. A shower of sparks shot into the air. There was the smell of burning flesh. Instinctively Schulze took his hands off the brass handles.

"Keep your claws on the tillers!" the Vulture snapped, and brought his cane down with a vicious whack to emphasise his order. "Keep going!"

With the flames in front mounting steadily and blinding them, the strange convoy of death clattered ever closer to the Russian positions.

Suddenly the Russians spotted the cannon-fodder from the 45th. A machine gun began to chatter. The front line of the infantrymen fell. But Corporal Meier pressed on, the men racing to their death, getting fewer by the second, as the Russians directed a murderous fire at them. Nothing seemed able to stop him. Seventy, fifty, forty metres. He was almost in between the

bunkers now, his machine pistol held tucked into his side, as he zig-zagged through the rubble like a professional football player heading for the goal to the triumphant yells of his supporters. Then he stopped and looked behind him. He was alone. As they rattled closer to him, under the cover of the fiercely burning first car, with its cargo of smouldering dead men, they could see the look of utter astonishment on his stupid face.

"For Christ sake run, man!" Schulze cried, though he knew Meier could not hear him.

But Meier did not run. Slowly, almost ponderously, his every movement reflecting his shocked bewilderment at the sudden absence of his men, he lowered his Schmeisser, and waited: a lone soldier in the middle of a battlefield, waiting for death, as if that fate had been ordained for him a long time ago. He did not wait long. The armour-piercing shell caught him squarely in the guts. They could see the great hole it punched in his stomach as he fell to the ground.

"Remember his name, von Dodenburg," the Vulture said. "He'll get his piece of tin for th-"

With a tremendous crash the convoy smashed into something. It was the end of the line, and the Russian positions! The Wotan soldiers were flung off their feet. The burning dead were scattered on the ground. And then hand grenades were exploding everywhere. The cries and yells of the wounded and dying rose in a nightmarish cacophony, screaming for help in German and Russian and half a dozen other Soviet languages.

The SS troopers fought their way into the bunkers with spades, fists, claws. Von Dodenburg sprang over the body of a young blond trooper, his broken back twisting him up in agony. A potato masher sailed over his shoulder and exploded in a group of Russians further up inside the bunker. They disappeared in ball of yellow flame.

And so it went on all that afternoon. They were driven out of the second bunker three times. Wherever one looked there was the glassy stare of a corpse, the severed arm or leg, the thick sticky trail of red, where some desperately wounded man had tried to drag himself to safety. But the Vulture would not give up. His hat gone, his uniform blackened with powder burns, his sweaty face streaked with blood, he rallied them time and again with his cry of "Wotan to the attack! Follow me!"And they followed him, utterly exhausted, but still eager for some last desperate glory before a bullet brought the blessed relief of oblivion or death.

By evening they were down to ten men unwounded. Still the Russians were holding out in the bullet-pocked third bunker, their fire weak, but effective enough. The Vulture looked down at his men as they sprawled among the smoking ruins. Absolutely exhausted, they lay there like the piles of corpses all around them.

"Men." He licked his lips. "Get to your feet." As he swayed back and forth, he seemed to find it difficult to formulate the next sentence. His brow wrinkled in a frown. It was very simple. All he wanted them to do was to get to their feet, that was it, to get to their feet. "And what then?" he asked himself aloud.

"Major Geier!" a voice yelled. "Major Geier, it's us!"

The Vulture turned. "Schwarz!" he gasped. Schwarz and the dirty, wild-eyed survivors of 2nd Company were running towards them.

"Major Geier," Schwarz shouted, "we've been fighting our way to you for the last..."

The Vulture did not hear the rest of the words. Staggering like a drunk, he raised his broken cane, and pointed towards the bunker with great deliberateness. "SS Assault Battalion –Wotan – to the attack. Alles für Deutschland!"

BOOK 3 – THE DRIVE EAST

"We shall be back. Believe me, von Dodenburg, the Russians haven't seen the last of us yet. Wotan will return!"

Major Geier to Capt. von Dodenburg, Christmas Day, 1941

CHAPTER 12

"German Soldiers!"

The tremendous voice reverberated across the dusty square. "Men of the SS!"

The Führer, flanked by his staff and the senior officers of the Bodyguard, stared down at the Division from the dais hastily improvised in the battle-scarred Russian square. "You have fought well. No other soldiers in the world could have done what you have done in these last few great days. You, the elite of my Bodyguard, have not failed me in spite of your grievous losses..." The Leader's voice faltered a moment and von Dodenburg knew that his emotion was genuine; Adolf Hitler was not concerned with personal advancement, the outward trappings of glory. His sense of loss was heartfelt.

"To each and every one of you who wears the precious armband which bears my name, I pay my humble respects for devotion – your sacrifice, your idealism and your belief in the National Socialist cause. We have had a tremendous victory on the Bug. Three-quarters of a million Soviets are at present marching into our prisoner-of-war cages. Another half a million Bolsheviks dead. An enormous amount of booty has been taken. In short, the so-called Soviet giant is reeling. All that is needed are those last couple of blows which will floor him *for good*." The great voice echoed from the loud speakers in the trees, stripped bare by the shellfire of the previous days.

The Führer brought up his hands dramatically, as if Stalin himself were there and he was about to strangle him. Then he let his left hand drop and stabbed his right hand into the air at an angle. "Now we must hit him in the stomach – cut off his food and oil in the Ukraine and the Caucasus. Then when that is done and he is reeling, without food and drink–" The Führer brought down his hand in a vicious chop. "We must strike the monster's head off so that he lies prostrate at our feet."

With an impatient jerk of his head he threw back the black lock of hair which threatened to fall into his eyes and thrust up his jaw pugnaciously, his eyes fixed on the sky, as if he were challenging the Gods to dare prevent him from achieving his purpose. "I declare without any reservation," he roared, "that the enemy in the East has been struck down and he will never rise again. Soldiers of the Bodyguard, we march on Moscow!"

Sepp Dietrich, standing in the centre of the square, thrust up his arm and yelled in his thick Munich accent, "Sieg Heil!" On the dais the Prominenz – Keitel, Bormann, Himmler and the rest – stiffened to attention, hands raised in salute to their leader.

Below, ten thousand throats burst into a great roar: "Sieg Heil!" To the right of the dais, the band of the Bodyguard crashed into the German National Anthem, the *Deutschlandlied*.

Von Dodenburg, staring up at the Führer, felt the sweat trickle down his body. He knew that this was a magic moment in history, an overwhelmingly great moment that he would tell his children about in years to come – if he survived – just as his own father had entranced him with his account of the first day of the war in 1914.

Sepp Dietrich marched stiffly to the centre of the square like the good Imperial Army NCO he had once been. He crashed his boots together in the position of attention and looked up at the Führer. "Permission to march off, my Führer!" he barked. Hitler looked down at the loyal face of the man who had fought at his side in the early days of the movement in Munich. "Permission to march off granted."

Dietrich swung round and rapped out an order. It was followed by a flurry of orders. The band took up the Horst Lied.

"Parade March!" Sepp Dietrich bellowed above it.

Ten thousand men moved forward as one. With their arms pressed rigidly to their sides, their eyes fixed unswervingly on some distant goal, ten thousand pairs of jackboots hit the ground while, up above, the Leader stared down at them, his hand raised in the Roman salute to his own elite.

"Eyes Right" the command came time and time again.

Like a perfect, well-oiled mechanical movement, their heads clicked round to look up at their Leader. Veterans and reinforcements from half a dozen countries, eager for the glory offered them by membership of this elite formation, they strode by in perfect unison. "Eyes right!" von Dodenburg yelled with hoarse enthusiasm. For a moment his eyes caught those of the Führer. How wise, how proud, how all-knowing he looked!

Just to his rear, Sergeant Schulze tore his eyes away from Archer's, as the contemptuous of the Nation called their leader. "Seen saner eyes than them in Elmshorn's lunatic asylum," he said to himself contemptuously and farted loudly as a sign of his disdain. But the music drowned the sound as it sped the young men to their appointment with death.

***

It was appalling country for tanks. Great pine forests that stretched for hundreds of kilometres, swamps even at the height of summer, terrible roads and bridges that could hardly hear the weight of one of the rickety Russian *panje* carts, let alone a 30-ton Mark IV. The maps they had been supplied with by Intelligence were all wrong too. A road marked deep red to indicate a motor highway turned out to be a sandy track and what appeared to be river crossings were really shallow fords. Still the tanks pressed on, thirty, forty, even fifty kilometres a day, with their soft-skinned transport stretched out a hundred kilometres behind them, trying in vain to keep up; while the sweating infantry toiled after them in great clouds of dust.

But in spite of the terrible conditions they won victory after victory. Here and there the Russians stood and fought. When they did, the Bodyguard simply swept round them and sealed them off, leaving the follow-up infantry to finish them off.

By mid-September they were in the heart of Russia. Kiev fell and the Russians surrendered three-quarters of a million men. The news of the tremendous victory spread like wildfire through the advancing German troops. Even the Vulture seemed to be caught up in the wave of enthusiasm. Dispensing with his usual cynicism, he told his officers assembled in the shade of an old elm tree in the centre of the dusty square of some God-forsaken Russian village, "It can't last much longer, gentlemen; first the Bug and then Kiev. They must break soon."

"But we haven't had a real crack at them since the Bug," Schwarz protested. "Why I haven't had a Russian tank in my sights for a week now, sir. Just a lot of down-at-heel Ivans whose only care is to save their own skins."

The Vulture nodded. "I know, Schwarz. Up to now this campaign has been like a conducted tour. Five casualties this week. Five, I ask you, gentlemen! How will that look back at headquarters? That Sergeant hack there will say we're rolling a pretty soft ball."

The young officers nodded their heads in agreement. It did look rather as if the campaign in Russia was going to fizzle out ignominiously for SS Assault Battalion Wotan. That afternoon, disturbed only by the sound of artillery a long way off, von Dodenburg attempted to escape the sticky heat

of the steppe in one of the miserable Russian huts, risking the lice with which they swarmed. Surprisingly enough it was occupied by an ancient peasant, squatting cross-legged on the earthen Boor. "Hello, little Father?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

The peasant answered in German and von Dodenburg realised that Metzger probably hadn't turned him out of the hut, or *isba* as von Dodenburg had found out, because of his knowledge of the language. Perhaps Metzger had thought he would be able to use him as a translator in his dealings with the rest of the peasants whom they had locked in the communal farm headquarters at the other end of the village.

For a while he chatted with the old man. Like most of the peasants who had not fled to the forests, the old man felt that the Germans were not treating the Russians correctly; if they treated them properly, they would help in the fight against communism.

Von Dodenburg nodded and wiped the sweat from his brow. He had heard the same tale often enough in the past weeks. Perhaps the old man was trying to curry favour with the new masters. He did not know and he did not care. All he wanted at the moment was a cold bath and an iced drink. He pointed at the great green-tiled oven which ran the length of the isba. "You must have a lot of family to need an oven that size, Uncle," he said.

The Russian grinned, his wise, old eyes almost disappearing into a sea of wrinkles. "Are you Germans going to spend the winter in Russia?" he asked.

"Of course."

The old man tittered, revealing his toothless gums.

"What are you laughing at, you stupid turd?"

The Russian pointed a long dirty finger at him. "Then you'll find out why I need that oven. You'll find out, German."

Five minutes later Schwarz burst into the hut, the sweat pouring down his face, his eyes wild with excitement. "I've been looking for you everywhere," he cried, forgetting to use von Dodenburg's rank in his haste. "Where the devil have you been all the time?"

"Why? What's the matter?"

"Great news – great news. We're marching in an hour! The orders have just come in from Division." Von Dodenburg grabbed his helmet and buckled on his pistol.

"Come on Schwarz, let's go!"

Outside, NCOs were blowing their whistles. Officers were yelling orders. The men were hurriedly packing their bedrolls and flinging them onto the tanks' decks. All was ordered confusion. But in the dark cool hut, the old man with the beard continued to giggle. "You'll find out, German," he said. "You'll find out."

CHAPTER 13

It was nearly dawn.

Cautiously, von Dodenburg's tanks rolled over the log road which bridged the swamp, throwing long shadows on the mud in the fading moonlight. There was no sound save the rusty squeak of their tracks and the marsh grass gurgling on both sides of them. Once a green *verey* light hissed into the sky a couple of hundred metres away and bathed them in its sickly light. But still the Russians did not appear to have spotted them.

Nobody spoke a word. Their heads were bent to one side, ears straining to catch the least sound. Up on the turret of the lead tank von Dodenburg and the Vulture searched the track for any gaps. Both knew the vital importance of getting across before dawn. The whole drive of the Eleventh Army across the Perekop Isthmus depended upon their establishing a bridgehead on the other side before the Russians became aware that the Manstein Army had gone over to the offensive. The narrow Isthmus which linked the Crimean Peninsula to the mainland was surrounded on both sides by a salt marsh which was completely impassable. It was not even possible to get across it in an infantry dinghy, especially in daylight under Russian fire. Ahead of them the two young volunteers from von Dodenburg's company, walking backwards through the heavy gloom, swung their blue torches back and forth to show that the way was still clear. Twice in the last hour, small sections of the log track had been missing and the two officers had sweated blood as the Mark IVs had edged their way across the gaps, with the remaining logs on either side slowly sinking into the stinking mire below. Shit luck had been on their side up to now and the marsh had opened its greedy maw in vain.

The minutes passed slowly. Schulze had taken over the driving himself and on the turret they could hear him cursing in his broad waterfront accent as he moved the tillers back and forth trying to keep the tank on course in the darkness. In spite of the night chill, von Dodenburg found himself sweating. He wiped his brow and whispered to his CO, "It can't be much further, sir!"

"I hope to God you're right. The Popovs'll massacre us if they catch us out here in the open. No room to manoeuvre. We're absolutely like sitting –" A shrill scream broke into his words. Schulze put his foot on the brake and hauled the tiller bars back. The tank came to a stop. "What was that?" the

Vulture snapped. "The right light! It's gone out!"

The man carrying the other light hurried out of the gloom. "Sir," he cried. "It's Stefan!" Von Dodenburg recognized the boy. He was one of their new 'Folk German' recruits from Romania – the old hands of the Battalion sneered at them as 'booty Germans'.

"What is it, Dudeck?"

"Stefan, he's fallen in the swamp," the boy stammered in his strange foreign-sounding German. "Listen, sir." A cry rang out from the gloom ahead and there was a sucking, slapping noise, as if the young soldier was fighting to stay on the surface.

Von Dodenburg grabbed the side of the turret, but the Vulture grabbed him before he could spring out. "Stay there," he commanded.

"But sir, we must help the poor bastard!" he protested.

"You can't. These marshes are bottomless. You'll suffer the same fate yourself if you venture one foot off the track."

"But we can't just let..." He broke off as the soldier in the marsh screamed again. "My God, he mustn't die like that!"

"He must," the Vulture said coldly. "The success of our mission can't be risked on account of some peasant boy from the back of beyond. You," he bent down to the other young soldier, "get back to your post. I'll take the other side." He flicked on the torch attached to his tunic. "All right, von Dodenburg, roll them again. I'm going out there." Without waiting for any further protest he dropped silently on to the soft ground and doubled ahead into the gloom. Von Dodenburg kicked Schulze's shoulder. Schulze rammed home the gear. The tank started to rumble forward again, following the two blue lights winking ahead in the gloom.

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It was dawn. The Nogay Steppe glowed in the ruddy hue cast by the sun, poised like a red ball on the far horizon. The view, uninterrupted by a single hill, not even a tree, was boundless, losing itself in infinity.

Von Dodenburg lowered his binoculars and rubbing his unshaven chin wearily, asked: "What do you make of those poles in the distance, sir?"

The Vulture yawned, showing the gold teeth at the back of his mouth. "The old Anglo-Iranian telegraph line built by Siemens in the 1900s," he answered. "Otherwise not one thing to be seen far and wide, eh?"

Von Dodenburg nodded.

All around, the tankers and the attached grenadiers were stretching themselves, smoking, conversing in low tones, their tired eyes taking in the boundless steppe with its telegraph posts standing out like ghostly signs.

"Excellent tank country," the Vulture commented. "All the same, it'll pay to move forward in open order. One cannot overrule the possibility that the Popovs are out there somewhere. We'll head for the village of Preobrazhenka." He tapped his map. "Two hours' march away if this is correct. We'll group there, eat and then move off in the general direction of Parpach." He stroked his monstrous nose for a second. "It would be better if you took the point with your company, von Dodenburg, and take six half-tracks of grenadiers with you."

"Yes, sir."

Five minutes later they set off, the tanks in open order, flanked on both sides by the half tracks, the grenadiers ready to drop to the steppe at the first sign of trouble. To their front the sun was rising, blinding them, making it impossible to see directly ahead. Schulze had come up on to the turret again and the two of them searched the steppe carefully.

"I've got a funny tingling in my fingers, sir," Schulze said warily, his back to von Dodenburg, "and it ain't rheumatics."

"What do you mean?"

"There's something out there, but I'll be buggered if I can make out what it is!"

Von Dodenburg laughed. "Imagination. Schulze! Yer getting a bit too old for this kind of thing."

"I'll take an immediate posting to the Veterinary Corps, sir," he offered. "I've got a way with animals – after all I've been over a year in the Wotan." But there was no humour in his voice, and his hand shook a little as he raised it to his eyes to shade them from the sun.

Thirty minutes later a handful of horsemen appeared far off to their right. Before von Dodenburg could bring his glasses to bear upon them they had vanished like grey ghosts, as speedily and silently as they had come. But he knew what they signified. He pressed his throat mike and spoke to all vehicles. "Here Dora One. Here Dora One. Now get this! Popovs to our right... three o'clock. Do you read me? *Popovs to our right.*"

They had been spotted by Soviet scouts.

***

It was now nearly six. Already the sun was high in the sky. But they had no eyes for the beauty of the morning. Their wary eyes were fixed on the dark low outline of the little village of Preobrazhenka, directly to their front. While his tanks deployed in open order, with the armoured grenadiers to their rear, von Dodenburg surveyed it carefully through his binoculars.

The ramshackle collection of straw-roofed isbas seemed all right. Here and there the first thick smoke of the morning fires was streaming straight up into the sky. A couple of dark figures moved around slowly and with early-morning doggedness. In the sudden silence, now that their motors were no longer roaring, he could hear the geese cackling and far away a dog howling. It seemed a typical early morning rural scene.

He licked his lips. Should he go on? Was he walking into a trap? He knew that Geier was only a couple of kilometres to his rear with the rest of the Battalion, but could he risk a showdown with the Russians before the follow-up infantry division had crossed the Perekop Isthmus? What if he advanced into a trap and the Ivans cut through him and caught the infantry in the middle of their crossing? A wrong move now might endanger the whole success of the operation.

"What are we going to do, sir?" Schulze asked. "Me guts is beginning to do flip-flops with hunger. I wouldn't mind getting in there and feeding the inner pig-dog." Schulze's comment made up his mind for him. The men hadn't eaten anything for nearly fifteen hours now. In the village they would be able to take a break and heat up a bowl of soup at least.

"Move out," he ordered and waved his hands three times in rapid succession – the cavalry signal for advance.

The tank motors roared.

"Drive in open order," he yelled through the throat mike.

The tank commanders needed no urging. There had been something uncanny about the steppe since they bad spotted the Soviet cavalry scouts. Here and there the more fearful pulled down their turret covers and everywhere the gunners stood by their 75-mms.

Five hundred metres – four hundred – three hundred. Nothing disturbed the tranquil picture of a village coming to life. Two hundred metres. A long line of dirty-white sheep started to stream from the tumbledown collection of straw huts. Von Dodenburg, standing upright in the turret, knowing he was

being a fool, yet ignoring the danger from snipers in order to inspire confidence in the young reinforcements, began to relax. Preobrazhenka seemed to be all right. As the ragged peasant driving the sheep came level with him, he tightened his grip on his Schmeisser all the same and cried the greeting: "*Schrastje!*"

"*Schrastje*," the shepherd grunted and looked up at the German officer, black eyes slanted in a dirty yellow face.

Von Dodenburg looked him up and down, ascertaining whether his dirty rags concealed any weapon. "Your sheep – get them off the road – *Davoi!*" The peasant nodded sullenly and bellowed at the sheep, encouraging the lead animal to get on to the verge with a kick in its ribs.

"Obviously an animal lover," Schulze said. "He'll twist his knickers if he goes on like that."

While the Russian cleared the animals out of the way von Dodenburg pressed his throat mike and gave his orders: "Tanks stay here – panzer grenadiers up to the front!" The half track drivers pressed down on their accelerators and rattled forward, the grenadiers hanging grimly on to the shaking metal sides.

Von Dodenburg turned to Schulze as the leading half-track came level with him. "You take over here, I'm going to have a look at the village with the grenadiers."

Schulze opened his mouth to object but von Dodenburg cut him short. "If there's trouble, Father Schulze, you can come and get me out."

Schulze mumbled something about some people "losing their eggs if they weren't sewn up in their sacks", but did as he was ordered, while von Dodenburg sprang on to the waiting half-track. He gave the hand signal to advance and the six half-tracks moved off.

***

With a hefty kick, von Dodenburg smashed open the door of the first isba. A smell of unwashed bodies, black Russian tobacco, boiled cabbage and misery greeted him. Clasping the machine pistol firmly, he searched the hut for any sign of the enemy.

But the civilians cowering in the gloom at the back of the hut were not to be feared. They were nothing but bundles of rags, scarecrows, their angular bones and stringy flesh showing through the holes in their clothing, their

hands raised in the gesture of mercy.

"Don't be scared, little mother," one of the 'booty Germans' said. "We mean no harm."

"Ask them if there are any Russian soldiers here?" But they could get nothing out of them. Feeling ashamed at having frightened them so much, von Dodenburg dug his free hand in his pocket and tossed them a bar of ration chocolate.

The next isba was no different: an old Babuschka, her toothless face withered like a mummy's shrunken skull with hard work and the harsh sun, and a couple of pot-bellied, half naked children, tears streaming from their fearful eyes. Again they flung the bitter, dope-filled ration chocolate onto the floor and backed out. For some reason the filthy children did not grab the chocolate.

Von Dodenburg wrinkled up his nose and looked at the young lieutenant in charge of the Panzer Grenadiers. "What a shitty pong everywhere!"

The officer, who had joined the Battalion from Bad Toelz two weeks before, shrugged. "Sub-human, they are. Like swine in shit. What can you expect –"

There was a sudden sharp crack like a branch breaking underfoot in a wood. The Lieutenant's mouth fell open and the rest of his sentence ended in a soft groan. He began to sink slowly to the floor, as if his legs had given way.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" von Dodenburg said. A burst of machine-gun fire not fifty metres away answered his question. The 'booty German' plummeted forward and lay writhing in the dust. The man next to him pitched forward, two holes suddenly punched along his face. Countless faces appeared at the glass-free windows of the remaining huts. The whole rear half of the village was full of Russian soldiers! Von Dodenburg flung himself into the dust next to the dead Lieutenant and loosed a wild burst at the nearest isba. "Down," he yelled. "Get sodding well down!"

Throwing themselves among the writhing bodies of their comrades, they began to answer the Soviet fire.

Scores of bandy-legged, little men in earth-coloured uniforms burst out of the huts and charged shoulder-to-shoulder towards the SS men trapped in the centre of the square.

Beside himself with anger at having walked into the trap, von

Dodenburg sprang to his feet, legs thrust wide apart, machine pistol tucked into his hip. "Stand fast!" he yelled above the noise of the bullets. He pressed the trigger and the nearest Russian fell dead. The man next to him stumbled and the long bayonet of the man behind him went through his chest. He screamed and the two of them fell in a tangled mess.

"Grenades!" von Dodenburg roared.

Potato mashers sailed through the air. One – two – three – four. They exploded into the Russians' front line. At that distance the young Grenadiers couldn't miss. A body somersaulted through the smoke and landed just in front of them. And then the tanks were among them, their drivers even running over their own dead, as Sergeant Schulze in the lead tank urged them forward, his radio crackling with invective, the Mark IV's glacis dripping with the blood of dying sheep.

"As soon as the firing opened up, that cunning sod of a shepherd drove the fucking sheep right at us," Schulze shouted down to a sweating von Dodenburg. "Thought he was being smart. They'd attached tank grenades to them."

"What did you do?"

"Drove right through them. One of the lads bought it. But nobody was badly hurt."

Von Dodenburg put his helmet back on and rose to his feet wearily. "Thank you, Schulze. That was a bit of quick thinking."

Schulze's dirty face broke into a grin. "That'll be five marks fifty, sir," he said.

An hour later, the Vulture gave the order for them to move on towards Parpach. With Schwarz's company in the lead, the tanks rattled through the ruined village towards the East and the long drive into the unknown that lay before them.

CHAPTER 14

In the years to come the incident at the village would stand out in von Dodenburg's mind as a turning point in the war. Up to then the war had been no different from the wars he had read about as a young cadet at Bad Toelz. In 1939, in Poland, the Polish generals had ridden out to meet them and surrender on horseback, complete with flag bearer and trumpeter like something out of a romantic battlefield painting of the Nineteenth Century. Belgium in 1940 had been little different; the commandant of Eben-Emael had even worn a sword. In France the British had bedded down punctually at six o'clock for the day, as if one ran a war according to a timetable. Undoubtedly they also had a break for afternoon tea.

But Russia was different. There was something horrifyingly elemental about it, as if it were being fought by two naked savages; as if the rule book had never even been written.

After the counter-attack at Parpach, when they had retaken the key town in bitter hand-to-hand fighting, they had discovered two hundred German prisoners in the courtyard of the local police barracks, the backs of their heads blown away by the pistols of the KVD. At Kerch it had been even worse. One of the Bodyguard's patrols, searching the seashore for boats, found two corpses floating on the surface. They were both officers of the Bodyguard, their hands tied to their backs, their severed genitals stuffed in their mouths.

Nor were the Russians any different when it came to their own civilians. As Manstein's Army pushed closer to Sevastopol, the feared Russian Katyuska mortars – 'Stalin Organs', the troops called them – systematically destroyed village after village in the path of the invaders in accordance with their scorched earth policy; and to make doubly sure that nothing was left for the Germans, they sent wave after wave of Sturmovik dive-bombers to finish off the job. As Wotan's tanks ploughed a path through the smoking rubble, they rolled past the scarecrow bodies of the barefoot peasants sprawled everywhere in the rubble of their isbas.

"If you ask me, sir," Schulze said as they drove through yet another destroyed village, "the whole fucking Crimea is one big cemetery! And as the days passed, with the fighting getting ever more severe, it seemed to von

Dodenburg that Schulze wasn't far from wrong.

But it wasn't only the Russians who no longer observed the rules.

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On 16 November, Wotan reached the outskirts of Sevastopol. In a heavy downpour of rain which had turned the approach road into a sea of mud, they passed sweating, swearing, mud-splattered men laying into trembling horses, frothing at the mouth, up to their bellies in the thick black goo. Everywhere the soaked fields were full of the litter left behind by the retreating Russians – shell-boxes, radios, rifles, dead horses, cows with their legs sticking stiffly upwards – and bodies. Always bodies, surrounded by fat black crows pecking steadily at them.

When they passed through the area of the most recent fighting, the rain had ceased and the wounded, lying in their thousands on both sides of the road, raised their hands to them and cried piteously "*Voda, gopodin... voda!*"

Their pleas for water remained unanswered, save by the handful of Germans in the black uniform of the Death's Head, who beat those capable of walking to clear them out of the way. As the tanks rolled by, the Russians who could move started to drag themselves to the rear supported by makeshift crutches, surrounded by swarms of huge flies. Behind them the ones who could not walk settled back to wait for death, their eyes gazing stoically at the crows flapping slowly overhead.

But there was worse to come. Later that same after noon while the tank crews showered and underwent delousing in a local barracks, von Dodenburg and Sergeant Schulze, acting as bodyguard, for there were still snipers about, went wandering around the smoking ruins of Sevastopol's outskirts.

Alerted by quick bursts of sub-machine gunfire, which kept disturbing the afternoon torpor, they advanced round a hillock to be confronted by a horrifying sight. A huge hole had been bulldozed behind the mound. Now it was full of dead and dying Russian soldiers, packed in like sardines, some lying on top of the others' heads, blood streaming from the wounds in their faces. On the far side of the pit an officer from the Death's Head was sitting, a cigar clenched between his teeth, a Tommy-gun cradled on his lap. Suddenly one of the bodies groaned. As casually as if he were swatting a fly, he raised his Tommy-gun and fired a burst at it.

Then he noticed that he had company, raised his hand lazily and said,

"Heil Hitler. Christ, it's hot, isn't it?" He jerked his head at the men packed into the pit. "Stalin's scholars – what's left of the 76th Officer Aspirant Brigade from Novorossiysk – excuse me." Lazily he fired another short burst at a Russian who had moved. The soldier groaned weakly and dropped his head. "Pong isn't there?" he said easily. "Most of them shit themselves before they get the chop."

"What's this?" Schulze said gruffly.

The officer was not offended by Schulze's lack of military courtesy. He was obviously a man who was happy with himself and the world. "Orders from the Reichsführer himself. Wipe out their officer corps when it's young. Keep 'em quiet for another fifty years after we've conquered the bastards." As if to emphasise his point, he fired another casual burst at a moving head and began to change the magazine, chatting away as easily as if he were at some fairground shooting-booth and the men lying in the pit were wooden targets.

For the first time he turned round fully to look up at them, and von Dodenburg recognized that pig-like face at once. It was the officer who had commanded the firing squad at Henri Chapelle! Another officer cadet moved in the centre of the pit.

"Excuse me," the Death's Head Officer said formally. Turning, he fired a short burst and the man fell back without even a groan. "Every slug a Russ, eh?" he joked. "For Folk, Fatherland and..." His mouth fell open suddenly as von Dodenburg began to draw his pistol. "What are you doing, Captain?"

Von Dodenburg did not answer. Instead he clicked off the safety catch and brought the pistol to bear on the Death's Head officer. The slug thumped into the man at four metres' range. Slowly he began to fall back into the pit. Deliberately, von Dodenburg put his pistol back into his holster, took care to fasten up the flap, as if it were very important to do so, and then began to walk away without uttering a single word.

***

There were others who profited from the complete breakdown in human values in the Crimea. At night they boasted of their exploits in the rough-and-ready accommodation they occupied while the Battalion waited for the great attack on Rostov, now that the capture of Sevastopol was being left to the infantry. In the shattered church which Metzger occupied with the Battalion's other senior NCOs, he was obliged to listen to them boasting of their sexual

adventures.

"At fourteen years old, they've got tits like balloons," they would say. "You can get your head right up to your sodding spoons between them!"

"I had the daughter for a can of 'old man', the mother for a packet of tea and I bet I could have had her husband for a couple of cancer sticks."

"Dirty buggers they are, though. Sleep with a plug in it."

"Go on!"

"It's true. They put the plug in to keep it nice and randy, everybody knows that."

"For a packet of cancer sticks they'll give you a right old gobble. They won't do anything else, mind you. It's something to do with Stalin. He laid down that they have to keep their cherry till they're eighteen. A law it is – a Soviet law. But a gobble's something different. I had one this afternoon – I bet she wasn't more than fifteen. But, believe me, she nearly had me back collar stud down her throat the way she went at it. Like mother's milk it must have been for her."

The thought of the youthful libertines haunted Metzger. He went about his daytime duties in a dream, his mind full of dark-eyed Crimean beauties with wide-open lips, beckoning to him in undisguised lust. At regular intervals he disappeared into the sack-walled latrine, heavy with the odour of lime, to check whether the fantasies were having an effect on that long-limp organ; and it seemed to him they were. Wasn't there a certain hardness there, just as there had been when the gross Polack peasant had put the eggs in his pocket? He even risked the Vulture's absence to lock himself in the CO's makeshift office, rip open his flies and take a hurried look at himself in the flyblown mirror which was its only decoration. He was sure he wasn't mistaken. There was definitely something there!

The evening their new movement order came in he slipped out and wandered around the shattered streets until he was sure that the curfew had cleared most of the rank-and-file out of the place. Now the only ones who would risk a clash with the chain dogs would be men like himself out for sex and those civilians who were prepared to risk a spell in jail to give them it. His mind full of hot fantasies, he hurried down the back allies, full of mosquitoes and the red ends of cigarettes which marked the whores or their pimps.

Once, he was stopped by a whore and her pimp, a cross-eyed runt who spoke some German and stank of garlic.

"You jig-jig?" he asked, thrusting his finger through the circle made by the thumb and forefinger of the other hand to make his meaning clear. He lit a match and for an instant, Metzger had a glimpse of the whore's face. She was young and pretty. Her pimp saw the gesture. "Upstairs," he whined. "Two cans – Old Man."

Upstairs. The word stopped Metzger. A fear of being knifed in the back while he was on the job rose in him. He pushed the man aside.

"Piss off," he said."You're talking to a senior NCO in the SS!" He stamped on.

"*Gospodin!*" a husky voice said in the darkness. "*Gospodin.*"

A small slim shape detached itself from the darkness. "You jig-jig," it asked. "Two cans – Old Man?"

Metzger could not see the woman's features in the darkness but the voice seemed young. "You gobble?" he asked.

"Da, da, gobble," she answered. "Gobble – three packets, cancer sticks."

She used the soldiers' slang word for the issue cigarette. Should he – could he? What if she had her ponce there in the darkness with a knife in his hand? In the position he would be in, he would have no chance of defending himself.

The girl made up his mind for him. A small hand wormed its way into his flies and he could feel its touch on his skin.

"Here," he gasped, as her hands crawled over him, inside his jacket, feeling the hair on his chest, his belly – everywhere. "Here – here's your cancer sticks... Now gobble!"

She grabbed the cigarettes and stowed them away. Then she got on her knees. As she began to work her trick and he realised joyfully that it was going to come off at last, he already started to frame the words he would use to the others back in the room. "She was only ten, but well-rounded, with the face of a little Goddess."

And then lust overcame him and he cared no longer. It was all over in a matter of seconds. But leaning against the cold wall, his pants around his ankles, he was gasping as if he had been running a great race. Yet in spite of the effort, he was happy, happier even than that tremendous day when he had first been promoted lance-corporal and he had known that he was going to be somebody in the *Wehrmacht*. Slowly he started to pull up his pants, then remembered he had not even seen the child who had restored his manhood.

He must see her face so that he could boast about her to the other NCOs.

Somehow he managed to get out his matches. Once, twice, three times he tried to strike a match. But in his nervous excitement he kept breaking the matches. Finally he succeeded. Shielding it carefully with his hand, he brought it forward so that he could get a brief glimpse of her. An ancient, slack-cheeked crone, her face covered in liver spots, grinned back at him, revealing a toothless mouth. He stared at her in horror. She must have been at least sixty!

"You like gobble?" she mumbled.

***

Two days later their tanks started to roll east again. It was a beautiful morning, the sky a bright blue, the birds singing in the trees.

"It's good to be alive on mornings like these," von Dodenburg said enthusiastically as the clean-shaven, well-rested young tankers passed, their eyes searching the distant horizon for the enemy.

"You get your share of it, sir," Schulze said sourly, his head aching from the load of vodka he had taken aboard the night before.

"Come on, Schulze," von Dodenburg urged. "Don't be such a grumpy old bear. You've got a face like forty days' rain."

Sergeant Schulze stared up at the grey rolling cloud which was beginning to form over the distant mountains. "It's not rain we're gonna get," he remarked sourly. "The sky up there's hanging full of violins, believe you me, Captain."

But in the roar of the tanks no one heard him and even if they had they would have not believed his forecast on that wonderful autumn morning, with the prospect of fresh action and fresh glory blinding their eyes.

CHAPTER 15

The icy wind roared over the great white waste beyond the river and slashed their faces with snow crystals. The three hundred odd men left of Wotan had been holding the eight kilometre line of the Don, south-east of Rostov for three weeks now, ever since they had seized the vital bridge into the city and made its capture possible. But in those terrible three weeks they had lost more men than in the whole campaign.

They had fought off attack after attack across the River Don, steadily losing men and tanks. At first it had been easy, in spite of the tremendous Soviet superiority. But now the Don was frozen solid and, with the exception of half a dozen Mark IVs, their own vehicles were destroyed or immobile because they lacked winter oil and special greases to prevent the periscopes and gun-sights from freezing up.

There were no reserves left. Every man was in the line, thin summer uniforms covered in sparkling white hoar frost, their breath fogging the air like cigarette smoke at 50 degrees below zero and forming glittering crystals on their ear flaps. Lousy with lice they began scratching frantically as soon as they were brought into the "warming bunkers" to receive their only hot meal of the day, 'giddi-up soup', made of horseflesh and army bread, which had been sawn into slices with a wood saw and thawed out in the fire.

Now, at the end of their tether, they knew that the last Soviet counter-attack must come soon. All day there had been activity in the ruined villages on the other side of the river and, the night before, a sentry had spotted a long Soviet convoy sneaking its way towards their positions. Thus they waited like condemned men, their shoulders sagging, scarcely able to open their eyes; waiting for their turn to join the elongated white hummocks, from which a hand or a jackboot often protruded to indicate that it had once been a human being.

It was not surprising, therefore, that the sentries did not hear the returning patrol until it was almost upon them. Suddenly, like white ghosts, they loomed up out of the howling blizzard.

"Who's there?" an alarmed voice called through lice-ridden face rags. "Halt, or I'll fire."

"Sergeant Schulze!"

He plodded up to the German positions, his body wrapped in a looted rug which he had pinned round the front and stuffed with old copies of the SS newspaper Das Schwarze Korps. Behind him the rest of the patrol came to a halt.

"Is Major Geier up front," von Dodenburg asked, outlined by the snow flurries behind him. The young sentry tried to salute.

"No, sir," he said. "He's back at Handgrenade Rock."

Weakly von Dodenburg touched his mittened hand to his white helmet. "Thank you." As if he had a very stiff neck, he turned his head to the others. "Get under cover. Try to get some warm food. Sentry, you take care of the stiff. SS Rifleman Krause, 2nd Company."

The sentry looked at the long bundle trussed up in a tarpaulin. Von Dodenburg raised his voice. "And everybody on your toes. The Popovs'll be coming soon."

"Yer," Schulze added,"and, remember this, they won't be bringing yer hot giddi-up soup either! So keep yer eyes skinned, *ponemyu?*"

"Ponemyu," the sentry said automatically. Like most of the SS troopers who became the veterans of the Russian campaign, both soldiers were already using odd pieces of broken Russian in conversation. *Ponemyu* meant 'understood'.

While the rest of the patrol scrambled into the trench and wound their way to the warming bunker, von Dodenburg and Schulze set off towards Handgrenade Rock, heads bent and mouth shut against the blizzard. They skirted Cock-up Corner, where their own Stukas had wiped out a platoon of 3rd Company; past The Horses, three dead artillery mares, a dead sergeant slumped over the middle one, frozen for eternity, and plodded on to the Rock, which stuck up from the white desert like a gigantic potato masher.

They pushed aside the stiff tank tarpaulin which covered the entrance to the dark little bunker, built against the side of the big rock which filled one wall, and coughed at the fug. The Vulture was sitting on a tank seat, ripped from some immobile Mark IV, his frost-bitten right foot propped up on a case of 75-mm ammunition. In the dark corner Metzger was poking with his bayonet at a smoking fire, made of frozen horse manure and ration boxes. On the dirt floor next to him there was an open tin of grits and several slices of dark bread.

"Welcome," the Vulture said, as if there was nothing in the least unusual about his headquarters or their own filthy appearance. "Metzger, a

glass of *crème du crime* for Captain von Dodenburg and Schulze."

Metzger dropped his bayonet and picked up the five-litre oil-can containing the home-made spirits. He poured them two canteen cups half full of the liquid, made of looted medical rubbing spirits and the jam issued to the troops. They took the metal cups gratefully and took a deep gulp.

"You hungry?" the Vulture asked, when they had finished their drinks. Metzger had started toasting a piece of thawed-out bread on the end of his bayonet. "There's *shit on shingles*."

"No time, sir," von Dodenburg declined the mincemeat oil toast with a shake of his head. "The balloon's going to go up at any moment."

"Go on. What did you find out?"

Von Dodenburg fumbled in his pocket and dropped the metal insignia on the map table. "325th Rifle Division and the 60th Cavalry. We cut these off their dead last night, only four kilometres away from the river."

"Tanks?"

"I don't know sir. We didn't hear any last night."

"But we did see horse tracks in the snow," Schulze butted in.

The Vulture tapped the map in front of him thoughtfully. "So that's three positive identifications – the two rifle divisions – the 325th and 31st – and the cavalry division?" He tugged at his monstrous nose. "It doesn't look good. Three hundred of us holding a front that should be the responsibility of a division and now this – perhaps thirty thousand Russians ready to jump on us!" He slapped the map. "God knows what those damned base stallions at headquarters are up to! Why can't they leave this sort of job to the stubble-hoppers? We're armour – we're bloody well wasted here!"

Von Dodenburg knew that the Vulture was not afraid of the odds; his mind was too full of decorations and promotions to concern itself with the emotion of fear. His major preoccupation was ensuring that the Wotan was not wiped out in some purposeless operation which would not further his career. "What are we going to do, sir?" he ventured.

"What the devil can we do?" the Vulture said angrily. "We'll just have to sit it out here and see what happens."

***

It had been a long frightening night. All along the vast horizon, the Russians had lit hundreds of braziers. But not to warm themselves. Indeed nobody

could be seen round them. They were being used to dazzle any possible German observers, while everything else was plunged into darkness through which the Russians brought up more and more reinforcements.

Now even the thickest of the peasant 'booty Germans' knew that the Russians would soon attack. Still some of them had been able to sleep, curled up in the ice-holes, covering themselves up with everything they could find, while the more nervous played skit in the flickering light of a Hindenburg Candle or if they were lucky by that of a lamp-heater, which operated on both gas or paraffin. The lamp-heater was a much prized possession; and there was a story going the rounds that the Wehrmacht was working on an unproven model which would dispense endless streams of good Munich beer.

***

Just before dawn they stood to, shivering in the darkness while the company officers checked their weapons, and their fingers to see if they were discoloured by frostbite. They were followed by the NCOs rationing out great canteen cups of *crème du crime*, and boys who a month before had turned up their noses in disgust at a glass of beer gulped the stuff down greedily.

"That's the ticket," Schulze bellowed enthusiastically. "It'll make heroes of the lot of you. And if the Ivans don't get you, your shitty liver will."

At dawn, the Soviet batteries opened up with an earth-shaking roar. Flight after flight of rockets from the Stalin Organs flew over the ice, crashing into the snow behind them. The men of Wotan did not even duck. They watched the bombardment, drunken stupid grins on their grey races, as if they were observing a peacetime firework display.

For ten minutes the storm raged all around them and the air was filled with hot steel shards and razor-sharp lumps of flying ice. Then as suddenly as it had started, the bombardment ended and the officers were stumbling up the line blowing their whistles and the non-coms were bellowing hoarsely. "Stand to; stand to; the Popovs are coming!"

On the other side of the Don there was a gleam of silver. Faintly they could hear a hoarse command. There was a deep hollow boom. Suddenly a great sparkle ran down the bank as a military band broke into a march. A long line of men, arms linked together, rifles thrust under their elbows, thin old-fashioned bayonets pointing upwards stepped on to the ice, their long cloth coats flapping about the ankles of their polished jack-boots. In their

front a lone officer raised his sabre. In perfect formation the Russians started to march forward. The Germans could hear the steady crunch of their boots on the ice above the music. Another line stepped onto the ice, and another. Without looking back, the lone officer raised his sabre again. The whole formation burst into song, their words punctuated by the steady crunch of their boots. Their bayonets gleaming, the human wall came closer and closer, while the defenders waited in amazement.

Then the band stopped playing. The singing faltered and died away. The Russians were less than four hundred metres away. Von Dodenburg licked his lips and raised his Schmeisser. He hoped it would fire. As soon as the alarm had been sounded, he had pissed on the bolt and wiped away the urine carefully with the warm inside of his felt jacket. Slowly and deliberately he took aim on the lone officer with the sabre. He aimed at the white blur above the sweeping grey cavalry moustachios. All around him in the foxhole line he could hear his men working their bolts to prevent the grease from freezing up. The Russians were three hundred metres away. They must charge soon. "Hold your fire," he ordered, trying to control his breathing.

The lone officer halted. He swung round as if he were on some eighteenth century parade ground and bellowed something at the soldiers.

"He's telling them that they must be prepared to die for Mother Russia," one of the 'booty Germans' translated. "Now he's saying..."

But his words were drowned by the great roar that rose from the thousand Russian throats. As one they surged forward, bayonets tucked into their hips. "Urra, urra," the vast stretch of the line echoed and re-echoed to their cries.

"Fire!" von Dodenburg screamed.

"Fire!" All along the foxhole line the officers followed his lead.

Von Dodenburg squeezed the trigger of his machine pistol. The Schmeisser rose and fell against his cheek. Empty cartridge cases clattered onto the ice.

The lone officer staggered. He let the sabre sink. Then he raised it again. But only for a moment. Slowly he relaxed his grip. His knees began to give way. The sabre fell and clattered onto the ice, skidding away from him. He fell with a crash.

The first burst swept into the Russian line. Scores of men were mown down in that first volley.

From the flanks the Spandaus burst into life. Within seconds the first wave was wiped out. But the second line stumbled over their bodies and advanced, firing from the hip as they ran. Russians began to detach themselves from the rest and pelted towards the machine guns. Suddenly the first Spandau went out. Then the second. Over the snap and crackle of small arms fire, von Dodenburg could hear Schwarz screaming. "Change the barrel – change the barrel!"

He glanced over his shoulder. The barrel of the nearest Spandau was glowing, steam rising from it in little ripples. Frantically a grey-faced youngster, his eyes wild with terror, was fumbling with it. Schwarz pushed him to one side. He grabbed the barrel and screamed as it burned through his gloves into his flesh. Cursing, he flung it into the snow. The snow hissed and turned black. Tears streaming down his frozen cheeks, he fitted the other one. The gunner forced the new belt in and it chattered into action again, while Schwarz held his burnt hands under his armpits, whimpering with pain.

Not a moment too soon. The Soviet skirmishers were only a hundred metres away. The slugs cut into them, howling them over by the score. They skidded over the ice, screaming with pain. But still the mass came on, crying their terrible "urra", as if they would never be stopped. They were only seventy metres away now.

Then they hit the minefield. The teller mines intended for tanks didn't explode. But their own 'debollockers' did. Suddenly their front was a crazy mess of screaming Russians clutching their bloodied crotches, hopping around on one leg or fighting to open their flies to see the extent of the damage.

Von Dodenburg sprang up from his foxhole, forgetting that he was weighed down by three layers of iced clothing. "Prepare to attack!" he screamed, careless of the Russian lead cutting the air all around him. Without waiting to see if his company were following, he stumbled forward, firing his machine pistol from the hip.

The German soldiers crawled out of their holes and followed him at a clumsy run, their rifles tossed to one side, their hands gripping spades, axes, knives. Like a pack of wild animals they flung themselves on the wounded Russians, slashing, hacking and slicing.

They had no mercy. As the Russians lay screaming on the ice, holding their ruined genitals, they rained blow upon blow on their unprotected faces.

Caught up in an elemental rage-of-the-blood, they continued with their

gory butchery until the officers staggered among them, screaming at them to stop.

Some of the SS men had just strung up a couple of dead Russians over a fire made of ration packets, in an attempt to thaw out their bodies so that they could steal their leather boots, when the next attack came.

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This time it was more skilful – five T-34s coming in from the flanks, with little infantry "grapes" behind them, taking their time, advancing with caution, obviously testing the Germans out.

Schulze lowered the binoculars he had taken from the dead Russian with the sabre. The lenses were already beginning to freeze up again although he had kept them in the warmest place on his body – between his legs.

"They're giving us the come-on, sir," he said to von Dodenburg.

"Yes. Let 'em come a bit closer. Then I'll decide." The T-34s started to pick up speed. Behind them the Russians in their ankle-length coats broke into a trot. Von Dodenburg was taking a calculated risk. If the Russian tanks managed to get within a hundred metres of their line, they were finished. It would take the Vulture back at Handgrenade Rock a good half hour to get their own Mark IVs started and by that time they would be dead.

Five hundred – four hundred – three hundred metres. He would have to make the decision now. "All right, smoke," he yelled. Five men knelt on the top of their foxholes, held their rifle butts on the snow and fitted the grenades. In ragged succession they fired. All rive hit the ice about fifty metres in front of the tanks. The grenades exploded with soft plops. Thick white smoke started to stream out of them. They fired again. A rough smoke screen began to form between the defenders and the advancing tanks.

"Come on," von Dodenburg yelled to Schulze.

Together they doubled clumsily past Schwarz's positions.

"I'll go with you," Schwarz roared over the noise of the tanks.

Von Dodenburg pushed him to one side. "Your hands are no good!" he cried. "Can't use you. Schulze, grab the trails." Schulze bent down and, with a heave of his powerful back, picked up the iron trails of the 37-mm anti-tank cannon. Von Dodenburg flung himself over the thin barrel and brought his weight down to help him. Together they pushed the half-ton weight towards the smoke screen. But the smoke screen was being blown away rapidly. They

only had a matter of seconds now.

"This is far enough," von Dodenburg cried.

Schulze dropped the trails, kicked them apart and fixed the connecting link, while von Dodenburg sprang from wheel to wheel pulling on the brakes. The smoke was almost dissipated now, and they could see the pyramid outline of the first T-34 slowly getting clearer. Schulze grabbed the shell clipped on the inside of the shield and rammed it into the breech. The breech lever clanged shut. Von Dodenburg yanked the firing lever back.

The gun erupted like a wild horse. The breech flew open. The blast slashed them across the face. Schulze thrust in another shell. Suddenly the T-34 burst into flame and huge chunks of metal went flying through the air. But there was no time for triumph. As slugs started to patter against the shield, another T-34 nosed its way through the smoke, its gun swinging from side to side.

Schulze reacted instantly. Whipping a grenade out of his belt, he flung it to one side. It erupted harmlessly some twenty metres away. The Soviet gunner responded as he had anticipated he would. He swung his gun round and fired at the burst.

"Fire!" Schulze yelled. Von Dodenburg jerked the firing bar.

The armour-piercing shell caught the T-34 at the base of the turret. The massive piece of armour, weighing at least five tons, rose straight into the air and crashed down again in exactly the same spot. The T-34 came to a halt, smoke pouring from it. A moment later it exploded, mowing down the 'grape' which had been running behind it.

The remaining T-34s turned and fled, leaving the supporting infantry to the mercy of the defenders. And the men of Wotan needed no invitation. A volley of lead ripped into them. They died in their scores as they fled over the littered ice, throwing away their weapons in panic.

"There'll be the Knight's Cross in this for you, Schulze," von Dodenburg gasped.

"Sod the Knight's Cross," said Schulze. "And sod the fucking war. I've had enough."

CHAPTER 16

By the first week of December, 1941, the whole Crimean front was beginning to break down. Retreat was in the air. The base stallions began to desert in their thousands; and in the rear areas special Death's Head officer patrols stalked the shattered streets stringing up deserters without trial, leaving their frozen bodies to dangle in the wind as a warning to the rest. But the mass desertions continued; and fewer and fewer supplies were getting through to the men at the front.

The field commanders started to lose their nerve. General Hans Count von Sponeck, commander of XLII Corps, ordered the withdrawal of the Wotan's comrades-in-arms at Brest-Litovsk, the 46th Infantry. Manstein countermanded the order: "Withdrawal must be stopped at once." But it was too late.

The shattered 46th pulled back and Count von Sponeck was arrested, reduced to the rank of private and sentenced to death. The 46th Infantry was broken up, at the order of Field-Marshal von Reichenau himself. But von Reichenau, commander-in-chief of Army Group South, could not close his eyes to the reality of the situation.

That first week in December, he telephoned the Führer himself and told him bluntly, "The Russians are penetrating into the over-extended German line. If disaster is to be averted the front must be shortened – in other words, taken back behind the Myus. There is no other way, my Führer."

But still Hitler refused to admit defeat. He hung on, and on the Don, the starving, exhausted remnants of the SS Assault Battalion Wotan, which had left Belgium a thousand strong, fought off attack after attack.

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The afternoon attack started with a roar like that of an infuriated beast. The Spandau gunners crawled into their pits. The riflemen began working their bolts back and forth, feeling the grease grow thinner and the action easier as the grease warmed up. With clumsy fingers the surviving officers fumbled for their whistles, ready to alert the eighty dirty, demoralized scarecrows which was all that was left of the once proud Wotan.

The whole Russian front blinked with violet light. More than two hundred shells burst in or about their positions.

"Alarm, alarm!" the NCOs screamed. In their holes the riflemen began clawing off their mittens and started banging away at the little figures running across the ice towards them. There seemed no end to the number of Russians waiting to cross the deadly skating rink of the Don.

"They're up to Pak Point!" someone screamed. And the Russians had indeed reached the shattered 37-mm anti-tank gun, now hidden in a mantle of snow.

"Spandau – concentrate Pak Point!" Schwarz croaked.

Suddenly something hurtled down from the sky. Schwarz flung himself on the snow and the Spandau disappeared in a ball of red and yellow flame. A rifleman threw away his weapon, sprang out of his foxhole and started running towards Pak Point. A burst of Schmeisser fire caught him between the shoulder blades just as he was raising his hands in surrender. He fell flat on the ice and the Russians stamped over his body as if it were a welcome mat. Then they were in the Wotan foxhole line, Mongol faces lathered in sweat.

The panic-stricken runner skidded through the opening, pulling the tarpaulin down with him, his chest heaving like a pair of old bellows. "The Ivans have broken through!" he shouted.

"Metzger," the Vulture said. "Get the engine started."

"Sir!" And picking up his machine pistol, Metzger doubled outside.

"You," the Vulture said to the runner, "give me your bayonet." Hastily Geier slashed open his boot. His leg swelled out of it, a dirty, pus-filled, stinking grey. He grabbed the bandages he had kept ready for this very emergency and started wrapping them round the frostbitten foot. Outside they could hear Metzger kicking away the stove from underneath the Mark IV. He said a silent prayer to Mars that the tank would start.

"Get me those strips of horse blanket," the Vulture said to the runner. "Quick!" The two of them bound the blanket round his leg and foot with string. He tugged at it to ensure it was firmly fixed; then hopping like some ancient Milord with gout, he grabbed his machine pistol and stumbled outside. At the same moment the Mark IV's engine burst into life. He cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Get in," he shouted at the runner. "You're the gunner. Get the lead out of your arse, boy; there isn't a moment to lose!" A moment later they were off

towards the sound of the fighting – the coward, the cripple and the boy, like allegorical figures from some medieval primitive.

The Wotan line was a confused mess of screaming, swaying, dying men, and the Vulture ignored it. He could not attack there without endangering his own men. There was only one chance to stop the rot. "Pak Point," he yelled and kicked Metzger in the small of the back to indicate straight ahead.

The ice was swarming with Russians, hurrying towards their comrades fighting in the Wotan line. But Metzger dared not hesitate. He put his foot down on the accelerator and roared right into them. They scattered in panic and he rolled on, cutting a bloody swathe through their ranks, while the Vulture fired blindly into their midst.

"*Halt!*"

Metzger pulled back on the tiller bars. The Mark IV skidded two or three metres and came to a halt. "Gunner, HE over their heads – and quick!" Geier yelled. The boy pulled the firing lever and the HE shell exploded over the heads of the Russians in the Wotan line.

The Russians tried to rush the stationary tank, but Metzger and the Vulture mowed them down from the protection of the armour. In the Wotan line, the Russians began to break. Flinging all caution to the wind, the Vulture dropped over the side of the tank and hobbling across the ice, dragging his monstrously swollen foot behind, he attacked the Russian rear single-handed.

Five minutes later the Russian attack was broken and they were streaming back the way they had come, leaving 300 dead and dying sprawled on the ice and among the Wotan positions. But Fick's 3rd Company, which had borne the main brunt of the break-through was down to Fick himself and two wounded booty Germans. The end was near.

***

Field Marshal von Brauchitsch, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, was fired first as the chief scapegoat. He was followed by Field Marshal von Bock, to whom the Führer was pleased to grant "sick leave", after the hard-pressed chief of Army Group Centre had informed the 'greatest captain of all times' that he could not hold much longer.

In the end Guderian flew to Hitler's HQ in East Prussia to put the

Army's case to the Führer. He pulled no punches. The Army would have to retreat!

The Führer's sallow face flushed angrily. "Once I've authorized a retreat there won't be any holding them," he rasped. "The troops will just run. And with the frost and the deep snow and the icy roads that means the heavy weapons will be the first to be abandoned and the light ones next and then the rifles will be thrown away and in the end there'll be nothing left. No, the defensive positions must be held. Transport junctions and supply centres must be defended like fortresses. The troops must dig their nails into the ground; they must dig in and not yield an inch."

His eyes bored into Guderian's. But the Colonel-General did not lower his gaze. "My Führer," he said, "the ground in Russia at present is frozen solid to a depth of one and a half metres. No one can dig in there." In the background the flunkies and the toadies in their immaculate uniforms drew in their breath sharply. *How dare he speak to the Führer like that?* their looks seemed to say.

"Then you must get the mortars to fire at the ground to make shell-craters," Hitler replied. "That's what we did in Flanders in the Great War."

"In Flanders the ground was soft," Guderian reminded him. "But in Russia the shells produce holes no more than ten centimetres deep and the size of a wash basin – the soil is as hard as iron." Before the Führer had time to object, he went on: "Positional warfare in this miserable terrain will lead to the same terrible losses as in the Great War. We shall lose the flower of our Officers and NCOs and those losses will be irreplaceable."

There was a deathly silence in the conference room. Guderian could see the whitening of Hitler's knuckles as he tried to control his temper. Hitler brought his face closer to Guderian's and said softly, "Do you think Frederick the Great's grenadiers died gladly, Colonel-General? And yet the King was justified in demanding of them the sacrifice of their lives. I too consider myself justified in demanding of each German soldier that he should sacrifice his life."

***

The front began to melt away. Just before dawn when they knew the fighting would start yet again, they would sneak out of their foxholes, rags tied around their boots, and stumble into the forests, leaving their comrades to discover

yet another empty hole. Others would pull out the Russian safe conduct which they had secreted in their lousy rags on pain of death and squirm through the icy night to the Russian positions, hissing: "*Comrade nemtyski – ponemayu?*" And there were a few who took the only other way out: rifle positioned along the body, naked big toe pressed through the trigger guard. A quick squeeze and an end to the hunger, cold and endless misery.

Two days before Christmas, the Vulture found that his communications with the infantry regiment to his immediate rear had gone. At first he thought that the usual morning artillery 'hate' had blown out the lines, but when at midday the infantry cooks did not come up with the hayboxes full of the usual 'giddi-up soup', he knew that it was something more serious than that. He sent Metzger off to check, although he knew he couldn't rely on him in the least, especially if there were any danger involved. An hour later Metzger burst into the HQ, his face greyer than ever.

"The shits," he gasped, "the wet-tailed shits, they've..." He broke off, as if he dare not utter the words.

"Done what?"

"They've buggered off, sir!" he said weakly and looked as if he might begin to cry at any moment. "Left us here on our sodding tod."

"So that's it," the Vulture said and stroked his nose. "So Wotan's on its own at last."

***

That same afternoon the Russians sent a captain riding slowly over the ice on a sturdy little mare, a white rag clasped in his gloved hand. He looked down at the survivors contemptuously, his face fresh and well-fed, the thick furs he wore protecting him from the icy wind. "I have come to ask your commander to surrender," he said in flawless German.

"Are you a Russian, sir?" Schulze asked in mock innocence. "A real Russian?"

"Of course I am," the captain retorted. "What do you think?"

"Well, sir," Schulze said hesitantly, "you speak such good German that I thought you might be an emigrant – a Jew."

"A yid!" the captain said in horror. "I'm a pure-blooded Russian!"

"Well, if that's the case," Schulze said, reaching up and grabbing the white flag, "you might as well stick this up your pure-blooded Russian arse!"

He broke the pole neatly over his raised knee and flung its two halves contemptuously on the frozen snow. "Sod off, you Popov bastard, we're not surrendering!" Smartly he brought his hand down over the mare's flank. It whinnied and next moment broke into a wild gallop back the way it had come, with the captain fighting desperately to regain control.

"And tell your Popov boss that Wotan is not to be had for the asking!" Schulze shouted after him. "We aren't finished yet, comrade."

But the Vulture knew that they were. Time was fast running out for the battered survivors.

The CO looked round the exhausted faces of his surviving officers and NCOs in the tiny smoke-filled HQ. He had already made his decision: the battalion was down to exactly forty-five men fit to march.

"We're moving out tonight," he said.

There was a gasp of surprise from the three remaining officers. Fick, who had a bad chest wound, but who insisted on staying in the line, gasped, "Orders, sir? Orders from above?"

The Vulture shook his head. "No, my orders."

"But sir," Schwarz said. "The Wotan never retreats."

"We are not retreating." The Vulture smiled. "We are tidying up our front."

"The Reichsführer will regard it differently."

"Quite frankly, Schwarz," the Vulture said calmly, "the Reichsführer can go and piss up his sleeve. I'm here: he's nice and warm somewhere in Berlin."

"I must protest," Schwarz began, but the Vulture waved him to be silent.

"I want a volunteer," he said. "Someone who will stay behind and keep firing the Spandaus. Perhaps for two hours. That should be sufficient time to give us a start. It will be an Ascension Day mission, of course." He said the words as if he were announcing the date of some pre-war Battalion sports day. "There'll be the sore throat in it for the man who volunteers." That goes without saying.

"Sir," Lieutenant Fick stepped forward. "I'll do it!"

"But Fick," von Dodenburg protested, "you're in no shape to..."

"Fick will do," the Vulture interrupted with an air of finality. "Thank you." He thrust out his hand and took Fick's. "I thank you in the name of the Battalion. We shall not forget you."

Fick's weary face flushed with pleasure. "I'll go and see to the guns now before it gets too dark."

As one the assembled officers and NCOs clicked to attention and saluted the young Lieutenant as he went out into the howling blizzard.

Von Dodenburg waited till he had gone, then he turned on the Vulture angrily. "How can you let him go like that, sir? He's bushed. Let me do it. I'm still fit enough and I'm unwounded."

"Will you be quiet, von Dodenburg?" the Vulture snapped. "The man's a fool, a brave one, but still a fool. And as you rightly point out, he's wounded too."

Von Dodenburg drew himself up. "As a National Socialist officer, I must fight for the cause..."

"The cause," the Vulture sneered. "I know what you and Schwarz think of me, von Dodenburg. But it's people like me who keep Germany going. People like Schulze there, or my pet coward Metzger trying to steal my bread ration. Those poor stupid booty Germans in the corner?" He pointed at the badly wounded men slumped against the wall. "They are the reality. They want to live out their petty little lives. They don't want to croak for the cause, the Horst Wessel Lied, the bands playing in the Unter den Linden, the Party rallies at Nuremberg. They are the true face of Germany, trying to survive for their own petty reasons, fighting like fury simply to keep alive – not for some vulgar, nebulous cause."

He stopped and waved his hand at von Dodenburg contemptuously, as if he and his point-of-view were too absurd to waste any more time on. "Now then, let's get on with it," he continued, his voice as calm as ever.

They moved out in a long weary file just after dusk, stamping through the deep snow with dogged persistence. When they had reached the cover of the first line of firs, the Vulture pulled out his signal pistol and pulled the trigger. It was the signal for Fick, sitting next to the Spandau, their last can of *crème du crime* at his side.

The machine gun began to chatter almost immediately, sending white tracer zig-zagging across the ice of the Don. They plodded on. Behind them the Spandau continued to stutter. It accompanied their steady, gasping progress through the waist-deep snow for another half-hour. Then finally the last machine gun fell silent.

The Vulture stepped to one side and let the survivors plod past him. Von Dodenburg fell out too and joined him. In a silence broken only by the

crunch of the men's boots over the snow they stared back at the way they had come.

Von Dodenburg felt the Vulture's fingers round his arm. "They'll never believe it," he said, as if he were talking to himself. "In years to come, no one who wasn't here will ever believe it could have happened."

CHAPTER 17

"Come on you heroes," Schulze urged them, wiping the snowflakes off his face. "Don't tell me the elite of the nation can't take it!"

They had been marching two days now, with the Cossacks on their heels all the time. Everywhere the front had broken down and the Germans were streaming west, concerned only with putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the marauding Russians and their unbelievable cruelty to prisoners. Twice the thirty-odd survivors of Wotan had been slotted into a patched-up German line and twice the line had broken in the first hour of the Russian attack.

Schulze looked at the stragglers, staggering after the main body like very old men, their eyes glazed with tiredness, seeing only the boots of the man in front.

"Get the lead out of your butts," he called. "The Ivans'll have the eggs off you in a couple of seconds flat – with a blunt razor."

A Russian shell whined over their heads and exploded harmlessly in the deep snow a hundred metres away. Instinctively they dropped and waited. But the Ivans weren't ranging in on them; it was just an odd shell. Painfully, they began to clamber to their feet again, not even attempting to knock the snow off their rags. A straggler, his feet bundled in Ivan foot-rags, looted from some dead Soviet, did not get up. He lay there panting in the snow, as if he had just run a great race.

Schulze staggered over to him. "Get up – get yer arse up!" The boy lifted up his head. "I can't...can't, Sarge," he whimpered.

"The Popovs'll pull it off you with a pair of blacksmith's tongs, son," Schulze threatened.

But his threat had no effect. The boy's head sank down on the snow. He was beaten.

"Get up!" Schulze cried.

"*Can't!*"

Angrily Schulze kicked him in the ribs. "Come on, you bastard," he roared, "*haul ass!*"

But the boy just groaned. With a grunt, Schulze bent down and slung the boy over his shoulder. With his free hand he tossed the boy's rifle into the

snow. "Fuck this for the sodding victorious Wotan," he grunted scornfully and staggered after the rest.

Some hours later they heard the faint sound of boots moving cautiously through the thick fir forest. The Vulture hobbled to the rear of the line, gave the hand signal and they sank to the iron-hard ground.

"*Popovs!*" The word was hissed from mouth to mouth. Suddenly their weariness was gone. Even those who a few minutes before had been racked by the gut-twisting pain of bleeding dysentery were alert. In these last terrible days they had seen enough mutilated German stubble-hoppers who had fallen into the hands of the Russians to know that they didn't want to be taken alive.

The Vulture gave Schwarz and von Dodenburg an urgent hand signal. Frantically tugging off his bandages, Schwarz doubled into the firs while von Dodenburg took his position next to Schulze, who was the rearguard. He plumped down in the deep snow and pulled the looted sheet over his head. The Soviet ski troops came gliding down the hill like a line of white ghosts, and in the forest the waiting SS troopers could see the first of them cautiously approaching their position. Their frozen fingers curled around the triggers of their weapons.

"The first Popov," Schulze hissed under the sheet, "the one with the red star on his helmet. I'll take him. *Horosho?*"'

"*Horosho*," von Dodenburg replied, switching his sights to the men following the officer. Schulze was the better shot. In the forest more and more Russians were approaching Schwarz's hiding place in the clump of snow-bound bushes.

"Fire!" the Vulture screamed. Just as they had planned, they ducked beneath their sheet as the Russians came in for the attack.

With a sharp hiss the first ski-trooper shot by them. And another. In the heat of battle, the Popovs missed them completely. They flung back the sheet. Schulze took aim and fired. The commissar, always the heart of any Popov unit. threw up his arms and pitched on his face. Von Dodenburg fired from the kneeling position, just as Schwarz emerged from his hiding place in the forest. Together they poured slugs into the unsuspecting Soviets' backs. Desperately the Cossack ski-troopers tried to break out of the trap, but the men of Wotan had no mercy. The Russians hadn't a chance. It was sheer massacre.

Then the surviving Cossacks burst through the trap and fled across the snow, flinging their weapons away in their eagerness to escape.

The moment of mayhem and murder was over. Exhausted, the troopers staggered through the forest like drunks, searching for dead Russians they could loot.

The Vulture, leaning wearily against a tree, shook his head as he took in the scene. "Animals," he sighed, as if he were talking to himself. "Absolute animals."

Von Dodenburg looked at his CO anxiously. For the first time since he had known him, the Vulture was beat. He had even forgotten to screw his monocle into his eye, and his voice had lost that cynical Prussian rasp that seemed so appropriate for delivering his usual cynical barbs.

"What now, sir?" he asked.

"Now, my dear von Dodenburg," the Vulture said slowly. "Now we march, but if we don't find food and warmth by tonight there will be no more SS Assault Battalion Wotan."

He levered himself up from the tree and shuffled towards the centre of the glade like a very old man.

***

They stumbled into the camp entirely by accident. Behind them the Russian flares were soaring into the darkening sky with increasing frequency and they could hear the slow tick-tick of the ancient 1905-type Popov machine gun. The enemy wasn't far off now. And then suddenly the snow cleared for an instant and they saw the little wooden encampment, with the line of motor-sleds, engines idling to prevent them from freezing up, standing in the square. But it wasn't the huts nor the sleds which caught their attention. It was the flag flying over the central hut – the flag of National Socialist Germany.

Von Dodenburg felt his heart give a great jump of joy. "We're saved sir!" he cried at the Vulture. "It's our own people!"

"Wait, wait a minute," the Vulture said weakly and laid a feeble hand on his sleeve to restrain him. "We must check first."

But before von Dodenburg could answer, a door in the central hut was flung open and a girl stumbled out into the snow. Another followed, her long jet-black hair hanging loose, her big breasts flopping, her body seemingly impervious to the freezing cold.

"Christ on a Christmas tree," Schulze gasped in amazement. "They're bollock naked!"

Before anyone else had time to react, a pot-bellied, brown-uniformed figure lumbered after them, his open jacket flapping in the breeze to reveal the old Great War type Iron Cross and the Party Badge in Gold.

"A golden pheasant!" someone yelled joyously. "*It's a fucking golden pheasant!*"

There was no stopping them now. Yelling and whooping crazily, waving their weapons about their heads, they stumbled down the snowy hillside towards the huts. They had done it!

They pushed into the dim smoke-filled central hut. German Army auxiliaries in ragged sheepskins and German Army trousers were busy packing cases while the drunken girls lolled in the chairs drinking out of bottles and dipping their dirty hands in bowls of sunflower seeds.

"Who's in charge here?" von Dodenburg snapped. The laughter froze on the Russian whores' faces. They stared drunkenly at the lice-ridden, snow-covered soldiers as if they were visitors from another world.

"Shut that door," a thick voice, full of good food and drink, shouted from the inner room. "It's cold enough in here to freeze the balls off you!"

Von Dodenburg pushed his way through the auxiliaries, whose faces had gone pale with fear at the sight of the SS runes on the soldiers' collars. These auxiliaries were *Hiwis*: Russians recruited locally. Schulze grabbed a bottle from one of the naked whores and roaring, "*Nastrovya pan,*" poured a great slug of it down his throat. The drunken whores crowded among them, giggling uproariously, thrusting their bottles into the young soldiers' hands, feeding them sunflower seeds. While the Vulture watched them helplessly, his back propped against the wall, one of the whores picked up a balalaika and started to twang it. Another jumped up and began to swirl around.

The Golden Pheasant in the back room glared at von Dodenburg. "The Bodyguard, eh?" he snapped, taking in the armband on his sleeve. "I know Sepp Dietrich well. Served with him in Munich in the old days." He pulled his well-cut brown jacket straight so that von Dodenburg could see the 'Blood Order' on it which identified him as an Old Fighter who had given his blood for the Movement. Without taking his little pig's eyes off the young officer, he snapped to the girl, "Get your clothes on Ilona, will you! This young fellow, is going to burst his breeches in a minute, looking at your knockers."

The honey-blonde girl stuck her tongue out at the Golden Pheasant and, swinging round, went into the big room, flaunting her bottom deliberately in front of von Dodenburg. He felt a faint twinge of long-forgotten lust, but

knew there was no time for fun and games. In spite of the row outside he could hear the rumble of the Soviet artillery.

He turned to the Staff officer. "We're all that's left of the Wotan Battalion of the Bodyguard. We've been marching three days now and my men are beat. We must find transport –"

"I know, I know, Captain. In my day the German soldier did not run away from the enemy. But that's another matter. You can have all you can eat and drink. We're clearing out anyway. I've been ordered back to Kiev immediately. But transport..." He shrugged and left the sentence unfinished.

"But Area Leader," yon Dodenburg protested, using the Golden Pheasant's rank in order to flatter him, "don't you understand? My men are finished. They can't go on anymore. If they don't get transport, they'll have to stay here and wait for the Cossacks – and you know what that will mean."

"You've got your weapons, haven't you?" the Golden Pheasant said. "We old fellows stuck it out for four years in France, you lot shit your pants after four days in the line. Besides, there's no room for you on the sleds." He was suddenly hesitant and avoided von Dodenburg's eyes momentarily. "They're full of top secret papers meant for the eyes of Gauleiter Koch himself– and then there's my staff –"

"Your whores, you mean!" the Vulture's voice cut in. He was standing at the door, supported by Schwarz, his Schmeisser slung around his neck.

The Golden Pheasant flushed a brick red. "What the devil do you mean? My Christ, man, do you know who you're talking to!" He snapped his thick, sausage-like fingers beside himself with rage. "I could break you just like that!"

The Vulture sighed. "Schwarz," he said softly. "Go and check those sleds."

"Sir!" Schwarz hurried out, slinging his Schmeisser as he went.

"You can't do that," the Golden Pheasant cried in alarm. "Those papers are meant for one person only – Gauleiter Koch. This'll mean a punishment battalion for you, Major. Good God, man, have you gone mad? Don't you realise what you're..."

He stopped short, his mouth gaping, as Schwarz walked slowly through the door and dropped a golden goblet on the floor.

"Important papers – meant for Gauleiter Koch," the Vulture said slowly.

"Every sled is loaded with the same sort of stuff," Schwarz said. "He

must have looted half the Crimea." The Golden Pheasant blustered. "It's not mine. It's intended for Koch. I have an express order from him." He turned and began to fumble furiously in his brief case. "Let me show it to you."

"Shoot the fat bastard," the Vulture said, as if he were ordering a waiter to bring him a bowl of soup.

"*What!*"

The Golden Pheasant swung round in alarm as Schwarz pressed the trigger of his Schmeisser. His fat body spun from side to side as each slug hit him, until Schwarz's magazine was empty and the Golden Pheasant, the blood streaming from a dozen wounds, was allowed to sink slowly to the ground, dead. It was all over in a matter of minutes. A couple of other Golden Pheasants tried to prevent them unloading the sleds, pistols in their hands, their screaming whores running after them, trying to restrain them. But they were mown down in cold blood and they died among the gleaming loot being tossed so carelessly into the snow.

The rattle of the Russian tanks was getting ever closer. The drunken whores were grabbing what they could of the loot and running half-naked into the forest. The Hiwis gunned their engines anxiously, continually casting glances over their shoulders; they well knew what their fate would be if they were caught by their fellow countrymen. With renewed energy, born of fear and hope, the survivors finished unloading the sleds. "Mount up," the Vulture shouted shrilly and supported by Schwarz and von Dodenburg, he hobbled towards the lead sled.

"I'll take the rear sled, sir," Schulze shouted from the door of the central hut, machine pistol clenched in his fist.

"Good, but don't leave it too late!"

"Don't worry, I'll be there," Schulze replied. The men were scrambling for places in the sleds. The first Soviet flare hushed in a wide arc over their heads, bathing their emaciated faces in a blood-red hue. A moment later the first T-34 nosed its way through the firs, its long 75-mm swinging from side to side. A panic broke out among the Hiwis. The Vulture's driver let out the clutch with a jerk. The sled shot forward, throwing them against the support post. Gibbering like an idiot, the Hiwi crashed home second gear and shot the three-ton sled round the bend as if he were driving a toy car at some autumn village fair. Behind them the other Hiwis followed suit. As they cleared the glade, the first shell crashed into the central hut, sending its wooden walls flying like matchwood.

The Vulture looked back at the burning encampment, the flames making a death's head of his exhausted face. Yet his indomitable will still blazed in his eyes. "We shall be back," he said slowly, looking at the beaten faces of the handful of men that was all that remained of his Battalion. "Believe me, von Dodenburg, the Russians haven't seen the last of us yet. Wotan will return." He broke off suddenly. His head slumped on the young Captain's shoulder and he fell into an exhausted sleep, his task finally completed.

Von Dodenburg looked down at his CO's ugly face and felt a new kind of affection for him. The Vulture, he realised, was the supreme realist. Somehow or other they would return. One day a new SS Assault Storm Battalion would return to Russia and then the Ivans would really learn to fear the name of Wotan.

In the rear sled, Schulze nestled closer to the honey blonde's plump little naked body, hidden under a great fur rug, while her hand was already beginning to take stock of his equipment. Her Golden Pheasant was dead and she'd got herself a new chicken for the plucking. Schulze took a last bite out of the piece of pork he had snatched from the Golden Pheasant's table and flung the remainder over his shoulder. "Whee!" he yelled crazily as the shit-scared Hiwi driver took off into space from the summit of a small hill. The sled hit the snow again with a spine-chilling crash. It tore up the trail at a hundred kilometres an hour, the wind cutting their excited burning faces, as the girl's hand began to move more rapidly under the rug.

Sergeant Schulze raised himself on one elbow and screamed at the Russian tanks behind them. "Retreat is a thousand times better than advances, mates! The grub's better and the dames are randier!" Just before he spread her legs preparatory to burying himself in her eager body, he yelled in parting, "*Ponemayu?*"

– THE END –

FROZEN MOUNTAIN

previously known as
BLOOD AND ICE

DOGS OF WAR – VOLUME SEVEN

by Leo Kessler

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THE LAST BATTLE!

"And he is dead who will not fight,
and who dies fighting has increase."
Julian Grenfell, 'Into Battle' 1916

"Rather dead than Red."
Popular German Saying, 1945

"Oh, left-wing thinkers and intellectuals,
students of the avant-garde. When you hear
the barked command 'Hands behind your backs'
and begin the march towards the archipelago,
only then will you begin to understand."
Solzhenitsyn, 'Gulag Archipelago' 1973

BOOK 1 – SS REGIMENT EUROPA

CHAPTER 1

"Cavalry!"

Sergeant-Major Schulze, in charge of the little convoy of SS men, the survivors of SS Regiment Wotan, did not open his eyes.

The Corporal licked his lips anxiously and looked again at the dark shapes on horseback moving across the snow-capped height, parallel with the Hungarian road. "Schulze," he shook the big NCO's shoulder, "there's somebody up there, watching us! Looks like the Ivans to me."

"Christ!" Schulze groaned. "Can't even sleep in this bloody army!" He sat up and stared at the black flecks about half a kilometre away. They had to be Russians. The 4th SS Panzer Corps which was defending this part of the Hungarian front was desperately short of men: that is why they, the pathetic handful of survivors from the ill-fated Ardennes Offensive, were being rushed to the East.

Schulze glanced at the two half-tracks rattling along behind him at regulation convoy distance, their decks covered with camouflage nets against air attack. Below them the exhausted SS men, who had been travelling three days now, would be asleep like the men snoring all around him. "What do you think?" the Corporal, who was the air lookout, asked anxiously.

"Shut up!" Schulze said brutally. "I'm thinking where the Ivans are going to hit us." Schulze made up his mind. He stood up and whistled shrilly. The driver of the second half-track heard the whistle. His head spun in Schulze's direction.

Carefully, Schulze placed his hand on the top of his helmet, fingers outstretched. It was the infantry signal for 'rally on me'. The driver understood at once. He accelerated. Behind him the other driver did the same. Schulze crawled over the sleeping men, kicking each one in turn and shouting, "Don't grow corns on yer asses! Move yourselves!"

Everywhere the exhausted men began to sit up, grumbling and cursing and reaching automatically for their weapons. They were veterans. They knew Schulze would only wake them if there was trouble.

Schulze balanced himself precariously on the swaying back of the half-track. The second vehicle was about a metre and a half behind but he dare not stop the convoy to transmit his orders, just in case there were other Russians

waiting for them in the firs on either side of the little road. He took a deep breath and launched himself into the air.

His big feet crashed onto the half-track's blunt snout. His hands clutched desperately and next instant he was dragging himself over the metal wind-shield into the cab. He banged the butt of his Schmeisser machine pistol hard against the metal side of the cab. "Shake those little sleepy heads of yours awake," he yelled, "while you've still got some to shake."

The worn, unshaven men of the second half-track came to life.

"Now listen," Schulze said. "We've got visitors up there," he jerked a big dirty thumb at the skyline, "Popovs! Right, stand by the lot of you and when they hit us – which they will – I want you lot to show off like ten big Bavarian boobies. Remember you lot are Wotan!"

They grinned back. Nothing ever seemed to shake *SS Hauptscharführer* Schulze!

***

The village was typically Hungarian – a collection of shabby white-painted cottages with straw roofs, now heavy with snow surrounded by little tumbledown picket fences. But there was something strange about this one. No smoke was coming from the cottages, yet a herd of sheep, shivering and trembling in the cold, stood grouped by the roadside. Schulze glanced at the skyline. The cavalry had disappeared.

He acted at once. "All right," he bellowed above the clatter of the half-tracks, "I think this is where the Ivans have decided to welcome us to the Eastern Front!"

The SS troopers in their camouflaged, green mottled overalls needed no urging. Hurriedly they positioned themselves behind the vehicle's metal sides, weapons at the ready. Schulze nodded at the driver. He put his foot down on the accelerator and the half-track shot forward, throwing up clouds of snow on both sides like the wake of a fast ship.

Schulze fired a burst over the driver's head. The sheep, jostling and bumping into each other crazily, fled down the road into the daisy chain of mines which had been spread across it in anticipation of this moment. The first mine exploded with a thick impressive crump. Angry scarlet flame shot upwards, sending animals hurtling through the air. The half-tracks sped along the smoking road, and started to take the first wild bursts of enemy slugs on

their armour.

The Russians were everywhere but the ease with which the SS carriers had passed the little mine barrier surprised them. Their fire was wild and erratic. Schulze gave them no chance to recover. With his men firing from behind the cover of their vehicles, the enemy bullets whining off them harmlessly, he led them through the ambush at a hellish speed. A satchel charge hurtled through the air. The driver swerved just in time. It exploded in the middle of the road, sending the ten-ton carrier swaying back and forth like a ship at sea. Schulze poured an angry burst of 9mm slugs into the cottage from which the grenades had been thrown. A man fell out of the window, his face gone, hands clutching the air crazily.

They were nearly out now. Schulze glanced behind him. The other two half-tracks had made it too, both their windscreens cracked into glass spider webs. He breathed a sigh of relief. "We're nearly out of this shit," he began.

He never finished his sentence. It was then that the Russian cavalry hit them, streaming out of a side track between the last of the cottages, whips lashing the sweat-lathered bodies of their horses, curved swords whirling in silver flashes, strange cries torn from their gaping mouths.

"*Kusacken*," someone yelled in fear.

Schulze knew why. The Cossacks took prisoners, but only for long enough to plunder them of their possessions and practise primitive barbarities on them before finishing them off. "All right, keep cool. They've not got as far as sawing off yer balls with those penknives yet."

Swiftly he switched the machine pistol to single shots and fired at the first rider with the silver insignia of a Cossack captain. The man flew over the streaming mane of his black horse, the silver curve of his sword sailing high into the air.

The rest of the troopers in the half-track followed their leader's example and the morning air was full of yells, curses, screams, cries of agony. But still they came on. The first of the Cossacks drew parallel with the half-tracks. Schulze flicked to automatic and fired a wild burst. The leading Cossack's horse was hit. Red flowers of blood erupted suddenly the whole length of its flank. The stallion reared high into the air, its hooves flailing wildly in an ecstasy of agony.

Just as the stallion went down, the rider launched himself into the air. His dirty paws sought and found a grip on the half-track and with a grunt he hauled himself over the side and on to the deck. His knife flashed in the weak

yellow winter sun, and then plunged deep into the driver's back. Schulze reacted in a flash and crashed the butt of his Schmeisser into the back of the Cossack's skull, crushing it like a soft-boiled egg. A moment later the half-track slammed hard against a great oak to the left of the road and came to an abrupt halt.

Behind them, the two other half-tracks were forced to brake, skidding wildly on the slick snow surface, as their drivers tried desperately to avoid crashing into the lead vehicle, sprawled crazily halfway across the road.

"Urrah," a great cry burst from the Cossacks' throats as they urged their horses forward, their manes streaming wildly behind them.

The leaders did not even rein in as they came level, but dropped straight from the saddles on to the half-tracks. Instantly the decks of the German vehicles were transformed into a wild, cursing, swaying mass of men, fighting for naked survival.

A huge, bearded Cossack, his broad dark face pitted with pockmarks, grabbed for Schulze's testicles in the middle of the fight. Schulze did not give him a chance. He crashed his elbow into the man's mouth. The Cossack went back, spitting out broken yellow teeth. Tumbling backwards, Schulze smashed the steel-plated heel of his jackboot into the Cossack's face, crying, "Try my dice-beaker on for size, Popov!"

Arms suddenly grabbed him around his neck. He squirmed his head round. A handsome young boy was glaring down at him, his dark eyes gleaming with hate and determination. Schulze thrust his two fingers upwards. They lodged inside the boy's nostrils. Schulze crooked them and tugged hard in one swift movement. The Cossack screamed hysterically in sheer, absolute agony. Hot blood streamed down Schulze's wrist as the boy's nose burst and he fainted across Schulze's body.

The morning air was suddenly heavy with the rattle of tank tracks and the tremendous crack of an 88mm cannon. The shell passed over their heads and crashed in the village beyond. All at once the Cossacks were running for their lives as the first Royal Tiger, all seventy-two tons of it, came to a halt next to the leading half-track and began sawing the air with its twin machine guns.

"Holy shit!" Schulze breathed out hard and wiped the sweat from his dripping brow with a hand that trembled visibly. "I thought they'd *sabred* my balls off that time..."

CHAPTER 2

Their rescuers kicked and shoved the Cossack prisoners on to their knees in the snow in a long line, their backs to the Royal Tigers. A tall emaciated officer in the uniform of an *Obersturmbannführer* limped towards the first of the prisoners, pistol already in hand. The left eye of his skinny, hawk-like face was covered with a patch and his left sleeve was empty, tucked into the side of his gleaming black belt. From the way he limped, Schulze guessed most of his left leg was missing too.

Carefully the Obersturmbannführer placed the muzzle of his pistol behind the right ear of the first prisoner. The Cossack tensed expectantly, but did not cry out. The officer's face tightened. He pressed the trigger. The pistol jerked upwards and the back of the prisoner's head disappeared in a sudden gush of bright red blood.

The officer's face was expressionless. Turning for a moment, he cried to the awe-stricken young soldiers with the Europa armband: "Another Russian pig less!"

He stepped over the body and placing his pistol against the base of the next man's skull, pressed the trigger.

"Who the hell is he?" Schulze asked the two young troopers of the rescue force standing next to him.

"*Niet verstan,*" the one said.

"*Comprends pas,*" said the other. Schulze groaned to himself, knowing instinctively that he had landed himself in yet another hole.

"Who is the senior non-commissioned officer?" rasped the hawk-like Obersturmbannführer. Behind him two of his men were draping the black and white Europa armbands across each of the dead Cossacks – "so the pigs will know who did it when they come to collect their carrion."

"Sergeant-major Schulze, Obersturmbannführer! he bellowed, knowing that he could not pull any of his old Wotan stuff with this man.

"Report, Sarnt-Major?"

"Report respectfully, survivors of SS Panzer Regiment Wotan, thirty effectives, eighteen wounded, Obersturmbannführer."

The skinny officer took in Schulze's impressive bulk – the Silver Wound Medal, Tank-Assault Badge in Gilt, the German Cross in Gold, the

Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross at his throat – and seemed pleased with what he saw.

"My name is Habicht," the officer said. "I welcome you and your men to *Viking*, the 5th Panzer Division. And, in particular, to *SS Regiment Europa*. We have need of experienced men like yours, especially NCOs."

Schulze ventured a question. "But are your men German, sir?"

"Only a few of them – and they are Ethnic Germans. The rest are from half a dozen European countries. All volunteers, fighting for the cause of Europe against the Red plague. His solitary eye gleamed with sudden fanaticism. "And we shall triumph. Final victory will still be ours, come what may... All right, tell your men to mount. We must get out of this damned partisan country before the Bolshevik swine return."

Schulze stood in silent amazement. Were there still officers, even in the Armed SS who believed in final victory? Everybody knew that Germany was beaten. The sparrows were singing it off the roofs, if there were any roofs left, that was. Slowly Sergeant-Major Schulze stamped across the scuffed, blood-stained snow, telling himself glumly that the survivors of Wotan were in the shit again, right up to their necks in it.

***

As the three half-tracks, led by the troop of Royal Tigers, swung into the main street of the little Hungarian town of Komarom, Schulze could see that his guess was correct. On both sides of the main street there were piles of ammunition boxes and jerricans full of petrol, ready for immediate use. In an alley there was a line of armoured half-tracks, their sides painted with a big red cross. Hiwis, mostly yellow-faced, slant-eyed Turcomen and Siberians, were everywhere, stacking fresh crates of food. It was clear that a new offensive was about to begin and Europa would undoubtedly be part of it.

Schulze, satisfied everything was under control, walked wearily to the tumbledown wooden hut that the guide had said was his, and thrust open the door, ready to fling himself on his bunk and sleep.

But the hut was already occupied. A yellow-faced Hiwi, was sitting there, a bland smile on his lips, a thin black moustache reaching down below his double chin, happily running a lighted match along the seam of his shirt to kill the lice.

"What the hell is this?" Schulze bellowed. "Am I in a Jewish

whorehouse or something?"

The Hiwi smiled happily at him and blew out his match. "You want whorehouse, Sergeant-Major? Not Yiddie. But Hungarian girls make jiggy-jiggy very good." He made his meaning quite clear with an obscene gesture of his thumb and fingers. The Hiwi got to his feet and began putting on his tunic. "Me Hung."

"Don't show me," replied Schulze, quickly. "I'll just believe you about that."

The man smiled uncomprehendingly. "German soldiers call me Chinese, but me Hung. I driver – your servant, Sergeant-Major."

He completed putting on his tunic and Schulze gasped. It bore the Europa armband. He moaned and clapped a hand to his forehead. *A bloody Chinese in SS uniform: What would the Führer say!* Schulze slumped into the only available chair. "All right, you slant-eyed Siberian shit. There's a tin of fifty cigarettes in my pack. Take it. Get me a woman, a bottle of fire-water and a packet of Parisians extra strong. I hear all these Hungarian whores are poxed-up to the eyes. And then trot back here with them – double-time."

"Hung, he back in double time," he cried and went out, clutching the tin to his fat chest, as if it were the Holy Grail itself.

***

"Oh, my aching back!" Schulze gasped in wonder as Hung proudly escorted the whore through the door, a bottle of schnapps in one hand. The red-haired Hungarian girl seemed to have been sewn into her short, tight skirt. It revealed the soft rounded curve of her buttocks and her crotch, as if she were naked. Her frilly embroidered peasant blouse was little better. She had pulled it so tight that her large, well-nippled breasts seemed about to burst through the semi-transparent material. Schulze rose to his feet, big paws stretched out eagerly. The girl giggled hysterically, revealing a mouthful of gold teeth, as Schulze's hands sought and found her breasts, as big and as firm as fresh melons.

The Chinese beamed his approval and put the bottle on the rickety wooden bed. "Watch bed, Sergeant-Major. He not much good for jiggy-jiggy."

But Sergeant-Major Schulze was not fated to enjoy the Hungarian whore's ample charms that particular afternoon. Abruptly a shadow darkened

the entrance to the little hut and Obersturmbannführer Habicht was standing there, his hawk-like thin face wrinkled in disdain at what he saw within.

"Enough!" Habicht cried. "Get rid of the whore. I want to speak to you."

Schulze shrugged eloquently at Hung. "You, take the Hungarian lady back where you found her. She'll have to come back later to do my washing and sewing!"

The Hungarian whore looked from him to Schulze, then shook her head as if in complete bewilderment. As she went out, Schulze savoured the wonderful mechanical action of the girl's buttocks, as she wriggled down the little street. Then sadly he began to pull on his dice-beakers, while Obersturmbannführer Habicht tapped his pistol holster with his fingers impatiently, as if time were running out very fast.

CHAPTER 3

Together the Regimental Commander and big Sergeant-Major walked down the lines of the Europa, speaking little but noting the busy activity on all sides with professional eyes. The men were mostly in their teens, poorly trained and probably unable speak anything but their native languages.

For a while they paused at the outskirts of the little town and watched a group of smooth-faced, teenaged lieutenants under the command of an older captain, whose left arm was in a sling, practising an infantry assault. But they obviously did not know the first thing about how to use the cover of the Royal Tiger which was leading the feigned attack. Their 'grape' was too far behind the tank – probably they were too scared to get close enough to its roaring tracks.

In the end Habicht barked: "Captain, punishment drill for your group. They are very idle and slack!"

The captain did not hesitate. "*Hinlegen!*" he bellowed.

As one, the young officers flopped face downwards into the thick grey mud churned up by the tank's tracks.

"*Aufstehen!*"

They sprang to their feet again, their uniforms grey and soaked with mud.

"*Hinlegen!*" the captain barked again and they fell to the ground once more like a series of wooden puppets.

"Straight from Bad Toelz cadet school," Habicht commented. "Seventeen-year-olds, the lot of 'em. Four months ago, they were still rubbing the seats of their trousers shiny in high school."

"Sir." Schulze said, but nothing more. He was wondering why he had been picked out for this guided tour of SS Regiment Europa's weaknesses and deficiencies.

Habicht seemed to be able to read his mind. He suddenly said, "Probably you are wondering why I am showing you all this, Schulze?"

"Sir."

"I shall tell you. The great days are long past when we of the Armed SS got the cream of the Fatherland's new recruits. Not a man under one metre eighty, not even accepted if he had a single filling in his teeth. The barrel is

about scraped clean. But there is no purpose in complaining about it. We must do what we have to do with what we have – those raw young officers and my Europeans. What they lack in experience and training, they make up for in fervour and their belief in the Folk, Fatherland, and Führer."

"But that won't stop the Popovs' bullets, sir," Schulze said.

The light died in Habicht's eye. "Agreed," he said as coldly as before. "That is why I requested Reichsführer SS Himmler personally to let me have a cadre of experienced SS NCOs for my regiment. You and your comrades of the Wotan form that cadre."

In silence the two men walked to the shabby one-time synagogue which now served as the Europa's HQ. At the door Habicht crooked his linger at one of two sentries, armed with machine-pistols, and barked, "*Sturmmann,* to my office. Guard the door until I have finished my talk with Sergeant-Major Schulze."

Carefully Habicht locked the door behind a mystified Schulze and pulled the blackout shutters closed before putting on the light, a single fly-blown electric bulb without a shade.

"Schulze," Habicht began slowly, "I'm going to tell you something which so far I have only told to my senior officers. I'm going to have to rely heavily on you and your Wotan men in what is to come. You have seen the standard of training of my young officers. I'm going to attach two of your veterans to each one of them. They will give him the experienced support he will need. You must give them the necessary motivation. The situation here in Hungary is very grim. Last November, as soon as the mass of the Hungarian Army began surrendering to the Reds, our whole front was forced back to the Danube and the Fatherland threatened anew. Our war economy depends on the Hungarian bauxite, and one third of the crude oil we use in the refining industry to make the Luftwaffe's aviation spirit comes from this country. As a result we tried to hold on to Budapest and stop the Reds driving any further into Hungary.

"But while our forces were occupied with the task of keeping Malinovsky's Army out of Budapest, that damned cunning Tolbuchin moved up from Belgrade and crossed the Danube near its confluence with the Drava. We had not expected the Reds to cross there but they did, and driving rapidly north-west to Lake Balaton, they upset the whole German front in Hungary. By Christmas Eve, the two Armies completed the encirclement of Budapest, cutting off 150,000 of our troops, including comrades of ours of the 8th and

22nd SS Cavalry Divisions."

Habicht strode over to the big wall map. "Remember, Schulze, what I am telling you now is absolutely secret. It will cost you your head if you breathe a word of it to anyone." Habicht drew himself up proudly. "Schulze, the German Army in Hungary is going over to the offensive again. The rot has stopped. There will be no more retreats. Soon we march again! General Balck of the 6th Army has decided that with the support of his infantry divisions, we of the Viking and our comrades of the Death's Head Division will break out without any preliminary artillery or air support from the north – here." He tapped the map.

"But that's mountain country, sir," Schulze objected. "Difficult for tanks and armoured vehicles."

Habicht beamed at him. "Exactly! That is why General Balck picked the area for the 4th SS Panzer Corps. The Reds will never expect us to attack through the mountains, especially in Winter. It will be the task of the Viking to roll through the Vértes Mountains and take Bickse as its initial objective, which should place the whole southern Hungarian road network in our hands, a network that is particularly important to German High Command.

"That is where Europa comes in. You see, General Balck has honoured the Regiment with a special task. Viking will have as its initial object Bickse. On our left flank, Death's Head will have as its object Zsambek. Both will use the only road network through the mountains to reach those objectives. Accordingly once the Reds tumble to what is going on, they will attempt to block those road networks.

But there is one road through the Vértes Mountains which our Intelligence is sure that they do not know about. And even if they did, they would hardly imagine we would attempt to use it in the depths of winter because it is one thousand metres or more above sea-level, running here," he tapped the map, between the twin objectives. Our object then is to slip in and through the Red lines without their spotting us, until we reach the road network beyond."

"And then, sir?"

"Then, Schulze, we shall race towards Budapest at the head of the SS Panzer Corps." His hawk-like face gleamed with sudden, almost crazy fanaticism. "Imagine it, Schulze. We will be a symbol of hope and renewed courage for the Fatherland – a symbol for the whole Western World. A regiment of European volunteers sacrificing their blood to save one of

Europe's oldest cities from the Bolshevik horde. The Western World will acclaim our success. We start in two days' time. At twenty-two hundred hours on the first of January, 1945."

Happy shitting New Year, Schulze thought with a helpless sinking feeling.

CHAPTER 4

"As the New Year begins, my dear Folk Comrades, I should like to thank all of you, men, women and the children of the Hitler Youth for what you have suffered, tolerated, done, achieved. Don't despair! I want you to continue fighting with the utmost fanaticism in this moment of crisis for our nation..."

Sergeant-Major Schulze let the words of the Führer's New Year message to the nation drone on. Habicht The Hawk had insisted that everyone in the Regiment should listen despite the fact that most of the European troops could not understand a word of it.

Moodily Schulze lounged in the lice-infested straw next to Hung and surveyed the young soldiers of his new company, dressed in full battle-kit minus their helmets. The men were pale and tense. They smoked a lot and went often to the evil-smelling thunder-boxes at the end of the long barn to urinate. They were scared; after all they were going into action for the first time.

Outside it had been snowing heavily all day long. Schulze could imagine what the roads up in the mountains were going to be like.

"I devote every hour to building up the will-to-resist of my armies, introducing new weapons, forming new divisions. And I assure you, Folk Comrades, our enemies will soon learn that I have not been sleeping.."

"You shouldn't have bothered to wake up, bastard," Schulze mumbled under his breath.

"I cannot close this message without thanking the Lord God on high for the aid he has always given to me and my Folk, which has made us stronger than our enemies..."

"Bloody hypocrite!" Schulze snorted and pushed aside the black-out curtain.

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Half an hour later, Obersturmbannführer Habicht stamped through the snow to where Schulze and the Chinese were working their way down the long line of waiting vehicles, checking tracks and suspension. In spite of the weather,

he was beaming. "You heard the Führer's speech?"

"Sir."

"Wasn't it magnificent?"

"Sir!" Both of them replied woodenly again.

The Hawk smiled fanatically. "It would be an honour to die for a man like that."

Inwardly Schulze groaned, and said, "We have checked the vehicles' tracks. They're too tight for deep snow. Once we get up there in the mountains..."

The Hawk waved aside his objection. He was in a tremendous mood, almost as if he had been drinking. "A mere bagatelle, my dear Schulze. We shall get through. Now, order of march. I shall give myself the honour of leading in the command half-track. You will follow in the VW jeep, leading the rest of the half-tracks with the grenadiers. Convoy distance between my vehicle and yours will he two hundred metres. Understood?"

Schulze gave a little sigh of relief. At least he was not going to be at point. If the Hawk bought it, he'd be two hundred metres away; that would give him and the Chinese a chance of making dust. "Sir."

"We'll be in constant radio communication, of course. Therefore if I run into trouble – which I don't anticipate – you will bring up the grenadiers. The Royal Tigers will bring up the rear. I don't want one of those monsters getting into trouble in the snow and blocking the road. When we are through and down on the plain again on the other side, they can then take the lead."

If... Schulze thought grimly.

"All right, Schulze. We have the cover of darkness now, almost. It will take us three hours to get to the start line. I suggest you call out the men and mount up." Suddenly he shot out his one hand and said with surprising formality. "*Hals und Beinbruch,* Schulze!"

Schulze took it uneasily. The hand was hot with suppressed fervour. "*Hals und Beinbruch,* Obersturmbannführer."

***

It was too late now to be afraid. Standing on his command half-track, head ducked inside his camouflaged hood against the icy wind that blew across the limitless field of snow, Habicht looked at the green glowing dial of his watch. It was almost time to go. The feeling of heady excitement had been replaced

by one of controlled happiness, like that of a child who knows he was soon going to receive a present.

Germany was returning to the offensive again. Month after month, the Fatherland had suffered defeat after defeat. Russia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, now Hungary – it seemed that nothing had been able to stop the Red Army. For every battalion the hard-pressed German forces had destroyed, a regiment had appeared; for every tank troop wiped out, a squadron; for every plane, a flight. The Reds seemed to possess an inexhaustible supply of men and material.

Yet Habicht knew they could be beaten. Nov it was no longer Germany on the march, fighting for some selfish imperialistic gain; it was Europe, striving to halt for good the Red tide which would swamp and drown it, if nothing were done soon.

SS Regiment Europa would only be the start. Once Budapest was theirs, their success would bring thousands, hundreds of thousands of eager young men from all over Europe flocking to the silver banner of the SS. By then he might well be dead. But what did his sacrifice matter if the success of his Regiment meant that Young Europe would spring to the Germanic Cause, and put an end to the Reds?

His fingers trembling with excitement, he pulled out his signal pistol. "One...two...three..." he counted off the seconds in a shaky voice, "nine...ten."

His finger crooked round the trigger of the clumsy pistol. A soft plop and then a slight hush. The flare climbed rapidly into the dark night sky and exploded in a burst of bright green.

It was the signal!

All along the long column, the engines of the half-tracks, jeeps and tanks burst into noisy, crazy life. Habicht, possessed by an almost uncontrollable excitement, slapped his hand on the driver's shoulder. "FORWARD!...WE MARCH!" he cried. "REGIMENT EUROPA ADVANCE!"

BOOK 2 – THE MOUNTAIN ROAD

CHAPTER 5

Dark clouds parted in the moon's path for an instant. Schulze, crouched next to Hung and a couple of Cheese-heads they had brought with them for extra fire-power – just in case – caught a quick glimpse of the distant peaks. But it wasn't the scenery that held his attention. It was the little bunker, almost covered by deep snow, to the right of the mountain road, fronted by a very deep drop. Then the moon disappeared beneath the clouds again and an almost total darkness engulfed them.

"What do you think, Hung?" Schulze whispered.

Hung sniffed the air a couple of times like a dog.

"Ivans," he announced finally. "Hung can tell. You smell."

Schulze sniffed. Yes, the little Hiwi was right. There were Russians up there in the bunker, just as the Hawk had predicted.

Schulze thought for a moment. The Hawk would want to attack – would want a 'sacrifice of blood' – but that was not the way he saw it.

"Listen, we're gonna take out that bunker ourselves. The four of you Cheese-heads will advance to the base of the slope, that's about fifty odd metres from the Popov bunker. Me and Hung here will come in at the same time from the flank. When we're in position, I'll whistle twice. You open up with all you've got. Then –"

Hung beat him to it. His long curved knife gleamed wickedly in the faint light. "Sergeant-Major and Hung cut throats." The Hiwi giggled. Next to him the Hamburger shuddered.

"All right," Schulze commanded, "that's the plan. Let's get on with it. Move yer arses!"

***

Schulze slid through the snow-heavy bushes, grateful for the mountain wind and flurries of snow muffling their approach. Behind him Hung made no sound whatsoever. Schulze could not even hear him breathing despite the steepness of the ascent to the bunker. He was obviously an expert at this sort of thing. Metre by metre they crawled nearer to the still bunker, silhouetted against the night sky. *Had they posted sentries somewhere outside?* Schulze

asked himself. German sentries would have crawled back into the warmth of the bunker, confident no officer would be around, but the Popovs were different, he knew that. They could endure a tremendous degree of cold, and besides in the Peasants' and Workers' Army it was not unusual for an officer to shoot a common soldier out of hand for the slightest dereliction of duty. Schulze decided there would be Popovs outside somewhere or other.

They were about fifty metres away from the bunker. There was no sound save for the howl of the wind in the firs. Schulze stopped suddenly, as Hung pressed his shoulder firmly. Very deliberately the little Hiwi brought his mouth close to Schulze's ear. "Ivan," he whispered, "to right!"

Schulze felt his heart beat more rapidly. Two dark shapes detached themselves from the shadows cast by the trees and plodded across their path in the slow weary manner of infantry men all over the world, carrying out sentry duty in the middle of the night.

"Shit!" Schulze cursed to himself. The two sentries were directly to their front. He had to get rid of them before they could tackle the bunker, but the ten or fifteen metres of ground which separated them was devoid of cover. The Popovs would spot them before they managed to cover it. He remembered the Cheese-heads down below. If they opened up, it might well distract the sentries. They might run forward to the edge of the drop to check what was going on. In those few seconds, he and Hung would be on the bunker. A grenade through the door and they would be in. They could worry about the two sentries later.

Schulze straightened himself slowly and whistled shrilly, hoping that the sentries would take the sound for that of some night bird. Nothing happened. Neither the sentries stirred, nor was there any reaction from down below.

Schulze glared at the darkness angrily. *Nothing!*

He tried again – again nothing.

"They're petrified down there, Hung. They're not gonna move. The Dutch bastards have left us in the lurch!"

Schulze was suddenly seized by an all-consuming rage. He pulled the heavy stick grenade out of his belt, ripped out the china pin and counted one-two-three. Then he hurled it over the edge of the drop down to where he imagined his men to be. It was an old trick. But it worked. In the same instant that it exploded in a vicious burst of scarlet just behind the Dutch men's positions, they opened fire in wild, fearsome abandon. The sentries shouted

something and ran to the side of the slope. Schulze waited no longer. "Come on Hung – at the double!"

They pelted across the snow and hit the bunker. From inside came the sounds of men stirring in alarm. The door was flung open. Hung moved first. His knife flashed and the Russian gurgled once as it opened his throat from the jugular to the carotid. He went down, drowning in his own blood.

Schulze sprang over his writhing body. A half-naked soldier ran down the narrow corridor screaming. Schulze ripped off a burst with his Schmeisser instinctively. The man jackknifed, a froth of pink foamy blood spraying from his wide-open mouth. Behind him Hung opened the first wooden door to their right, tossed in a grenade and pulled it closed again. The wooden wall seemed to bulge like a live thing. Abruptly the room was full of screams and wild, agonized yells. In a flash, the whole corridor reeked of cordite, blood and death.

The two of them ran on. Another little room to their right, the door wide open. Legs spread wide apart, big body half crouched, Schulze clutched his machine pistol to his right hip and sprayed its occupants as they still lay in their beds, tumbling them off old, crude bunks like beetles from underneath a suddenly upturned stone. It was a massacre.

Hung came running up to him, chest heaving, his knife gleaming scarlet now. "All gone!" he gasped. "Hung fix!"

"Good for you, you Siberian shit!" he gasped himself, trying hard to control his harsh breathing. "Not bad for an honorary Aryan." Suddenly he remembered the sentries. "Hung, the other two. Come on!"

Frantically they pelted down the body-littered corridor, out into the open again.

"Over there!" Hung gasped.

The two sentries saw them at the same moment. They fired. Their bullets gouged out spouts of snow just in front of Hung. He fired back. *Missed!* Schulze tried to stop the frantic pumping of his heart so that he could aim correctly. The snarling hiss of his Schmeisser – a full half-second burst – almost ripped the sentry in two.

It was too much for the other man. With a scream of fear, he flung away his rifle and started to run wildly, floundering through the deep snow towards the safety of the trees. Schulze knew he could not let him get away. He pressed the Schmeisser's trigger. Nothing happened. "Shit!" he cursed bitterly. The magazine was empty.

The Chinese raised his machine pistol and tracer-stitched the darkness. Schulze could see the slugs cutting a crazy pattern around the man's running feet. But they were missing him by a metre or more.

"Lift your muzzle, Hung, for Chrissake!" he urged frantically.

But already it was too late. The lone Russian was blundering into the firs, crashing into their green gloom and disappearing from sight.

Slowly, very slowly, Hung lowered his machine pistol and looked at Schulze standing there like some ancient Nordic god, turned to stone, oblivious of the wild fire still coming from the Cheese-heads below. "You think same me, Sarnt-Major?" he asked reluctantly.

"I think the same, Hung," Schulze answered equally slowly. "That Popov bastard will tell them we're coming."

CHAPTER 6

Dawn. SS Regiment Europa was drawn up on the crest of a ridge, the young troopers drinking steaming hot canteens of Ersatz coffee and washing down the hard Army bread, stamping their feet continually on the packed snow of the road trying to drive out the cold.

Hung filled Schulze's canteen once more with the boiling hot, black brew, and taking the little bottle out of his pocket, poured a quick and generous slug of the fiery Hungarian plum schnapps into the coffee.

"That's the stuff to give the troops," Schulze said happily. "You're not bad Hung – for a foreigner."

The little man beamed. "Hung your friend," he said.

Schulze moved across the snow to where the Hawk was standing, smoking a cigarette and chatting to Major Kreuz, his second-in-command, a tall, rather cynical veteran with an intelligent face adorned by a monocle.

Once Schulze had joined them the Hawk got to the point at once. "Now I know you are worried, Schulze, that the Red who escaped last night might nave alerted his masters that we are on this road."

"Sir."

"I appreciate your concern for the safety of our mission, but really where could the man have gone to? I mean we are at least twenty kilometres behind their lines by now and there is still no sign of the man who got away, or any other Red unit for that matter."

"I don't know about that, sir," Schulze answered doggedly. "But those fellows in the bunker back there must have had some means of communicating with their HQ."

"Agreed, Sergeant-Major." Kreuz spoke for the first time. "But even if he did somehow manage to get in touch with his people, do you really think that they could do anything to stop us now?" He pointed an elegantly gloved hand to his right. "Look down there."

Thin, dark, graceful plumes of smoke were ascending slowly to the sky on the far horizon. Occasionally there was a silent pink ripple, which Schulze knew of old was the explosion of a heavy gun.

"The Viking," Kreuz said casually, "giving the Reds a taste of their own medicine for a change."

"Yes," the Hawk said. "The lower road is surely in our hands by now and the Reds will have enough to do without worrying about us up here."

The Hawk seemed blind to the disaster that could overtake them; packed on one tight winding road like this, they were easy meat for a Russian flank attack. The armoured vehicles would have no room at all to manoeuvre.

"We present more of a threat to them once we're out of these mountains than does the rest of the Division down there," Schulze persisted. "Once they find out we're up here, surely they'll do their damn best to stop us."

Kreuz nodded his approval slowly."You are right there, Schulze. There's obviously a brain working somewhere in your big turnip." He smiled cynically at Schulze through his gold-rimmed monocle.

Schulze bristled. "Some of us sub-human other-rankers have been known to have an idea now and again," he retorted acidly.

Habicht intervened, "Kreuz, you seriously think, as obviously Schulze here does, that we might be in trouble?"

"Colonels think, Majors carry out orders," Kreuz answered and then added hastily, "Yessir. It is possible."

The Hawk breathed out hard and made a decision. "All right, you are our explosives expert. Where could you block this road behind us and how long would it take?"

Kreuz ran an expert eye down the length of road that lay behind them, checking the steep slope to the near side for the overhang he would need. Then he spotted it. About three hundred metres back. To the right, the mountainside went down almost sheer. To the left, there was an overhang obviously the work of unskilled engineers – some three metres above the road and jutting out a good two metres. The overhang was obviously unstable – a standing invitation for a landslide.

"There, sir," Kreuz said. "With a bit of luck, we could sheer off ten metres of that overhang and block the whole damn road."

"How long would it take?" Habicht rapped.

"We have no power tools. But if I had enough men working in shifts of ten minutes, boring into the rock flat out, probably about three hours."

The Hawk glanced at his watch. "I'll give you exactly ninety minutes – and you've got the whole Regiment at your disposal, save the lookouts. All right, Kreuz, what the hell are you waiting for!"

Schulze almost liked the Hawk at that moment.

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In spite of the biting cold on the mountainside, the young men sweated as they slammed the heavy sledge-hammers against the chisels held against the rock face. Time and time again, feet braced against the rock, leg muscles screaming out with the strain of standing at the forty-five degree angle.

But Schulze did not give them an opportunity to slacken off. He was here, there and everywhere, cursing, cajoling, threatening the gasping young men with cries that most of them did not understand. But if they did not understand the words; Schulze's gestures and grimaces were unmistakable. They toiled on.

Now some of Schulze's own concern had infected Kreuz. Already he had a group of troopers stacking the TNT and nitro-starch blocks under his direction, while the wire, its leads checked for cleanliness, was unreeled along the side of the road, ready for attaching.

An hour passed. Now the holes were about finished. Kreuz began to pass out the charges. The young troopers cradled them carefully to their chests and inserted them delicately into the apertures. Kreuz attached the detonating wire and swiftly checked the leads of the wire with the galvanometer. The little green needle flicked across the dial, swung back and flicked up again.

"The splices are all right. The whole circuit is functioning." Hurriedly he clamped the wires into the detonating apparatus, while the Hawk glanced impatiently at his watch. He screwed the clamps tight, and straightened up. "We're all ready, *Obersturm*!" he cried.

The Hawk wasted no time. He clasped his one hand to his mouth and bellowed, "All right, all you men back round the curve to the vehicles!"

Kreuz kneeling at the little machine next to Schulze glanced back at them and was satisfied everyone was under sufficient cover. He took a deep breath and seizing the wooden-handled plunger pressed it down with one smooth thrust. For a moment nothing seemed to happen. Then there was a series of sharp cracklings like fireworks exploding. The earth beneath their feet began to tremble and suddenly the whole side of the mountain erupted in volcanic fury, scarlet flame, interspersed by brilliant white flashes shot into the sky, followed a moment later by a great spout of earth and rock.

Schulze opened his mouth to prevent his eardrums bursting and felt the hot wave of blast strike him like a flabby fist across the face. For a fleeting

second he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the explosion was over and its roar, diminishing by the instant, was disappearing down the valley, its echo growing fainter and fainter.

The explosives had clawed the whole length of the overhang down. Now the rocks and boulders ripped from the raw new face of the mountain blocked some thirty metres or more of the road in a huge heap, which would take days to clear.

Kreuz broke the heavy silence. "Well, my friend, there is no way up for the Russians now, that is for sure."

"Yes, Major," Schulze answered slowly, "and no way back for us either."

CHAPTER 7

Colonel-General Zacharov, Commander of the Fourth Guards Army, was sweating heavily. Every time he attempted to dry himself with his handkerchief, soaked in cheap eau-de-cologne, the field telephone rang and one of the anxious staff officers would pass on the news of the latest disaster. Then the Guards General would break out sweating once more.

Marshal Tolbuchin, Commander of the Second Ukrainian Front, sitting in the corner of the one-time Hungarian villa, which now served as Zacharov's headquarters in the Battle for Budapest, smoked steadily, his broad peasant face expressionless. But he was thinking hard, undisturbed by the regular thump-thump of a gun less than two hundred metres away.

He knew that the Fritz defenders of the Hungarian capital would never be able to break out now. His concern was the new situation to the west. Where in the Holy Virgin's name had the Germans found the strength to launch this morning's surprise attack? What was their objective? Budapest? Or to drive through his axis with the Third Ukrainian Army south of Budapest? Or was it just a spoiling attack – a last desperate attempt by the Fritzes to forestall the Soviet capture of Budapest and the drive into Western Hungary? So many questions, Tolbuchin told himself, and so few answers.

With a heavy groan, he rose to his feet and strolled with deliberate slowness to the centre of the room. The staff officers made way for him like shoals of little fish parting to let some great predatory shark through. Zacharov looked at his superior uneasily, his face ugly and damp with sweat.

Tolbuchin let him wait. The Colonel-General was losing his nerve, he told himself. If he didn't master this day's crisis he would sack him... or worse. Marshal Stalin did not take too kindly to Army Commanders who allowed themselves to be defeated. Finally he breathed out a slow ring of blue smoke and said, "Well, Comrade General?"

Zacharov jabbed a finger at the big map spread out on the table in front of him. "The whole line of my Thirty-First Guards Rifle Corps between Naszaly-Tata and Felsogalla has been broken into, Comrade Marshal. Their objectives seem to be – from north to south – Gran, Zsambek and Bickse."

"Bickse?"

"Yes, Comrade Marshal. Felsogalla has already been taken by the

Fritzes on the road to Bickse. It is obvious that it is one of their main objectives."

Unceremoniously the burly Marshal pushed the sweating Army Commander out of the way and bending over the map, scrutinized it keenly for a moment. He rose and announced quite simply, "Budapest."

The door at the far end of the big echoing room was suddenly flung open and Colonel Zis, Zacharov's Intelligence Officer, entered, escorting a private soldier. The man was in a terrible state, his earth-brown tunic was ripped and torn, while there was a dull stain on the right side of his baggy breeches and a ragged hole which indicated that a bullet had entered his leg.

"What is this?" Zacharov demanded angrily.

"Comrade General, one of the retreating units of the Fifth Guards Cavalry picked him two hours ago not far from Zsambek."

"And?"

"Well, Comrade General, he belonged to a small guard unit, whose task it was to cover the mountain road through the Vértes Range. Last night, the outpost was overrun by the Fritzes – SS armour, he thinks.

"What?" Zacharov exploded. "Not that too!"

"Vodka," Marshal Tolbuchin snapped, clicking his fingers. The ever-present aide produced a silver flask of the fiery spirit and placed it into the Marshal's waiting hand. "Drink a drop, little brother. It will warm you up."

The soldier blinked his eyes rapidly – a Marshal of the Soviet Union offering him a drink from his own flask and calling him *little brother!* He seized the flask and took a swift, deep slug.

Tolbuchin inwardly told himself he must have the flask sterilized. "All right, comrade, now tell me what happened on the mountain road last night?"

The sole survivor of Schulze's raid on the bunker told his story in a hurried, nervous manner.

"So comrades," Tolbuchin said when the man had been dismissed, "that confirms it. The Fritzes want Bickse because it is the centre of the road network which they will use to drive on Budapest."

Zacharov looked at him aghast.

Tolbuchin ignored the look. "Now, it is clear that the first threat is this Fritz unit which will spearhead the attack on Budapest across the mountain range."

"But we have nothing to stop them, Comrade Marshal," Zacharov objected hastily, already visualizing Old Leather Face – as the Army called

Stalin behind his back – ordering him to one of his Siberian concentration camps for lack of Soviet zeal. "How can one get armour up into those mountains in this kind of weather?"

"The Fritzes obviously managed to get armour through, Comrade General," Tolbuchin said mildly enough. "So you've got no reserves, eh?" He considered for a moment and then demanded to be connected with Headquarters, Second Ukrainian Front.

"Comrade Major Suslov to the phone – at once," he commanded.

"*The Grey Eagle!*" Zacharov breathed.

Tolbuchin looked at the heavy-set, sweating Guards Army Commander with undisguised contempt, then Suslov's cheerful, confident voice was at the other end and he was rapping out his instructions in sharp little staccato phrases.

The Grey Eagle listened in silence, before saying, "You realize Comrade Marshal that you are probably condemning about half my Eagles to death with an operation like this in that terrain and in this weather?" There was no change in the cheerful, confident note in Suslov's voice.

"Probably," the Marshal answered. "But they will die for the glory of the Red Army and the Soviet Union."

The Grey Eagle cheerfully made an obscene suggestion about what he could do with such glory, and hung up without another word.

For the first time that long grim January day, Marshal of the Soviet Union Tolbuchin smiled.

CHAPTER 8

It had been a back-breaking day for the young men of SS Regiment Europa, as they had fought their way through the blinding snowstorms higher and higher into the mountains. Each new curve in the winding road had been a minor engineering feat, as the vehicles, sliding and skidding on the slick new snow, had been dragged round by sheer muscle-power, with hundreds of freezing, cursing, yelling SS men digging a new path for them in the rock and snow.

Now the Regiment was stuck again. At the head of the column, just behind Habicht's command vehicle which had cleared the corner safely, a half-track full of grenadiers had begun to slip towards the sheer drop on the far side of the road and the ashen-faced driver had only managed to bring the ten-ton vehicle to stop at the very edge of the drop. Behind it the whole Regiment was stalled again, the drivers gunning their engines nervously, while they waited for the obstruction to be cleared away.

Angrily, Habicht pushed past the young driver and strode to the side of the road to gaze down at the drop. With his good foot, he stamped on snow-covered ground there, obviously to test the strength of the rock below the snow.

"Schulze, get a dozen men at each side of the vehicle ready to push when I give the word."

"Over the side?" Schulze asked.

"No. Back on to the road," the Hawk said. He swung himself up into the cab just vacated by the shaken driver. "I'll get the bitch out myself."

Hurriedly Schulze ordered the men to their positions on both sides of the half-track, while the Hawk gunned the motor and then gently let out the clutch. The wheel trembled violently in his single hand. With a lurch the half-track moved forward a little as he put his foot on the accelerator.

"Put yer backs into it!" Schulze yelled, as the troopers took the strain. They heaved. The half-track moved forward a little more, its rear tracks throwing up a shower of stone and snow. Another lurch. Abruptly the track hit ice or hard-packed snow. The vehicle lost traction. The tracks whirled furiously, the Hawk gunning the engine all out.

"*Pass op!*" one of the men on the sides yelled in panic.

The Dutchmen jumped clear as the half-track began to swing to one side.

"Get back there, you Cheese-heads!" Schulze cried in dismay, as the men scattered out of the path of the vehicle which was sliding sideways towards the edge of the road, the Hawk fighting the wheel crazily.

Schulze jumped out of its path just as Habicht regained control of the half-track, preventing it from sliding that last couple of paces on the treacherous granulated snow.

"Get out, sir!" Schulze yelled from where he lay sprawled in the snow. "Let it go over the side. The bastard's not worth –"

The words died on his lips. Quite deliberately the Hawk rammed home first gear again. Gently, very gently, he let out the clutch, the engine whining in protest as he did so. The half-track came forward again. Schulze held his breath. If it slipped now, the Hawk would not have a chance. His face showed no fear, just anger that this piece of metal would not obey his commands. He increased his pressure on the accelerator, thick clouds of blue smoke pouring from the half-track's exhaust. But the vehicle did not respond. Schulze watched, his mouth wide open, his heart beating frantically in an onslaught of panic. *Can he do it?*

Suddenly the track caught. Habicht did not hesitate. He swung the wheel a half turn to the left. For a moment Schulze thought his commander had done the wrong thing. Desperately he gave the vehicle more power. The half-track jolted forward. He swung the wheel round again. The tracks answered readily. A moment later he was away from the danger of the mountainside, the vehicle righted and pointing up the slope once again.

On the ground, Schulze breathed out hard. The Hawk might be out to kill them with his blind belief in Germany's cause, but he was a damned brave man all the same.

But there was no time for congratulations. For in that same instant that Habicht sprang lightly from the half-track's cab as if nothing special had occurred, there was the faint throb of a light aeroplane's motor, increasing by the second, coming towards them from the east.

"It's a sewing machine all right," Kreuz said, shading his eyes against the angled yellow glare of the dying sun.

Crouched behind the cover of the leading half-track, the Hawk and Schulze watched the little biplane coming ever closer to their positions. "With a bit of luck, Schulze," Habicht said, "he might not spot us. It's already

getting dark and those firs up there cast quite a bit of shadow over the road."

A moment later the Rata was over them, trailing a gigantic black shadow behind it over the snow. Swiftly the two men rolled over and saw it disappear over the nearest peak. Habicht breathed out a sigh of relief. "The Red didn't –" He stopped short. Behind the peak there was the sound of the little reconnaissance plane turning. It's coming back!"

"He's spotted us!" Schulze cried in alarm. "You flak gunners get on to him!"

Desperately the crew of the quadruple flak, mounted on one of the halt-tracks, scrambled for their gun, just as the Rata appeared from behind the mountain, coming in very low. At a hundred metres, it began to fly the length of the column, while the frantic-fingered gunners fumbled with their gun. Angrily, Schulze let fly with a futile burst from his Schmeisser. Suddenly the four slim barrels of the 20mm flak opened up with a tremendous burst. White tracer slit the blue sky furiously. The Russian pilot reacted at once. His speed rose as he opened up the throttle. Suddenly he banked to the left, leaving the angry stream of shells to hiss by him harmlessly, some twenty metres away and a moment later he was gone, leaving the furious sweating gunners firing at an empty sky.

The firing died away and there was no sound save the soft throb of the plane's engine to the east, getting fainter by the second.

Schulze broke the silence: "Looks to me like trouble, sir. If they can't come on up after us because of the road block, they can plant a nasty surprise for us at the other end now they definitely know we're here.

"Yes, I suppose you're right, Schulze," the Hawk said a little wearily. "But we'll face up to that particular problem when we come to it. Tell the men to mount up again, would you please?"

But before long Sergeant-Major Schulze was going to be proved wrong, very seriously wrong indeed.

CHAPTER 9

"Helmets on!" Major Suslov barked above the roar of the towing plane.

Suslov, a tall dark officer in his late twenties, looked along the dim, green-lit length of the big glider and nodded his approval. His Grey Eagles, not one of them over twenty-five and virtually every one decorated in combat, looked fit and confident in spite of the terrible danger of their bold mission.

"Check equipment!" he snapped.

With the precision of machines, each man turned to his neighbour and checked his equipment – Machine pistol, ammunition, grenades, smoke and high explosive, pistol, emergency rations – before reporting, "All correct."

"Comrade Major." Suslov turned to the voice. It was the young glider pilot, who like all the pilots in the Grey Eagle Battalion had been a pre-war Soviet champion in the Komosol Youth Movement.

"Yes."

"The tugs are preparing to drop the tow now."

Suslov swung round and faced his men. "Prepare for landing!" he ordered.

Veterans that they were, the young men adopted the landing posture immediately: hands clasping the metal spars behind their heads, feet raised slightly from the floor. There was a light tug. The glider shuddered slightly as the pilot brought up the nose in order to brake. Suddenly there was silence as the towing plane broke off in a great curve and began heading back east. All noise died away. The January dawn seemed suddenly unbelievably calm and peaceful. Now the Grey Eagles could do nothing but wait and rely on the pilot to put them down safely on the difficult terrain.

Major Suslov had been instrumental in setting up the first experimental glider company of paratroop volunteers, from which the Grey Eagles had sprung. From the war against Finland right through the terrible battles against the Germans in '41 and '42, on to the great victories of the last two years, the Grey Eagles had always been in the forefront of the action. Time and time again the Battalion had been decimated in some desperate action behind enemy lines, but always there had been more than enough volunteers to fill its empty ranks again. Suslov and his Grey Eagles were, after all, the idols of

Soviet youth. Had not Stalin publicly embraced Suslov at a Kremlin reception in front of the newsreel cameras and called him *the boldest of the bold*?

Suslov, however, was not a reckless commander. It was only because of the desperate situation of Zacharov's Guards Army that he had allowed himself to be talked into landing his Eagles on the most difficult type of terrain possible – the mountains.

Anxiously he pushed his way down the littered gangway to where Boris, a flaxen-haired Ukrainian crouched over the controls, swinging the glider round in a huge circle to lower its speed, prior to landing.

On the western horizon the darkness was breaking up, turning to the threatening opaque grey, which he knew was snow falling far away. But Suslov had not eyes for the horizon. His gaze was fixed on the ground below, it looked far from promising. Long stretches of dark green, which were firs, broken at regular intervals by sharp, naked peaks.

"What do you think, Boris?" he asked, after glancing upwards to check that the rest of the Battalion's gliders were there.

"It's not good," the pilot answered, not taking his eyes from his controls.

Suslov could see the faint line of sweat fringing the pilot's hairline and knew that if one of the Soviet Union's most experienced pilots was beginning to sweat, they were in for trouble.

Boris straightened the big glider. There was no sound now save the hiss of the wind, as the glider came down at speed. The nose-dive brakes were applied and the fuselage trembled violently. The ground loomed up ever larger, steep and littered with what seemed gigantic snowballs. "Boulders!" Boris cried in alarm.

"Crash landing!" Suslov yelled back into the plane. The Grey Eagles tensed their bodies, but their young faces showed no fear.

The ground was racing by them now at a tremendous speed. Boris flung up the nose and the next instant, two thousand pounds of glider and men hit the snowy slope. Snow sprayed up on both sides of them higher than the cockpit, in a blinding white stream. Wood and canvas splintered and tore. The barbed wire they had wrapped around the skids to shorten the breaking distance snapped like bits of wet string as it hit the boulders concealed beneath the snow. The skids squeaked shrilly, as the glider clewed towards the edge of a precipice. Boris, fighting the controls frantically, brought the

glider round just in time. The glider slithered sideways, lurched against a huge boulder and came to an abrupt stop.

"Good man, Boris," Suslov cried and slapped him on the back. "All right, my Eagles – out," he yelled.

At once the glider's interior was transformed into a frenzy of movement. The Eagles sprang to their feet. With their heavy boots, those who were too far from the open door smashed through the canvas, as they had been trained to do, and stumbled out into the cold dawn air, to form a defensive perimeter.

Suslov checked his positions and stared up at the sky. The others were corning in now, ten gliders bearing the rest of the Battalion. The first one hissed over his head. It came into a perfect landing, nose held high, brakes screaming in shrill protest as it shrieked to a stop in a gleaming white flurry of snow. An instant later his Eagles came tumbling out. The second one followed closely but number three hit the ground hard and began to slide across the hard-packed snow. Brakes screaming all out, trailing a great wake of snow behind it, the glider shot helplessly over the edge of the precipice and fell over one thousand metres, a broken-off wing falling behind it to its death like a lone leaf.

All the others landed safely after this disaster. The Grey Eagles had pulled off the most difficult landing in the history of glider-borne operations. They had landed on a snow-covered mountain range, some five thousand metres above sea level!

"It looks as if we'll go down in the history books after the war, Comrade Major," Boris commented as the Grey Eagles began to form up.

Major Suslov looked up from his map for a moment, and grinned. "We've got to survive it first, Boris."

Thirty minutes later, the men of the Soviet Union's elite unit had disappeared into the firs on their way to their confrontation with SS Regiment Europa. Soon the battle of the giants would begin.

CHAPTER 10

As the morning of the second day in the mountains progressed, the snow steadily began to fall more thickly. The wind increased too. Now the long line of vehicles, crawling through the Vértes Mountains, battled against a veritable blizzard, the lookouts' faces stung by the flying snow, their eyebrows white with the bitter crystals. The road ran through steep-sided gorges, its edge hanging vertiginously over the valley below.

Despite the treacherous conditions, Obersturmbannführer Habicht was exceedingly pleased. It was over fifteen hours since the little Russian reconnaissance plane had spotted them. By now he could have expected the first Red attack front the air. But in this weather the Reds would not be able to fly. And even if they could, their pilots would have a devil of a job spotting the convoy on this particular stretch of the road, with the great sheer mountain side giving them the cover they need.

"You look very pleased with yourself, Obersturmbannführer," Kreuz remarked, cleaning the snow off his monocle, and wishing himself in Berlin with a glass of steaming hot grog.

"I am," Habicht replied. "In spite of the weather we are making excellent time. Another day, in my estimation, and we should he through the mountains. Then the road to Budapest should be wide open for us."

"Providing that the *Viking* and *Death's Head* keep up their attack schedule," Kreuz objected mildly.

"But they are, my dear Kreuz," Habicht answered. He indicated the chattering command radio at the back of the half-track, with its freezing operator crouched over it. "Division signalled an hour ago that the Viking is making progress all along the front. The first day went splendidly and we're doing just as well today. We caught the Reds with their pants well and truly down yesterday."

"Excellent!" Kreuz said with hollow enthusiasm.

"Besides," Habicht continued, "even if the Division weren't making such splendid progress, I would go on."

Kreuz looked at him aghast. "Alone?"

"Alone," Habicht echoed, a faint smile on his thin lips. "You see we are a symbol, we of the Europa." He paused for moment airily, as if he were first

having to convince himself of the truth of what he was about to say. "And sometimes symbols are more effective when those who create them are... are dead, don't you think?"

Kreuz shivered. Nov he knew the Hawk was insane.

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Otto Habicht had decided on that day in the peaceful little SS Cavalry Hospital in Heidelberg that he was not going to survive the war. He had done so quietly and completely undramatically in the stillness of the big summer-white room, with the only sound of the barges on the Neckar outside to disturb the sterile hospital calm. It had not been the loss of his lower leg which had caused him to come to his overwhelming decision. It had been the other thing.

SS Oberstabsarzt Phelps had broken it gently to him when he felt the sudden strangeness between his legs after the three-day series of operations on his lower body. At first, Phelps had hidden the terrible revelation behind medical terminology: "Wounds in the scrotal sack...inguinal canal... removal of sin and dex..."

Habicht had interrupted him coldly: "Have you taken my balls off, doctor?"

Numbly Phelps had nodded.

"Am I a eunuch now?"

"Yes, both dex and sin – I mean right and left testicles were irreparably injured by the mortar burst which took off your lower leg. I'm afraid there was nothing else I could do..." his voice had tailed away. There was nothing more he could say to the man lying on the simple white bed in front of him.

Habicht had thanked him gravely for saving his life, asked him to leave and considered the situation as any other military problem, weighing the pros and cons, considering the possibilities – the inability to marry, the inevitable accumulation of more and more fat, the increasingly high-pitched voice, the female instability of the eunuch. He had come to his decision. Before the war ended, he would die – grandly – in some desperate bold venture at the head of his men as befitted a Habicht, whose family had served Prussia since the days of the Great Frederick himself. Now as his regiment ground its way ever higher into the Vértes Mountains, Colonel Habicht knew this was that desperate, bold venture he had promised himself.

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The Grey Eagles had been climbing steadily for over three hours, plodding upwards in strained silence, weighed down with thirty kilos of equipment per man. There was no sound, save the squeak of their frozen boots on the packed snow and sharp exhalations of breath.

But ahead of them Suslov knew they were coming to the end of their march. Before them the key height, which dominated the mountain road, loomed ever larger. He had chosen it because of its excellent strategic position. Behind it to the north, there was a sheer rock wall. To the east and south it was bounded by a ravine, narrow but very deep. In both directions there was an excellent field of fire. To the west, it overlooked the road the Fritzes must take if they were to break out of the mountains. From the point of view of defence, the height could not have been better situated. Once established on top of it, a handful of men, well dug-in and determined, could hold off an army.

Suslov knew his men needed a rest badly – they had been going with only one ten-minute stop since the drop – but he knew too he could not let them halt. They had to be in position on the height before the Fritzes arrived.

"Grey Eagles," he cried, feeling the icy mountain air stab at his lungs like a sharp knife, "at the double!" He pumped his clenched fist up and down twice swiftly: the infantry signal for 'at the double'.

Eyes glazed, yet determined, the paras stumbled after him.

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Obersturmbannführer Habicht also looked eagerly towards the gleaming white peak, knowing that it was the highest point in the Vértes Once it was passed, the going would be downhill, a straight run to the floor of the valley and the vital road network beyond.

He urged on his column, taking risks on the surface of the mountain road, which he would not have dared to that morning. "Tempo...tempo," he barked over and over again into the radio which linked him with Schulze's VW jeep. "Get those men moving, Sarnt-Major!"

Schulze hurried the rest of the convoy along like an angry sheepdog, switching in and out of the ponderous half-tracks with the little jeep, taking

appalling risks as he wheeled back and forth. At his side, a fearful Hung, his face now a sickly green, could do nothing but close his slant eyes and groan, "Sarnt-Major, you think of Hamburg, eh, and jiggy-jiggy shop after big war!"

Habicht's tactics paid off. Even the hard-pressed young drivers, virtually exhausted by the terrible conditions through which they had been forced to drive these last thirty-six hours, seemed to be infected by the Commander's enthusiasm. They, too, started handling the clumsy dangerous half-tracks, as if they were light racing cars, accelerating just before they came to a bend, changing down with a crash – right across the gated gear box – and swinging round it with only the merest tap on the brake pedal, ignoring the frightening swing of the vehicle's rump towards the off-side edge of the mountain road and the awesome drop.

The height to their right loomed ever larger in their worn, red-rimmed eyes. Soon they would reach it.

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Suslov plodded determinedly through the deep snow at the top of the height. Everywhere his Eagles were digging in, forming large walls of snow, broken by firing slits, opening their flies to urinate with a hot hiss onto the walls so that when the surface of the suddenly melting snow refroze, it would form a solid sheet of ice to ward off any stray slug.

The skilled airborne men had formed a three-sided perimeter some 200 metres in length, with its open, undefended end towards the sheer, naked rock wall – so sheer, indeed that even the blizzard which was abating had not lodged any snow on its surface. It was an excellent position, easily defensible even if the weather improved sufficiently for the Fritzes to call up an air strike. Suslov was confident that he could withstand anything the Germans threw at him.

He paused at the twin mortars set up in the centre of the perimeter, next to the big snow-covered boulder which he had chosen as his own command post. The mortarmen were busy rubbing more winterised grease on the sights of the weapons and the levels they used to judge their firing angles.

"*Horoscho*, my Eagles," he complimented them on their foresight. "You are thinking well."

Sergei Kolchak looked up at his commander: "And what are we going to call this mountain, Comrade Commander?" he demanded.

Suslov's gaze fell on the Grey Eagles' battalion flag, thrust into the snow by the boulder command post: a grey eagle against a bright red background, its claws extended, its cruel beak ready to tear its prey.

"There you are, Kolchak, there's your name for you."

"What, Comrade Commander?"

"Why, Grey Eagle Mountain!"

Kolchak beamed, "Of course," he breathed.

"Comrade Commander."

Suslov swung round. It was Oleg, the battalion runner. "What is it?" he snapped, the flag forgotten now, at the sight of the urgent look on Oleg's face.

"The Fritzes, Comrade Commander – they're coming up the road!" He doubled to the edge of the perimeter with Oleg. Together they flopped into the snow.

Down below the first evil snout of a half-track had begun to nose its way round the bend in the road on the last stretch before it surmounted the pass. Suslov focused his binoculars hastily, taking care to shade the lenses with one hand to avoid giving away his position.

The men, crowded in what was obviously the command vehicle, sprang into his vision. He knew immediately from the camouflaged overalls they were the SS, the hated Fritz killers. His attention was captured by the man with the eye patch, hood flung back to reveal the cap with its death's head badge. Suslov allowed his glasses to rest for a moment on the man's haughty, emaciated face and knew instinctively that this was the commander. He would be the man they would kill first.

Swiftly he squirmed back through the deep snow and doubled back to the waiting mortarmen. "All right," he barked, "we've got Fritzes to kill at last!"

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Habicht leaned forward over the top of the driving cab, urging the half-track up those last hundred metres to the top of the pass, his mind racing with plans. Once he had the Regiment over the pass he would race through the night down the mountain, taking whatever roadblock the Reds might have set up for him on the exit to the valley by surprise. After that, it would be only a mere twenty kilometres to the Hungarian capital. He swallowed, hardly daring to believe it was possible that by this time on the following day he

might be in Budapest.

"More speed, driver!" he commanded harshly.

"I'm doing my best, sir," the driver answered, "but it's –"

His words were silenced by a soft plop up ahead. Then another and another. An instant later the plops became an obscene, stomach-churning howl.

"What the –" Habicht cried in alarm and stared upwards at the little puffs of white smoke on the high peak to their right and the small black objects hurtling towards them. Then he realized what they were. "MORTARS!" he yelled.

Frantically the driver attempted to stop; but to no avail – the half-track would not respond in the icy surface. The next instant, the first salvo of mortar bombs from the peak straddled them. One exploded directly in front of the half-track, sending up a huge spurt of snow, coloured a brilliant scarlet. A second sailed harmlessly over the edge of the precipice, but the third bomb struck the road just under the skidding half-track's front axle. The ten-ton vehicle reared into the air like a bucking horse put to the saddle for the first time. Glass splintered. Metal shrieked. Habicht, the veteran, turned his head away from the hot blast, laden with gleaming razor-sharp fragments of steel just in time. His driver was not so quick.

The fist-sized piece of red-hot steel hissed through the cab window and took the top of his head off as neatly as any surgeon performing a trepanning. The boy screamed just once. Then with his brains tumbling out of his head, his lifeless body lurched limp against the wheel. The command half-track smashed into the mountainside and came to an abrupt stop, fifty metres from the top of the pass.

The Battle of Grey Eagle Mountain had begun.

BOOK 3 – THE BATTLE OF GREY EAGLE MOUNTAIN

CHAPTER 11

On Friday morning, 4 January, 1 94 5, Marshal Tolbuchin sacked Zacharov and took over the defence of the River Danube line himself.

Under the present circumstances his demoralized Guards could not conceivably stop the Royal Tigers of the two elite SS Panzer divisions which were leading the German thrust through the mountains. But the further the Fritzes penetrated into the Vértes Range, the longer and more exposed their flanks became. His first order to his Guards Cavalry, the most mobile and most flexible of his units in mountainous terrain, read simply: "Tickle the German's ribs for him so he loses control of his head!"

Thus his cavalry regiments began a day-long series of bloody little hit-and-run raids along the Germans' long, exposed flanks, forcing the 4th SS Panzer Corps to detach more and more emergency units to protect the flanks, and by doing so weakening the point.

Tolbuchin's next order went to the commander of the troops attacking Budapest itself. If the city fell, he reasoned that the steam might go out of the German attack. A sizeable number of German troops within the capital would be Soviet prisoners, and the relief forces would realize that they were shedding their blood for an objective already in Russian hands.

The second order was as simple as the first, but far more brutal. It read, "Take Budapest soon or face the consequences." Every regular Soviet officer had long known what the 'consequences' were, ever since the Great Army Purge of 1938: the camps or the firing squad. The General would understand.

His third order took more time to carry out. It went to every artillery commander on the long Second Ukrainian Front Command. It read: "I want every spare artillery piece, mortar, anti-tank gun rushed to the Budapest front immediately."

During that grey morning, Tolbuchin's staff built up a great barrier of artillery in front of the advancing SS, ranging from the smallest mortar to the fearsome 'Katuschka' rocket batteries. By midday the artillery was ready to go into action, albeit without a co-ordinated fire plan. But a fire plan was not needed in the rugged mountain territory. All the local artillery commander needed was to wait for the first SS tank to appear around the bend to his front and then call down the whole weight of fire at his disposal upon it.

Slowly but surely, the burly Marshal's measures began to pay off. SS Panzer Division Viking managed to capture Vetes-Tolna that morning, but found it difficult to get out of the village and push on eastwards. SS Panzer Division Death's Head captured one of its key objectives that same morning – Tarjan, but when it tried to link up with Balck's infantry, which had made a successful assault crossing of the Danube to its right, the Division found its advance barred by massed Soviet artillery. Now the SS was measuring its progress eastwards in metres, instead of the kilometres of the day before.

There was only one area that worried Tolbuchin – had Suslov's Grey Eagles managed to stop the Fritzes' advance through the high peaks towards the road network?

***

A thousand kilometres away from the Hungarian front, Adolf Hitler, still conducting the last of the ill-fated Ardennes Offensive from his Western Battle Headquarters at the Castle of Ziegenberg, was concerned too about the progress of his Armed SS.

Facing Luftwaffe Colonel Rudel, whom he had just decorated with the highest German award for bravery, he asked the C.O. of the *Immelmann Battle Wing*: "Well, what do you think of the situation in Hungary, Rudel?"

The burly dive-bomber pilot, who was still flying missions although he had lost a leg and Hitler had expressly forbidden him to do so, did not pull his punches. Aware that the high-ranking staff officers, even the yellow-faced, trembling Führer himself, did not understand what the true situation on the Eastern Front was, he stared around their faces in the big echoing operations room and told the truth. "It is bloody awful, mein Führer!"

There was a shocked intake of breath from the servile Marshal Keitel, and Colonel-General Jodl, Hitler's Chief-of-Staff, looked sharply at the angry-faced pilot.

"What do you mean, Rudel?" Hitler broke the shocked silence.

"I mean, mein Führer, that we are doing several things wrong up there, which cannot help but make the offensive end in failure."

"What can we do about the state of the weather, our transport difficulties and so on?" Keitel snapped angrily, his face suddenly flushing with anger.

Rudel turned on him. "It has nothing to do with weather, transport and

such things," he retorted hotly. "I fly eight hours a day over the Eastern Front on missions and have been doing so ever since 1941, Marshal. I know what's going on!"

"What is going on?" Hitler interrupted the pilot's angry outburst, his voice still gentle, almost monotonous.

Next to Hitler, Jodl tensed. He knew that voice of old. At any moment the Führer could explode with a fury of awesome power.

Rudel struck the map with his heavy hand. "The Vértes Range, mein Führer, out of which the Fourth SS Panzer Corps is trying to break east. Yet we all know that its advance is slowing down considerably. Why? Because we have lost the element of initial surprise. Nov it stands to reason that the Russians will bring up more and more forces to block the exits out of the mountains. Soon our offensive will bog down altogether." He paused and let his words sink in.

Next to him, Hitler, peering at the map through his nickel-framed spectacles remained silent.

"So what do we do?" Rudel snorted. "We batter our heads at a closed door, only to get them beaten bloody. We keep attacking and attacking to no purpose whatsoever."

"Well, what do you suggest we do, Rudel?" Jodl asked in the arrogant manner of a trained staff officer who had worn the purple leaves of a General Staff member, when this upstart from the Luftwaffe was still learning to fly his first glider.

"Roll with the punch, as a boxer does," Rudel answered with out hesitation.

"Explain?" Hitler snapped, his voice normal now, tense and eager.

"Pull the Fourth SS Corps out of the mountains, leaving the infantry behind to tie down the Russians, and put them into the battle for Budapest at another spot."

"Where?"

"Here." Rudel stabbed the map south of Budapest. "Here, beyond Lake Balaton. Its first objective should be the Danube south of the capital, say, at Dunapentele. From there, your SS boys could fight due north right into Budapest, taking the Russians by surprise."

The assembled staff officers listened to the airman's performance with dismay. Yet they knew that his suggestions were influencing Hitler, who despised the General Staff officers and only listened to their advice when he

was forced to by some defeat or impending defeat. More often than not he would make his decisions on the basis of his famous 'intuition' or the advice of some 'front-line swine' such as Rudel.

"But how would we break off the action without the Bolsheviks becoming suspicious?" Hitler asked after a moment, his face thoughtful.

"Mein Führer," the pilot answered. "I am just a simple soldier, who knows little of higher strategy as these gentlemen do," he waved his hand at the assembled staff.

Jodl's pale, wizened face grew even paler. *One day, Rudel*, he promised himself, *I'll make you pay for that.*

"In the days when we flew Stukas, the lead plane would come roaring down out of the sky, sirens howling, machine guns chattering, making the gunners below believe he was going to fall right on top of them, forcing them to concentrate all their fire on him. Meanwhile the rest of the squadron would sneak in at another level and bomb hell out of the real target. A simple feint like that is what you need in those hills, mein Führer. Some device to encourage the enemy to believe that you are still attacking with your armour, while in reality you are withdrawing it to launch a surprise attack on a completely different front, a good fifty kilometres away."

For what seemed a very long time, Hitler did not respond to Rudel's words. Instead he stared intently at the big table map, as if he could see things there that no one else could. "A feint," he said, breaking his long silence. "That is what you mean, Rudel?"

"Yes."

"But how and where?"

Jodl intervened: "SS Regiment Europa, mein Führer, presently battling its way through the mountains, and apparently to no purpose," he sneered at Rudel, "if we are to accept Rudel's suggestion."

"But not my SS!" Hitler objected.

"Why not, sir?" Jodl answered easily. "They are beyond recall now and would play no significant role if we were to withdraw the Viking and the Death 's Head, save one. If they were allowed to believe they were spearheading the main drive for Budapest, they might well fool the Russians that we were still pressing ahead with the original plan."

Hitler looked at his cunning-eyed Chief of Staff. "But that is a monstrous suggestion, Jodl!" he gasped. "It would mean sacrificing many hundreds of brave young men purposelessly."

"Not purposelessly, sir. If they succeeded in fooling the Russians, they would not have died in vain. Besides," he added as a sudden, malicious afterthought, "we could give them Rudel's *Immelmann Battle Wing* as air support." He smiled maliciously in the direction of the most decorated man in the German Forces.

"But we can't fly at those heights," Rudel began, angrily. Hitler held up a soft, flabby hand for silence. "One moment Rudel, while I think about this matter."

Utter silence descended upon the big room, as Hitler limped to the window and stared out at the bleak, snow-bound landscape. The men of the Armed SS were his Imperial Guard, who had fought and died for him in their hundreds, their thousands, their hundred-thousands on every battlefront. There was no loyalty left in the Army anymore as the Wehrmacht's assassination attempt had proved. But the SS – his SS – were they not 'loyal to the death', as their proud motto proclaimed? Could he willingly sacrifice some two thousand bold young men, who believed in him implicitly, for the sake of a tactical manoeuvre?

Even as he turned to face his waiting staff and Rudel again, he already knew that he must.

"Gentlemen," he announced deliberately, trying to prevent his lips from trembling as they were wont to do since the bomb explosion in his East Prussian HQ that previous July. "I have made my decision. I have decided to break off the offensive of the Fourth SS Panzer Corps! It will attack again from the south-west, once it has successfully regrouped near Lake Balaton." Hitler hesitated and directed his yellow, rheumy old eyes at the floor, as if suddenly ashamed. "SS Regiment Europa will continue its attack in the direction of Budapest."

Europa's fate had been sealed.

CHAPTER 12

The Frenchmen, volunteers all, burst from their cover, heads bent behind the white rain of tracer, doubling towards the dark, unseen peak.

The Russians had not been sleeping after all. Violet light crackled all along their perimeter. Red and green enemy tracer began to cut the air. Behind the French the Cheese-heads intensified their fire, pouring the glowing 20mm shells at a rate of eight hundred a minute at the top of the mountain.

Encouraged by the *elan* of the French volunteers, Habicht played his next card. Under the covering fire of the flak wagon, another half-track nosed its snout into the wrecked half-track which blocked the road and thrust it to one side. Next moment it was rattling towards the peak, its deck crowded with crouching grenadiers.

The Grey Eagles heard rather than saw the danger.

"Flares, in God's name flares!" Suslov yelled urgently.

An instant later two flares burst over the snowfield below, bathing the dark figures struggling valiantly across it in their eerie icy light. Immediately Suslov took in the half-track rumbling on towards their rear, rattling over the dead, crushing their bodies to bloody pulp.

"Kolchak!" Suslov ordered. "Stop that vehicle!"

The mortarman rapped out a series of swift orders. The mortar crews worked frantically, ignoring the white hail of death hissing over their heads.

"Ready!" the first mortar corporal yelled. "Ready!" the second followed him a moment later.

Kolchak did not hesitate. "FIRE!" he cried.

The two Corporals turned their firing wheels, swinging their heads to one side as the mortars spoke. The first bombs hissed clumsily into the sky.

Suslov's gaze did not leave the dark black shape of the half track, illuminated in the dying flares like some predatory, primeval monster, seeking its prey. The mortars were his only heavy weapon; if they couldn't stop the half-track, its cargo of infantrymen could be delivered right in front of his positions.

But Kolchak was as accurate as ever. The second and third bombs landed right on the open deck of the half-track. There was a blinding flash of

bright white light. Dark shapes whirling and turning in the air against its glare were flung in all directions. Next moment the vehicle's punctured fuel tank exploded, sending a stream of burning red across the snow. Here and there a survivor, already a blazing torch, threw himself vainly into the snow, trying to extinguish the flames which were consuming him alive.

The sight of the burning half-track took the heart out of the Frenchmen. They broke and ran, streaming back the way they had come, perfect targets against the red glare.

The Grey Eagles rose to their feet, regardless of the 20mm shells still peppering the peak of the mountain, and poured cruel automatic fire into their backs.

The first attack on Grey Eagle Mountain had been repulsed.

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"Damn, damn, damn!" Habicht cursed, striking the metal of the nearest half-track with his fist.

Kreuz looked anxiously at Habicht's face – still peppered with the black dried blood of the untreated shrapnel wounds. They could neither go forward nor back. They were trapped on the top of this damn mountain.

"If I could only get the Royal Tigers up," Habicht groaned. "I'd blast them out of their damn holes like the rats they are!"

"Impossible on this road, Obersturmbannführer," Kreuz said pointedly. "The outer verge wouldn't support their weight and we can't simply toss the half-tracks over the side to make room for them."

"Of course, of course," Habicht snarled. "I know that." Raising his night glasses, he stared at the stark outline of the peak ahead, as silent now as if it were deserted. "A frontal attack is out of the question," he commented to Kreuz.

He swung his glasses to both sides of the peak. "The flanks are just as bad, even if we could get into position there without their spotting us first." He raised the glasses and focused them on the sheer rock wall behind the Russian position. His trained Alpinist's eye told him at once that they did not have a hope in hell of getting down there. Yet all the same – he lowered his glasses thoughtfully and turned to Schulze. "Sarnt-Major,"

"Sir."

"What would you say off-hand those two automatic rifle cannon might

weigh?"

Schulze knew the Hawk meant the two recoilless rifles, Germany's latest secret weapon.

"Fifty kilos or thereabouts, sir," he said hesitantly.

The Hawk mused, "A lot of weight to be carried by one man." He looked at Schulze and the big NCO could see his teeth gleam in a parody of a smile. "But not if he's as big as you, Schulze, eh?"

"Jesus," Schulze cursed to himself, "This is where I crap in my pants!"

***

Habicht raised his hand as a signal to halt. Schulze with the recoilless rifle strapped to his back and the four big Cheese-heads, laden with shells, flopped into the snow gratefully. They had run the gauntlet of the Russian positions without being spotted, and now they were on the peak, behind the Russians, ready to begin the impossible mission which the Hawk had dreamed up for them.

Close-up the rock face did not look as bad as he had anticipated. The wall sloped at about sixty degrees and was ribbed and terraced pretty fully. There would be plenty of hand- and foot-holds.

Carefully he searched its surface for a convenient ledge: not too high, broad enough to support them and at the same time allow them to see the Reds' positions. Then he spotted it. He focused his glasses on the fault a couple of hundred metres above their heads.

It was broad enough, that was certain, and he was pretty sure that the inky-black darkness of the fold beyond it indicated that there was a deep narrow gully there, which might well overlook the Red positions.

He turned round and looked down at the men on the ground.

"Now listen to me," he said softly and simply. "Everybody is frightened on mountains. But the main thing is to keep your head. Once you panic, you are finished. Do you understand that?" He looked directly at the four Dutch volunteers. "Now you must rely on my judgement implicitly. Where I put my feet – I shall go first – you will put yours. There – and no other place. Clear?"

They nodded their understanding.

"Fine. Our objective is there, that ridge at about ten o'clock."

Schulze looked up the mountain, following the direction indicated by the Hawk's outstretched arm. "Oh, Christ!" he exclaimed, "That's halfway to

heaven, that bastard is."

Habicht chuckled. "It's not as bad as it looks, Schulze. Believe me."

Reluctantly the men began to trail through the deep snow in single file behind the Hawk, plodding through its virgin surface like convicted criminals, condemned to a nameless fate.

***

It was a beautiful winter dawn in the high mountains, the sky above a hard glittering blue and the mountains gleaming all eve-blinking perfect white.

But the Commander of the Grey Eagles had no eyes for the beauty of the morning. His gaze was fixed on the dead littering the snowfield and the burnt-out wreck of the half-track. *What were the SS up to?*

He bit his lip and wondered. Would they whistle up their planes? Was that what they were waiting for – air support before they began another attack? Suddenly Major Suslov was strangely uneasy. Turning round he blew his whistle three times to sound the alarm. The men not on stand-to sprang to their feet at once, as if they had not been really sleeping, and grabbed their weapons. Those on stand-to peered alertly from their weapon pits, waiting for orders.

Swiftly Suslov rapped out a stream of commands, putting his Grey Eagles on immediate alert. Veterans that they were, they carried out his orders at once, the new air lookouts seizing binoculars and beginning to search the quarter of the sky allotted to them, while the rest started to hack even deeper holes in the snow for when the German bombers came. But none of them had eyes for the sheer rock face behind their position. There could be no danger from that particular quarter.

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After two abortive attempts, Habicht had found what he sought. A sloping ledge took him to a crack and on to a snow-covered platform, perhaps some two hundred metres to the right of the ledge on which he wanted to position the recoilless rifle. It had taken him a good hour of threatening, cajoling, persuading, encouraging to get his men to make it, but in the end he had managed it. Now breathless and obviously not daring to look down at the giddy spectacle of what lay below them, they were ready to attempt the

traverse of the rock face to the ledge.

He smiled at them coldly. "I think we'd better get started now," he said, "before you gentlemen take root here." They were not amused, he could see that. Their eyes, even those of the big NCO, were round and wide with fear like those of sheep, scenting the freshly shed blood and knowing that soon it would be their turn to enter the slaughterhouse.

They began to move across the gleaming face of the mountain towards their objective, sweating profusely in spite of the biting cold and travelling with incredible slowness, but moving, all the same.

Habicht led them to a crack. It ran slantwise up a perpendicular rock. He knew it would be easier for them than any other hold. It was not too bad at first, then his foot jammed. Below they halted bewildered by his suddenly frantic struggles to free his foot, but their red, strained faces still showing an almost pathetic belief in his ability to get them to their objective.

Habicht calmed himself. He paused for a moment, forcing his heartbeat to slow, the sweat streaming down and blinding him, his muscles screaming with pain. Gently he tugged at his foot and worked it free. "Watch that hole," he called down, controlling his voice with his iron will.

Bringing up the rear with the fifty kilo gun barrel strapped to his shoulders, Schulze was no longer afraid; he was too exhausted to register positive emotion. All his efforts were directed to getting to the ledge which seemed so impossibly far away and slumping down in the snow to rest. The strain was tremendous even for his huge powerful body as the murderous weight of the gun tried to pluck him backwards into the abyss. The sweat streaming down his face, his eyes bulging wildly from his crimson features, he clambered upwards.

And then finally, after what seemed an age, they had made it and were flinging themselves face-downwards on the snow-covered ledge, choking violently for breath. Habicht looked down at them for a moment before crawling carefully to the narrow gully beyond the ledge and peering through it.

He had been right. The Red positions were set out exactly below him at some two hundred metres distance. He could see their every detail – the weapon pits, the snow walls, which sheltered their gunners, the little mortar pit, even the red flag fluttering bravely in the centre of their perimeter.

He had them completely at his mercy. Suddenly Obersturmbannführer Otto Habicht chuckled. It was an unearthly sound.

CHAPTER 13

The flare hissed into the still morning air like a bird of prey. Down below the startled Russians stared up at the green ball of light descending on their perimeter, staining the snow a sickly hue. Gradually the flare came to rest and died a slow, hissing death in the snow.

Everywhere Suslov's Grey Eagles clutched their weapons and stared to their front. The Major, upright next to his command post, machine pistol in hand, was as tense and uneasy as his men. *What the hell was going on?*

Suslov darted through the scuffed snow and focused his glasses on the bend from which the Fritzes must surely come. There was no sign of activity. One thing he noticed, however. The camp fires had gone out. Did that signify the Fritzes were going to attack? Or were they perhaps withdrawing, realizing that it would be impossible to pass his position. His heart leapt with sudden joy. He had stopped the Fritz drive through the mountains with only a handful of casualties – the men lost in the crashed glider. He swung round to his expectant men and opened his mouth to pass on the news. But no words emerged.

For in that same moment, two things happened. Down below engines roared into life, among them the massive rumble of tanks. A second later there was a sharp crack high above his head. He glanced upwards in alarm. Just in time to catch the stab of scarlet flame burning across the snow.

"*Alarm!*" he cried at the top of his voice. "Stand by everywhere! Mortars?" – his words were drowned by the crash of a medium sized shell bursting right into the centre of the perimeter and exploding with a hellish roar. The Fritzes had somehow managed to get a gun on the height above them! In that same moment, the first half-track burst round the bend and into the open.

Schulze, crouched behind the long recoilless rifle took careful aim, just as the first half-track came rattling up the mountain road. Controlling his breathing, he squeezed the trigger gently. The gun thudded against his shoulder. Hot blast swept backwards and the dark flash of the shell whizzed from the muzzle of the strange gun. The shell exploded right in the middle of the Russians manning the furthest mortar. They flew apart, as if punched into the

air by some gigantic fist.

"Excellent, Schulze!" Habicht cried exuberantly and ducked as the first enraged burst of Russian machine-gun fire came zipping in their direction.

"Load!" Schulze bellowed. "Come on you big Cheese-head, move it!"

"On!" the, big flaxen-headed Hollander yelled and thrust the shell home.

Schulze took aim again. He pressed the trigger. The gun cracked once more and Schulze cried, "Now try that one for size, you Popov pigs!"

Suslov fought his panic. If his Eagles could only stop one of the vehicles now emerging from cover, they could still block the way over the pass. "Kolchak!" he bellowed over the roar of the escaping German half-tracks and the firing of the gun on the heights above them. "Knock me out one of those damn Fritzes. QUICK!"

Suslov left him to it. He grabbed a rifle. "Boris, get some grenades – from that box there."

"Smoke?"

"Yes," Suslov said impatiently, fitting the special grenade-launching device to the rifle. Finished, he kicked the nearest machine-gunner in the ribs. "You, swing round and give us covering fire up there.

"But you can't get up there, Major," Boris protested, ducking smartly as another shell slammed home into the perimeter.

"I know. But at least I can blind the swine, while Kolchak does his job. Come on."

Together the two of them doubled to the rear of the perimeter, while behind them the machine-gunner opened up, sending a stream of white and red tracer towards the narrow gap high up on the glittering rock face from which the gunfire was coining. They flung themselves into the snow at the base of the rock wall. Frantically Suslov fitted one of the smoke grenades to the top of the long clumsy rifle. He held it upright, pointing straight up at the gorge and fired.

It was an unlucky shot. The grenade struck the rock wall and went ricocheting off like a crazy bird. Suslov muttered a gross obscenity. A heavy stick grenade came whirling down towards them. They ducked as it exploded harmlessly a dozen metres away, showering them with snow. Wildly Suslov raised the rifle knowing that the Fritzes' aim might well be more accurate next time. He fired. This time the dark ball of the grenade sailed right into the

entrance of the gully. For a moment nothing happened, then Suslov heard the ping and crack of the grenade exploding. In a flash, thick white smoke started to emerge from the gully.

Ignoring the wild burst of fire from above, Suslov fired grenade after grenade at the opening, as swiftly as Boris could hand them to him knowing now he was effectively masking the Fritz gun and giving Kolchak the time he needed to knock out a half-track.

Kolchak was ready. He glanced at the level on the big mortar and was satisfied. Below the mountain road was black with the running men. Kolchak raised his arm and then brought it down sharply. "FIRE!" he bellowed.

The sheet of scarlet flame spewed the dark deadly bomb from the mortar's muzzle. Clumsily it waggled through the air, gaining height by the second until suddenly it seemed to stop, before falling towards the road at a speed, trailing its obscene, stomach churning howl behind it.

Kolchak watched spell-bound as it fell directly in the centre of the line of Fritz half-tracks. One of them trembled violently, as if it had been struck by a sudden great wind. The next moment it came to an abrupt stop, thick smoke pouring from its shattered engine, while men sprang frantically over the side before the half-track caught fire. Behind it the rest of the column around to a halt.

"We've done it, boys!" Kolchak cried, flinging up his arms with joy. "We've shown the Fritz–"

The words died on his lips. A monstrous shadow lay across the snow at the tail of the stalled convoy.

"A Royal Tiger," Kolchak breathed in horror, as the hooded gun started to swing round slowly in their direction.

"Piss on it!" Schulze cried frantically, trying to control his choking breath. "Quick!"

The Dutchman ripped open his flies and choking and coughing, the tears streaming down his face with the smoke, he urinated on the dirty handkerchief tendered him.

Schulze did not hesitate. He bound the disgusting rag around his mouth. "Well, don't stand there like a fart in a trance, you stupid Cheese-head. Do the same!" Schulze ordered. "And bring me some more ammo."

He dropped onto his belly and crawling through the smoke advanced to the edge of the sheer drop. Ignoring the ricochets and the vicious crack of

rifle grenades exploding all around him, he drew his last grenade. Narrowing his eyes against the ever thickening smoke which had blinded the gun, he pulled the china pin at its base and lobbed it over the edge of the rock wall and ducked.

The stick grenade exploded directly below the two Russians.

The snow erupted and obscured them in a wild whirling white storm for a brief moment. When it had cleared, one of them lay sprawled in the snow, his head blown away while the other, helmet-less, his clothes ripped by shrapnel and blast, was pelting across the snow the way he had come.

"You'll get a medal for that," the Hawk's voice cut into Schulze's consciousness. "I'll see that you do, Schulze, when this business is over."

"Got a whole drawer full of them, Colonel," Schulze answered. He doubled back to his gun, while the Hawk chopped at the smoke and tried to clear it so that the big NCO could start firing again.

But there was no need for Schulze's recoilless rifle now. In the same moment that Suslov, his face begrimed and smeared with Boris's blood, flung himself headlong into the snow, just behind Kolchak's mortar pit, there was a tremendous roar. It tore the air apart as if in eternal anguish. Even as it engulfed Suslov, wreathing him in its awesome, hot, choking, deafening fury, he knew with a sense of despair what it was. The Fritzes had managed to bring one of the 90mm cannons of their tanks into action. Next moment, the shell exploded right in the centre of Kolchak's mortar pit, one hundred pounds of high explosive, packed in high-grade Krupp steel, tearing, ripping, gouging, hacking all in front of it, leaving the pit a smoking horror of mangled, limbless bodies swimming in their own thick, hot blood.

Suslov struggled to his feet. Right at the bend the hooded gun was preparing to fire again. Hurriedly he turned to his terrified radio operator. "Sergei, tell HQ we can't hold them. We'll have to give up the mountain. Quick!"

"In clear?"

"In clear. No time for code now." He cringed instinctively as the 90mm cannon spoke again with a mighty roar and the High Explosive shell zipped flat across the snow-field with the sound of a huge piece of canvas being ripped apart by a pair of gigantic hands. It exploded in a monstrous burst of crimson flame on the Eagles' perimeter, scything down a good dozen of his men.

The radio operator's finger flew up and down on the key. The man was terrified, veteran that he was, Suslov could see that. But then they all were, himself included. There was no protection against that great gun; even if they dug themselves down as far as hell, it would find them.

"Finished, Comrade Commander," the radio operator cried over the hellish racket, his voice almost hysterical.

"Sign off!" Suslov yelled. "We're moving out. Our position here is untenable."

He blew three shrill blasts on his whistle. The Eagles reacted automatically. They knew the drill well enough. As the German gun fired yet again, every second man left his foxhole and started to retreat to the centre of the perimeter. "Down the slope to the right," Suslov commanded, standing proud and erect as was expected of an officer whom Stalin himself had called the 'boldest of the bold'.

The men ran for the cover of the eastern, slope, grateful to be allowed to escape the terrible fury of that murderous gun. Suslov blew his whistle again – twice this time. As the great gun thundered, as if enraged that its chosen victims might yet escape, the last defenders of the perimeter ran out of their foxholes and followed in the direction of the others.

Suslov glanced at his radio operator. "Pack up and run after them," he ordered. "We're finished here now."

Major Suslov took one last look at the bodies of his dead littering the perimeter and saluted. Grabbing the shell-torn flag, he turned and began running after the radio operator.

The Battle of Grey Eagle Mountain was over. The way to Budapest was open again.

BOOK 4 – BREAKTHROUGH

CHAPTER 14

"Flight leader here," Rudel pressed the throat mic, "are you reading me?"

"I read you...I read you." The wingmen's answers came back in a quick, metallic blur of words. Colonel Rudel was a strict disciplinarian. In the Immelmann Battle Wing, he did not tolerate the easy-going, happy-go-lucky behaviour common to other Luftwaffe wings. Rudel believed that one remained alive in combat by minute planning and strict, unquestioning discipline.

"Close up...close up...now," Rudel commanded and eased the throttle of his twin-engined Me 262 jet back slightly.

The two wingmen responded at once. Satisfied he jerked his thumb downwards. They both nodded their understanding. At 550 kilometres an hour they hurtled out of the sky towards the ground and levelled out at 300 metres.

Now they were roaring along above the mountain road, Rudel leading the flight, while the two wingmen searched the ground for the missing SS regiment.

Rudel did not like the assignment his Wing had drawn one bit. Flying in the mountains in this kind of weather was decidedly dangerous, especially with the raw pilots who made up most of his Wing these days – the veterans had been shot down years before. All the same, he realized that the missing SS regiment's new role was indirectly due to his suggestion. He had a duty to help them the best he could. Besides, he told himself, with a bit of luck and his help, the SS might just win through.

"Colonel Rudel...Colonel Rudel," a voice filled his ear phones abruptly.

He squeezed the throat mic. "Yes?"

"To port, sir, looks like a wrecked half-track."

Rudel saw it immediately. A burnt-out half-track, abandoned in a patch of scorched snow, with dark shapes littering the area around it, which he knew were dead men. "One of ours," he said over the intercom. "It's them all right." They flashed on, the bright white light of the mountain sun gleaming off their canopies as they swung due east, dragging their monstrous black shadows across the snow behind then. To his front Rudel spotted a long line

of black dots, moving across the snow at a snail's pace.

"Watch out for flak!" he warned the other two. "Going down now!"

As one, their wings not more than twenty metres apart; the three planes roared down low, coming in out of the sun to the rear of the convoy to blind their flak gunners. But there was no need for this precaution. Every second vehicle had the swastika recognition flag draped over its bonnet, and the white faces looking up at them were smiling; men were waving their hands in greeting. They had found SS Regiment Europa. As the lead half-track drew away beneath them, Colonel Rudel waggled the wings of the jet in acknowledgement and swept on down the road to check out the opposition undoubtedly awaiting the condemned Regiment.

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An enormous black shadow shot over the road. The Guards Cavalry troopers cast frightened eyes upwards, as the second jet came screaming in, its cannon chattering. They scattered wildly, horses snorting, wide-nostrilled with fear.

Rudel came in for his run. He glanced in his mirror. That last glance had saved his life many a time in the last years, but there was no Russian fighter on his tail. The roadblock had no air cover. He eased the stick back. The engine noise died to a whisper. The jet seemed to drop like a stone. The stall warning buzzers started screaming. Rudel ignored them, as he continued with the manoeuvre for which he was famous throughout the Luftwaffe. The ground was only fitly metres below him now. He could make out the fleeing Russians quite distinctly.

The scream of the warning buzzers had reached a peak. If he did not react soon, the plane would crash. He pressed the firing button. The cannon sputtered. Twenty millimetre shells hissed at the Russians like angry red hornets. Men fell everywhere. A horse had its hind legs blown off, but tried to struggle on over the snow, dragging its intestines behind it like an obscene grey-green snake.

Rudel caught the jet just in time. He was thrust back hard against his seat, as both engines regained full thrust, and zoomed high into the Sky, leaving his two wingmen the job of demolishing the hastily erected road block with their cannon. His message was simple. "Rudel to Europa. Road out of the mountains clear now. Courtesy Immelmann Battle Wing. Good luck!"

***

Half an hour later, the advance party of SS Regiment Europa came to a halt at the site of the massacre, and the two vehicles rolled to a stop. Cautiously Habicht and Schulze, followed by the Chinese and a couple of other troopers, advanced on the shattered mess up the road. But there was no need for their caution. The men lying everywhere in the shell-pitted snow were dead.

Habicht thrust his pistol back in its holster and placing his leather map case on the rump of a dead horse, spread his map, while behind him Hung began to loot the bodies, quietly but efficiently.

Habicht looked up at Schulze: "Sergeant-Major, I want you to listen carefully. In perhaps another kilometre or so, we shall be out of the mountains and joining the main road network to Budapest, which is exactly twenty kilometres away from that junction. A mere twenty kilometres, imagine that!" He looked at Schulze almost proudly.

Schulze's broad red face remained expressionless, not revealing his misgivings about the great offensive, which had been growing throughout the morning.

"Now we know that the bulk of the Red forces are located in front of the Bickse and Zsambek positions where the Viking and the Death's Head are attempting to make their main break-outs. We can assume that the main east-west axis from Budapest should be packed with second-line troops, the rear echelon and the like. With the men at our disposal we cannot cope with that kind of thing. Besides I don't want to get involved in unnecessary minor action. So we must find another road to Budapest.

"A secondary road – something of that kind – which would be big enough to take the Royal Tigers, possibly running parallel but to the south of the main axis. Now once the regiment hits the main road here, I cannot afford to hesitate. Hesitation could well mean we could become bogged down in some Red counter-attack. When we arrive there, I want to be across that main road and on my secondary road immediately."

Schulze knew he was a fool even as he posed the question: "But how will you know which secondary road to choose, sir?"

Habicht smiled at him but there was no answering warmth in that glacial-grey eye of his. "You will tell me, Schulze. You are the only man capable of it."

"You mean, sir, you want me to carry out a forward recce and radio back the details of the way ahead to the rest of the Regiment – all the way to Budapest?" He looked at the Hawk aghast. "For twenty kilometres behind the Popov lines?"

Habicht ignored the shocked look on the NCO's face. "Yes. That little Hiwi driver of yours speaks fluent Russian and I believe I have a ploy which will conceal you from discovery." He extended his one arm at the dead Russians lying everywhere in the bloody, scuffed snow. "You could wear Russian uniform – you and your Chinese." He smiled at Schulze, as if it were the most obvious thing to do in the world.

"But, sir," Schulze said, "may I point out to you that the Popov shoot people who wear their uniform. In their naïve manner they seem to think that they are spies."

"Yes, I suppose they do," Habicht answered easily. "But that, I'm afraid, is a chance you will have to take."

***

Schulze and Hung had just completed their transformation into Russian soldiers of the Guards Cavalry Division when the shooting began.

The Hawk had intended to use the prisoners taken on the mountain as a human protective screen to walk in front of the column and force whoever was holding the expected barrier on the road to surrender or shoot their own comrades. But Rudel had taken care of that particular problem for him. Now he had no need of the Grey Eagles, and with his habitual desire to rid the world of as many Russians as possible before he died, he had them lined up in the snow and mown down by machine-gun.

Hung watched with a look of disapproval on his yellow face. "Hung think no good," he mumbled. "No shoot prisoners in Red Army – well not much."

Schulze looked at the fat little Hiwi. "Better dead than Red, Hung," he said without too much conviction, adjusting the collar of his newly acquired overcoat.

"No good – very bad," the Chinese persisted.

Gloomily he stamped towards the jeep, its bonnet camouflaged with netting to hide the telltale swastika, while Schulze went across to take leave from Habicht. The Hawk was in one of his heady, electric moods. He took his

gaze from where the two Frenchmen were draping the Europa across the dead Russians' chests, as was the Regiment's practice and said joyously, "Well, Schulze, all ready to go?"

"Yessir."

"You know just how important the mission I've given you is. Find me that road to Budapest and you can have anything that it is my power to give you."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"I know you will, Schulze."

The big NCO strode back to the jeep, where the Chinese was already gunning the motor noisily, as if he could not wait to get away from the grim sight of the murdered paratroopers. A moment later they were on their way.

Up on the heights, Major Suslov lowered his binoculars slowly, the tears streaming unrestrained down his handsome face. He had seen enough. His brave Eagles had been slaughtered in cold blood by the Fritz swine.

While the survivors of the battle stared at him in awed silence, Major Suslov wiped the tears from his eyes and said in a strained voice, full of anger and anguish. "Grey Eagles, I swear to you I will kill every one of the fascist pigs for what they have done to our comrades down there. I swear!" He raised his right hand into the air, as if he were pledging a solemn oath.

And then the German jets were coming again, winging low over the snow at a tremendous speed as part of the cover supplied by Immelmann Battle Wing and the Grey Eagles were scattering wildly for the safety of the nearest fir wood.

CHAPTER 15

On the fifth day of the surprise German offensive, which now seemed to be slackening off in the Vértes Mountains, Marshal Tolbuchin's troops assaulted and captured the most important height on the western bank of the Danube: Gellert Hill. Rising steeply to a height of nearly 250 metres, it dominated the Buda half of Budapest, which was held by Colonel Doerner's Germans and their still loyal Hungarian allies under the command of Colonel-General Ivan von Hindy, some 70,000 men in all.

As soon as the news came in that the assault of his picked storm troops had been successful, Tolbuchin ordered the General commanding the attack on the remaining half of the city to rush his artillery up the Gellert Hill and begin a systematic destruction of Buda. "Smoke the rats out, he commanded, "and then send in your tanks to finish the job off. I want Buda captured without delay."

The local commander obeyed with alacrity. Every gun available was rushed up the height to commence the destruction of Buda, which was cut off from Pest by the destruction of the eight bridges spanning the Danube. Hour after hour they poured their fire into the old town around the Castle Hill.

The German–Hungarian resistance along the Danube line began to weaken. One by one their defence posts crumbled under the massive bombardment. The first T-34s started to cross the Danube and attempted to penetrate deeper into Buda, flight after flight of rockets covering their progress across the burning water.

The defenders retreated, blocking key intersections with overturned trains, interlaced with timbers and torn-up tramlines. They had few anti-tank weapons but plenty of ingenuity. They greased the old cobbled streets with engine grease, waste oil and industrial liquid soap. When the T-34s hit the greased patches, they slid and skidded violently, their drivers swiftly losing control, making themselves easy targets for the volunteers with their Molotov cocktails.

Similarly, hollows or depressions in the well-worn streets were filled with petrol and when the T-34s rattled through what they took to be water, a soldier hidden in a doorway would fling a phosphorous grenade into the petrol, swamping the tank in a sudden awesome blaze.

Brown earthenware plates of the kind used by poorer Magyar families were strung across the roads so that they could be easily seen and taken for a daisy chain of mines by the Soviet tank crews. Fearful of rolling over them, the tankers would back down the narrow streets to run right into a chain of hand grenades suddenly pulled into their blinded rear. Trains, packed with high explosives, were set hurtling down the steep narrow streets of the Castle Hill district to ram the invaders. High tension wires were dropped upon them as they passed by, electrocuting their crews. Empty oxygen cylinders were rolled under their tracks as they ground their way round the treacherous bends of the narrow, steeply inclined streets sending the great machines crashing against the buildings.

But still they pressed on, followed by assault squads of picked infantry, who were armed with flame-throwers and burnt their way systematically from house to house and from street to street with their terrible weapons, leaving behind them a fearsome smoking wreckage of crashed trains, ruined houses, wrecked tanks.

Siberian infantry followed and died in the German fire by their hundreds. The fact they were simply cannon fodder to be used up before Tolbuchin sent in his elite Guards did not seem to perturb them. They died in the same manner as they raped the screaming Hungarian housewives and their daughters, impassively and without comment.

As night fell on that fifth day, the Siberians broke into the German telephone HQ, manned by a handful of middle-aged soldiers and a hundred or more 'field mattresses', as the German soldier called their female auxiliaries contemptuously. The drunken Siberians threw their lives away foolishly, forcing the German soldiers back and back into the telephone building until all of them were dead and the screaming terrified women were theirs. They knew no mercy.

Hidden beneath a dead body, the lesbian supervisor of the exchange, feigning death and looking no different, in her Wehrmacht trousers and cropped hair, than the dead soldiers all around her, took in the terrible mass rape. She watched how three of them raped little Ingrid, the virgin for whom she had lusted herself; how they ripped the clothes off a screaming "Fat Erna" whose enormous breasts fell down to her bulging stomach when they cut away her bra; how they fought each other with knives and bayonets to enjoy the favours of "Granny", the white-haired, eldest member of the troop,

because they believed that an old woman had a special magic.

And before she fainted with revulsion, she saw how one of them, enraged beyond measure by the fiery resistance of Eva, the one-time German Maiden leader, smashed an axe against her face, causing a horrific gaping wound. When in his drunken state he could not make love to her bleeding unconscious body, he thrust the axe handle up between her thighs and raising his booted foot, gave it a vicious kick which sent it deep into her cruelly tortured body, the hot blood seeping out from between her legs in a scarlet stream.

When the middle-aged Doerner heard of these outrages, he ordered the immediate evacuation of the remaining auxiliaries to the suburbs where SS Obergruppenführer von Pfeffer-Wildenbruch held out with his two SS cavalry divisions. He spoke on the telephone to Colonel-General von Hindy, Commander of the 1st Hungarian Corps, and asked him to counter-attack immediately with his two weak infantry divisions.

Von Hindy was obviously at the end of his tether, but he was the typical old school Anglo-Hungarian officer. "My men are hungry. They have no ammunition to speak of and nothing more than machine guns to ward off the Russian tanks," he began.

"The situation is desperate, I know," Doerner exclaimed. "But I must ask you to do your best."

Von Hindy did not seem to hear Doerner's words. He continued, "But we are Hungarians and Hungarians have always been fools about such things. Colonel, we shall attack as soon as it grows dark."

"Brave fools," Doerner said to himself as he put down the phone and began the virtually impossible task of trying to re-establish his crumbling line with the middle-aged policemen who made up his command.

Thus it was that Colonel-General von Hindy's surprise counter-attack into Buda caught Tolbuchin unawares and forced him to withdraw the Guards battalions, which had been dug in behind the main Bickse–Budapest road. to use them against the new threat.

It was into this suddenly open gap that Hung and Sergeant-Major Schulze slipped, as that terrible Saturday finally came to an end.

CHAPTER 16

The jeep rolled cautiously into the first village Schulze and Hung had encountered on their reconnaissance drive.

Hung changed down to second, while Schulze, his finger round the trigger of the round-barrelled Russian machine-gun stared at the single storey, tumbledown cottages with their crooked chimneys from which no smoke rose. The place looked empty. But he knew they could not be too careful.

As they entered the little settlement, they soon learned there was nothing to be afraid of. The village was dead – wiped out.

Men – and women, their skirts thrown back obscenely, their legs thrust apart – lay everywhere in the dirty snow. From the black skeletal trees in the village square, naked men hung by their necks, their faces black, their bodies as hard as board. Just outside the church, the village priest was nailed upside down to the big wooden crucifix, his amputated penis thrust in between his gaping lips.

Schulze retched and fought hack the bitter bile which threatened to flood his throat. "Christ almighty Hung, who did this?" he exclaimed.

"The Russians," a soft voice in German said behind them. The two of them spun round.

A little man, dressed in a brown, overlong leather coat and a fur hat with loose ear-flaps was standing there.

"Who are you?" Schulze demanded, raising the gun. The little man raised his hands but the smile remained on his cunning face. "Janosz is the name, sir," he said. "Janosz the Pedlar, they call me in these parts."

Schulze lowered his weapon slowly. "How do you know we are German?" he asked. The man pointed to the back of the VW jeep. "German number. SS too. I thought you were the Russians coming back but when I saw that number I came out of my hiding place, knowing that our allies had returned."

"What happened here?" Schulze asked.

"They were ordered back to the siege of Budapest last night. It annoyed them. The Guards thought they were going to have an easy, safe time here, sitting out the battle. They got drunk. After that their officers couldn't control

them." He extended one dirty hand as if revealing to them some splendid tableau, his wizened cunning face devoid of any emotion. "You can see the result."

"You're a Yid," Hung burst out suddenly, a look of accusation on his yellow face.

"That is correct," Janosz the Pedlar replied impassively.

Schulze was caught off guard for a moment. Was the man off his head, or simply very brave in admitting he was one of the persecuted race? He decided that the Jew was neither; he was cunning. He had revealed himself like this to the two of them delivering his life into their hands, as it were, because he had some plan. "Now listen Ikey, don't try pulling any Jew-boy tricks on me, or I'll dock your prick a lot shorter than the Rabbi ever did! What's yer game?"

The little man smiled slowly. "Game? No game, honourable sir. Just a little proposition. A matter of business."

"Business?" Schulze echoed, while Hung's suspicious look was changed to one of guarded interest.

"I have the impression that you gentlemen are on your way to Budapest, perhaps as a forerunner of others." He shrugged slightly. "It is no concern of mine. But if you were prepared to take me to the capital, I could ensure you did not bump into any of the enemy on your way." He looked at the giant NCO out of the corner of his dark, smart eyes; as if he felt the German might be scared by the impact of his full gaze.

"But what do you want to go to Budapest for?"

"Sir, I have been wandering these roads now for forty years. I am weary of it. You Germans call the Magyars the 'hungry people'. I am sick of hungry people too. I think I would like to spend my old age with the Chosen People," he smiled to himself at the use of the word, "in Palestine, and for that indulgence I need money. In Budapest in such confusing times as these, there is money to be made – much money. I will obtain some of it." He said the words as a simple statement of fact, not conjecture.

Schulze stared at the little man thoughtfully. Slowly a plan was beginning to form in the back of his big head – vague and incoherent as yet, but there all the same. "All right, Ikey, you're on. You can lead us to Budapest."

Five minutes later Schulze had radioed their position and the map reference

of the road they were taking east, and shortly afterwards the three of them set off in the little jeep to the accompaniment of Schulze's: "A Chinese, a Yid and a senior NCO of the Armed SS in a jeep together! What would the Führer say!"

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The little Jew was true to his word. All that long Sunday, he directed them down little side roads, country tracks, through empty, looted, raped villages, avoiding the Russian mobile patrols time and time again. In the afternoon it started to snow again, thick heavy soft flakes which made the going treacherous. Through the battling windscreen wipers, the silent fir forests on both sides slid past, while Schulze concentrated on driving.

Just as he changed down and prepared to negotiate a steep hill, the little Jew said urgently but without any apparent fear, "There are Russians up there, Sergeant-Major."

Automatically Schulze hit the brake and the jeep slithered to a stop, a pillow of snow dropping on the hood from a tree with a plopping crunch. "Where?"

"On the height."

Schulze saw them. A long line of cavalry riding noiselessly through the streaming white wall of snow like grey ghosts, heading into the forest.

With tensed breath, they waited till they had ridden past, Schulze ready to slam into reverse. But there was no need; the cavalrymen did not spot them.

"You've got good eyes for a Yid, Ikey!" Schulze said, as he thrust home first and prepared to tackle the hill.

"It is because I have such good eyes that I have survived, dear sir," the little man answered. "Yids, as you call us, need good eyes, and a good nose for danger. We die young if we don't have them."

Just before darkness fell, their luck ran out. They had left the country lanes because of the deeply packed snow and were driving cautiously down a second-class road. By now they were all exhausted; even Schulze's giant frame was tired after a day's driving in those terrible conditions. Perhaps it was for that reason that none of them spotted the big, six-wheeled armoured car with the dull red star on its turret until it was almost too late.

"Russian!" the old man yelled in alarm.

Schulze acted instinctively. As the armoured car came out of its harbour at the side of the road and fired, Schulze swung the wheel desperately to the right and went skidding and bouncing up a narrow trail which led steeply upwards through the close-packed firs. An instant later the 37mm shell exploded in a spurt of angry scarlet on the spot where they had been a moment before.

The four-wheel drive whining in first, Schulze drove the VW jeep up the incline, fighting the terrain, skidding time and time again, and threatening to roll backwards.

"They come other road!" Hung cried, as he caught a glimpse of the big armoured car through a gap in the forest. The armoured car was tearing up the road almost parallel to them. A moment later Schulze swung round a bend and discovered that the two vehicles were on converging paths.

Schulze put his foot to the floor. The VW bowled along, the crossroads only fifty metres away now. The armoured car saw them. Its machine guns chattered. Tracer zipped through the green gloom towards them. Schulze just made the crossroads before the armoured car which swung round and headed after the bouncing, bucking VW. The vehicle's 37mm cracked into action once more. A sudden brown hole appeared in the surface of the snow to their right like the work of some gigantic mole.

The gun fired again. To their left the firs were sheared away and went crashing down in a flurry of snow like matchsticks. They reached another steep slope. To their right the mountainside fell steeply. Now the armoured car's massive horsepower began to tell, and it started to gain on them again, its machine guns chattering furiously. Schulze's eyes strained through the flying snow, trying to make out the top of the ascent. If they did not make it soon and swing round the cover of some bend, they would be finished. The armoured car would overtake them. The snow cleared for a moment and Schulze saw with an overwhelming sense of defeat that there was perhaps a quarter of a kilometre of straight road ahead of them to the next bend. They could not make it!

But he had not reckoned with the old Jew. Suddenly he seemed to forget his fear. He thrust his skinny hand through the flap at his side and began undoing the strap which held the spare jerrican of petrol fixed to the side of the VW. Supporting himself in the wildly swaying VW as best he could, he managed it and ripped open the filler cap. The VW was suddenly

full of the stink of petrol. He let go of the can. It fell behind them, bouncing and tumbling on the hard-packed snow of their tracks, right into the path of the armoured car. The driver had no time to manoeuvre. Next instant, there was the hollow clang of steel striking steel. What was left of the petrol – perhaps ten or so litres – washed up and covered the whole front of the armoured car's glacis plate.

Abruptly Hung realized what the old man was up to. He did not hesitate, but, plunged his clenched fist through the thin plastic of the rear window, and pulled out a stick grenade. Schulze watched fascinated in the rear view mirror, at the armoured car, dripping petrol, looming ever larger. Then the Russians were close enough.

"Urrah!" Hung yelled and flung the grenade.

It exploded exactly where he wanted – on the link between the turret and the petrol-soaked glacis plate. The grenade itself did no harm to the hardened steel of the car, but the heat of its explosion ignited the petrol.

In a flash, the whole front of the armoured car was alive with bright red flame, completely blinding the driver. Instinctively he hit the brakes. It was a deadly thing to do on that slope and in that snow. The armoured car skidded crazily to the right. For one long moment it teetered on the edge of the cliff. But there was no holding it now.

As Schulze pressed the brakes gently and brought the VW to a stop, the flaming armoured car went over the side and then tumbled from view. He heard the outcome far below: the long jarring crunch as it hit the first rocks, followed by the brittle shattering of steel as it struck outcrop after outcrop until it came to rest in one great echoing crash at the bottom.

Schulze wiped the mixture of sweat and snow from his broad, scarlet face gratefully and looked down at the little Jew, who was beaming at him. "You know, Ikey, you saved our bacon just then."

"We survived," the little man said easily.

"Here," Schulze said spontaneously, "I've got something for you." He reached inside the Russian greatcoat and tugged out his Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. Stick that round yer skinny Yiddish neck," Schulze said.

Janosz the Pedlar looked down incredulously at the gleaming black and white decoration now hanging from his neck. Then shaking his old head, he followed the other two back to the bullet-holed jeep.

"Oi, oi," he muttered to himself as he clambered inside again, "a Yid

with the Iron Cross. *Meschugge!*"

Moments later they were on their way towards Budapest.

CHAPTER 17

"Otto, we request Otto?" the radio operator's cracked hoarse voice was the only sound in the little stone barn. "Great Hawk do you read me...we need Otto urgently."

Habicht, standing next to Kreuz, seemed unconcerned that Europa had been unable to raise Division – 'Great Hawk' – all day, and that there was no 'Otto' – fuel – forthcoming. But Kreuz knew that inwardly the C.O. was worried. They had slipped through the Russian lines quite easily, and now they would make their last dash for Budapest. But to what purpose, if there was no Division Viking to follow them up?

With a sigh the radio operator took off his sticky headphones and turned to face Habicht, dark violet circles under his blood shot eyes. "Sir, I don't think I'd raise them if I tried till I was blue in the face. It's almost as if they're not there, sir," he ended a little desperately.

"Of course Division is there!" Habicht snapped. "Try again, man."

Reluctantly the radio operator put on his earphones once more, while Habicht dismissed his young officers.

"What about you, Kreuz?" Habicht asked, when his second in command showed no signs of moving.

Major Kreuz had had enough. He was not a professional soldier like Habicht. He had joined the pre-war Berlin Reitersturm of the SS because it was the chic thing to do. In this way he had come to the SS and he had fought their battles loyally enough throughout the war. But he had not the self-sacrificing fanaticism of the regular SS officer. Now he wanted to save his skin while there was still time.

"Obersturmbannführer, I would like to speak to you – outside."

Habicht looked at him curiously and nodded agreement. Slowly they walked through the sleeping village, the only sound the crisp slow tread of the sentries on the hard snow. Kreuz stopped and faced his commander.

"Habicht, you must be realistic."

Habicht looked at the pale, unshaven, self-indulgent face in the cold-blue light of the moon and knew his second-in-command was deathly afraid. "What do you mean, Major – realistic?"

"About the Division. We couldn't get the Division, because it is simply

not there."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at the horizon, to the west."

"I see nothing.

"Exactly, Habicht. For the simple reason that the Division has pulled out – isn't that obvious?"

"Impossible," Habicht snapped icily. "Absolutely impossible!"

In sudden anger Kreuz went the whole way. "The offensive has failed, I tell you, and we are all risking our necks for nothing." He stared at the tall C.O., his face flushed with emotion.

"You and your precious neck," Habicht said contemptuously. "We are exactly ten kilometres away from Budapest now. So far Schulze has done his job. With the same luck tomorrow, we could well be in the capital by nightfall."

Kreuz stared at him aghast."You're crazy, Habicht! You have lost all contact with reality," he exploded, knowing now that there was no turning back; he had said it. "There is no bloody follow-up! We will be just joining the rest of the poor bastards trapped there by the Russians."

"We shall have made history," Habicht barked, iron in his voice. "Europa will have led the first successful German offensive for nearly two years.

"Do you really think anyone cares? You might want to waste your life, Habicht, but I'm not going to let you waste mine and those of all your young men. I don't suffer from your kind of death wish."

"What do you mean, Kreuz?"

"I mean that I am going to rouse the officers out of their beds and tell them what the real situation is. I shall recommend to them that the Regiment should withdraw, while there is still time, to our lines at Bickse."

"That is mutiny!"

"Not when one is led by a maniac. And don't believe you can frighten me with the threat of a court-martial. Germany is falling apart too quickly for that to worry me. You can't stop..."

His voice died in his throat. Habicht was holding a pistol pointed directly at him.

"What the devil, Habicht," he began, his face suddenly contorted with terror.

He never finished the sentence. The pistol kicked in the Hawk's hand,

shattering the silence of the night. Kreuz screamed and flew backwards through the night, the blood seeping through his shattered guts. Calmly Habicht walked over to where he lay in the suddenly darkened snow and placed his pistol against the side of Kreuz's head. His face expressionless, he blew his skull apart.

"Major Kreuz has just met with a fatal accident," he said to the running sentries, alarmed by the shooting. They stopped short and looked down at the mutilated body, lying crumpled in the ever-growing red star of its own blood, their young eyes wide with shock and bewilderment.

"You'd better throw some snow over him or something," Habicht said carelessly. "Wouldn't like the men to see him like that at dawn."

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Up in front, Habicht's oddly assorted reconnaissance team had hit trouble. Just before dusk they had reached the river which formed the Russian second-line around the western suburbs of Budapest. No way across was apparent and to make matters worse, as soon as it had grown really dark, the Russians had switched on huge searchlights, which probed the night with long fingers. They abandoned the jeep, which was too conspicuous, and vanished into the snow-heavy pine forest which lined the western bank of the unknown river.

Now the three of them crawled ever closer to a little ford which the Jew knew of. It, too, was illuminated, but according to Janosz unguarded. Between the trees they could make out the river across which searchlights threw sinister patterns at ten second intervals.

"What do you think, Ikey?"

The little Jew stroked his heard thoughtfully. "You need me, Sergeant-Major. I need you. You will be able to get through the river and beyond the wire before the searchlights illuminate it again. I am too slow, too old, too frail."

"Knock it off," Schulze interrupted him brutally. "You'll have me breaking down and crying in a minute, you short-cocked banana-shitter!"

Janosz continued imperturbably: "I shall send you, Sergeant-Major to get through the barbed wire, where you will leave our Chinese friend here. Then, you put out those search lights and our friend here will come back and fetch me."

Schulze looked at him open-mouthed. "And why," he asked finally, "should a senior non-commissioned officer of the Armed SS and his Hung servant come back and collect one scruffy docked-tailed Yid who we don't need any more, eh?"

The Jew smiled, as if at the folly of human understanding. "But you do need him, Sergeant-Major. My dear German friend, you might just want to come out again," he hesitated for only a fraction of a second, "and who will there be to show you the way?"

"You!"

"Exactly."

Behind them, Hung beamed and said, "Jew, him pretty smart feller."

Janosz the Pedlar allowed himself another smile.

CHAPTER 18

Schulze waded cautiously through the shallows hoping the faint hollow boom of the guns at the front would hide the noise. Behind him Hung, laden down with the radio, struggled in the freezing cold current. The Hamburger clambered up the bank and tugged Hung up with one heave of his powerful shoulders.

"Right, you slant-eyed devil, as soon as those twin searchlights have moved on, I'm going to double for the wire. When I'm over it, you should hear a couple of shots. That'll be me knocking out the lamps." Hung nodded. "Then you pull your yellow finger out of your yellow arse and run back like hell to fetch the Yid. Don't forget to bring the radio with you when you come over the wire."

"Hung now savvy."

"Thank Christ for that," Schulze said and directed his attention to the twin searchlights. Their beams did not always coordinate but he reckoned he might have fifteen seconds to tear across the hundred odd metres across the field and fling himself over the wire. It was not enough. Then he spotted a slight hollow runnel which led from the river to within about sixty metres of the wire before it petered out where the ground was completely exposed to the searchlights. There was his chance!

Suddenly he set off, crawling swiftly down the hollow. The twin lights caught him just as he reached the end. He lay stock still, face pressed tight to the cold snow. The yellow reflected light seemed to pin him there for an eternity. All his muscles were drawn painfully tight as he fought against the temptation to break and run before they saw him and the machine-guns tore his body to shreds. But no machine-guns opened up. A moment later the lights passed on and he was up and running madly for the wire.

Legs pumping, arms driving, the snow spurting up around his feet, he flung himself upwards and cleared the fence. His heart pounding furiously, he lay still as the lights swept the ground behind him yet once again, while he remained this time in complete darkness. Now for the second phase!

He could see the operators quite clearly, stark black silhouettes against the white glare of the light. They moved slowly and without much energy in the bitter cold. There were four of them, but that did not worry Schulze. He

could catch them completely unawares.

He glanced briefly at the second light. It was about two hundred metres away and the suspicions of the crew would probably not be aroused after the first one went out until a couple of minutes had elapsed. They must he used to technical flaws in such a climate. If he worked quickly, he could get them both.

He rose to his feet and almost casually began to walk towards the searchlight crew, the hoods in which they were huddled drowning the crisp noise his boots made on the frozen snow.

Schulze was only five metres away when the man next to the steadily throbbing generator spotted him. "*Stoi?*" he demanded, obviously startled.

Schulze did not give him a chance to say any more. He belted him with his Reeperbahn Equaliser, the set of brass knuckles he had always taken with him to the Hamburg whorehouses. The man slammed against the side of the mobile generator and slumped limp-headed to the ground, without a sound. Schulze advanced on the other men grouped around the light.

His big right arm reached out of the darkness and grabbed the nearest man, his hand over the man's mouth stifling the instinctive cry of fear. He squeezed – very hard. The man sighed, as if tired and happy to go to sleep. He did. For good. Gently Schulze lowered him to the ground.

Something must have warned the survivors. They swung round and stared aghast at this gigantic shape emerging from the darkness. The nearest man opened his mouth to yell, but Schulze's right boot thudded into his crotch. He went down gurgling vomit. The other man ran. Schulze dived forward. His Reeperbahn Equaliser clubbed down. The Russian jinked and the brutal set of brass knuckles hit him on the shoulder. For a moment the two men wrestled violently in front of the blazing light like actors in a Chinese shadow play, then Schulze's knuckleduster connected. There was a sharp click. The Russian's spine broke. He dropped helplessly to the snow. Schulze did not hesitate. He ground the nail-studded heel of his big jackboot into the helpless man's face and churned it to a bloody, lifeless pulp.

Blinded by the glare, Schulze tumbled in the red darkness behind the searchlight to find the switch. He snapped it off and at once the bright light died. Schulze sprinted towards the other one.

He ran until he was about twenty-five metres away from it. In a moment the other crew would swing their own light round to check the trouble. Carefully he raised his Schmeisser and took aim. At that range the

long hard burst of fire was deadly accurate. There was a sound of splintering glass, curses, a long drawn-out scream of agony and abruptly the light went out. He had done it!

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It was nearly dawn now. The little Jew led them unerringly through the kilometre-wide no-man's land between the Russian and German positions. Across a silent, ice-covered canal. Through a frozen marsh, where the white reeds, heavy with hoar frost, cracked alarmingly when their boots brushed against them.
Between two abandoned and ruined farmhouses, dead pigs lying everywhere like tethered barrage balloons.

Just before six, Janosz stopped them.

"What is it?" Schulze demanded.

"We're there," the Jew whispered. He pointed with a skinny finger. "Do you see that little height? It is the first German machine-gun position. It's in what's left of old Ferenc Kobol's barn. I have slept there many a winter's night on my travels." Janosz smiled warily. "This is where I leave you. I shall make my own way into Buda from here as I doubt if your fellow countrymen would welcome a Jew with open arms. But when yon need me, Sergeant-Major, you'll find me or someone who'll know where I am in the Kobanyai Street. It's near Burgberg, the Citadel."

"And who do I ask for – Janosz the Pedlar?"

Suddenly the little man was embarrassed. "No," he said hesitantly. "In Buda, I have another name – Csoki. It means 'Little Chocolate Drop'. Because that was what I peddled in Buda before the war – chocolate drops."

Schulze smothered a laugh. "All right," he said, eager to be away now. "I'll come looking for you when the time is ripe, my little Yiddish Chocolate Drop."

The old man departed in the direction of Buda without further ado, disappearing out of their lives as mysteriously as he had appeared. Schulze and Hung wasted no more time. Hurriedly they made their way to the front-line outpost.

"*Wer da?*" a voice rapped out suddenly, heavy with frightened surprise. "*Halt, oder ich schiesse!*"

Slowly Schulze rose from the ground – he knew these trigger-happy

young sentries – and lifted his arms into the air. "Take it easy now," he said softly. "You've just been rescued, soldier-boy, by the advance party of SS Regiment Europa."

Two hours later in a brilliantly executed lightning attack, Obersturmbannführer Habicht forded the undefended river, and with his monstrous Royal Tigers in the vanguard, burst a quarter of a kilometre hole in the Russian front line. Taken completely by surprise, the Russian riflemen scrambled out of their holes and fled in terror, leaving the SS Regiment to file through the gap without a single casualty and pass into the lines of the hard-pressed 22nd SS Cavalry Division to be feted like heroes. They had reached Budapest at last.

BOOK 5 – BATTLE OF BUDAPEST

CHAPTER 19

At 5am Friday, 18 January 1945, the new attack to break through to Budapest began in a snowstorm. From their new positions around Lake Balaton, the 4th SS Panzer Corps, with the 3rd Panzer Division to their right and the 1st Panzer Division to their left, raced forward to overcome the surprised first-line Russian positions. The plan was for the SS panzer divisions in the middle to make the running, while the two Army Panzers on the flanks contained any Russian attempt at a counter-attack. The SS Panzers would have as their first objective the ford across the canal at Kaloz, which was the major physical barrier on the way to the River Danube, and their second objective the little town of Dunapentele south of Budapest.

The new plan, the result of Rudel's conference with Hitler, worked like a charm. After a short preliminary artillery bombardment and led by Rudel's Immelmann Battle Wing, the Tigers and Panthers of the Viking and the Death's Head, followed by waves of panzer grenadiers in half-tracks, burst through the Russians and disappeared into the snowstorm before the enemy had realized what had hit them. That first day, the SS Panzers, their flanks barely defended by the more hesitant Wehrmacht divisions, pushed a wedge thirty kilometres deep into the Russian position.

But in the evening Viking ran into serious trouble. The Russians had not only mined the area to their front, they had also introduced a new obstacle – wire charged with high voltage electricity. Even the battle-hardened SS officers hesitated to send their young European volunteers and their German comrades against such defences. The Viking attack bogged down. General Gilles, commander of the Fourth SS Panzer Corps, made a personal appearance at the Division's Command Post. The elderly, bespectacled, normally good-humoured Corps Commander was blazingly angry. He would tolerate no hesitancy from General Ullrich, the commander of the Viking Division. Viking would advance through the minefield and the electrically charged wire whatever the casualties.

"Ullrich," Gilles barked, "you either attack or you name your successor!"

Ullrich was a proud man, who had fought a very hard, bitter war to become a divisional commander. He was not going to lose that command

now. Heavy-hearted, he summoned Obersturmbannführer Dorr, commander of the SS Germania Regiment, to his CP and ordered him to attack.

The big SS Colonel accepted the order without the slightest hesitation. That same evening he led his young volunteers into the minefields. They suffered terrible casualties, but Dorr allowed no retreat. He forced them forwards. They hit the electric wire barriers. The night was hideous with their screams as 20,000 volts raked through the grenadiers' wildly thrashing bodies. Suddenly the darkness was split by the dramatic blue light of short circuits and heavy with the stink of burned flesh. And then they were through and the Russians were running for their lives. Behind them charred bundles of rags and flesh hung everywhere on the wrecked wires.

That morning, covered by Rudel's Me 262s flying at tree-top level, the Viking crossed the canal at Kaloz. Gilles at Corps HQ ordered a change of objective for the 4th SS. Dunapentele would be left to the slower moving 3rd Panzer on the right wing. The two SS armoured divisions would now make a bold dash for Budapest further up the river, with the Danube itself forming their right flank. Viking was commanded to drive for Ercsi, a matter of some twenty kilometres or so from the Hungarian capital. Now Gilles planned to seize Budapest in one bold stroke.

But by now Tolbuchin was reacting to the surprise attack. He threw in all his reserves, the best of the Guards divisions. The two forces met at the village of Sarosd. The point of the Viking was cut off within the shattered hamlet. The Division counter-attacked and freed the leading unit.

Hastily the regimental staff of the Germania Regiment which was leading the drive again, assembled to discuss the next move. But all Russian resistance in Sarosd was not yet crushed. Just as the officers were bending their shaven heads over the big maps, a lone Russian anti-tank gun, cunningly concealed in a shattered barn, opened up at point-blank range, blowing the Regiment's key officers apart in a fury of fire. Obersturmbannführer Dorr fell with the rest, wounded for the sixteenth time in combat. This time it was to be his final wound. Now Germania was without its commander and all its senior officers.

Still Gilles was determined to push on. The first refugees from Budapest, German and Hungarian, were beginning to trickle into the SS positions, bringing with them horrific tales of the tortures and cruelties being inflicted on the defenders and the civilians in their charge when they fell into

Russian hands. They told Gilles too that the defenders were on their last legs; ammunition and food for the 800,000 civilians was beginning to run out very rapidly.

On the Monday of the new week, after the disastrous events in Sarosd, the 4th SS Corps attacked again. Everywhere the word was passed from mouth to mouth. "Today we reach Budapest!" It acted like magic on the eager young volunteers. They went into battle singing. A row of small villages were taken in a rush and the point of the Viking reached Adony on the Danube.

Marshal Tolbuchin began to panic. He had thrown all his reserves in by now, but still he had not stopped the Fritzes. In fact they had broken his 3rd Ukrainian Front in two at Adony. He called Lt-General Scharochin, commander of the 57th Rifle Army, which now stood in the Germans' path and warned him of the danger of his Army being encircled on the following day; would it not be better that he withdrew his Army across the Danube to the eastern bank?

Scharochin knew Tolbuchin of old. He recognized the suggestion of his Army Commander as a cunning device to exculpate himself. When the time came to analyse the causes of the disaster on that front, Tolbuchin would point the finger at him as the commander who had first ordered a major withdrawal. More scared of Old Leather Face – Stalin – sitting far away in the Kremlin than the enemy at his doorstep, Scharochin refused. He preferred to stand and fight on the next day. On 23 January, the point of the Viking attacked directly north on both sides of the River Danube. At first they made excellent progress, throwing back the 57th Rifle Army in confusion. Then a new enemy entered – the weather.

It started to snow as if it would never cease again. In a matter of minutes, the roads and tracks that the tanks were using disappeared completely under the flying white deluge. Gunners and commanders were blinded. The massive 72-ton Royal Tigers, isolated in the whirling mass of snow, were easy meat for the Russian infantry, armed with their portable anti-tank weapons. The Germans began to suffer severe casualties, and their progress was charted in metres, not in the kilometres of the previous days.

Somewhere or other Scharochin found a whole tank corps. The tankers were young and armed with the old-fashioned T-34s instead of the new Joseph Stalins. But they were courageous.

To Scharochin's relief. the snow turned to fog. It gave his inexperienced tankers more of a chance against the Fritzes. Dug in at the hull-down position, exposing only their thick glacis plates, the T-34s, massed in groups of six and seven, waited for the Germans to loom out of the mist. The Tigers slaughtered the T-34s. But there was always one surviving Russian tank which could place that shell between turret and hull, or in the tracks, or in the engine cowling to bring the Fritz colossus to a final halt.

On 29 January, Scharochin, now actively encouraged by Tolbuchin, launched what was left of the young tank corps, supported by massive air cover, into a major attack against the 4th SS Corps at the village of Petend.

The SS fought back desperately, but there was no holding the Russians now. They had scented blood. Scharochin forgot Stalin. He thought only of victory.

He threw in all his last reserves. Full of a double ration of vodka and the promise of loot, leave and women, once Budapest had fallen, they charged into battle, arms linked, their bands playing the old Czarist marches. The Germans mowed them down by their hundreds but still they came on. The SS faltered and started to crumble.

Desperately Gilles tried to shore up his front but to no avail. The SS divisions were bled white. The 'bodies', as he was wont to call them to his staff, were no longer there. The pace of the withdrawal quickened.

One hundred and eighty Soviet tanks appeared on the SS Corps' front to be opposed by exactly nine Tigers left to the Death's Head and fourteen still running in the Viking. There was nothing the SS men could do but retreat. The Russians were everywhere.

On 1 February, 1945, Gilles, Commander of the Fourth SS Panzer Corps, reported to his chief, General Balck, that his divisions were exhausted. They could do no more.

Balck, who hated the Armed SS, but who at the same time knew that if the Third Reich's ace had failed to break through to the Hungarian capital there was no hope left, made his decision. It was very simple. Tolbuchin had won: he had lost.

"Gilles," he ordered, "prepare to withdraw!"

That same evening, what was left of the Viking and Death's Head began to move back from the Danube.

The last attempt to relieve Budapest had failed.

CHAPTER 20

"Gentlemen," *SS Obergruppenführer und General der Polizei und der Waffen SS* Pfeffer-Wildenbruch said with surprising formality in view of the fact that all the windows in his Buda HQ were long shattered and there was new snow drifting in through the shell-hole in the ceiling. "Please, be seated."

The assembled commanders, General Rumohr of the 8th SS Cavalry, General Zehender of the 22nd SS Cavalry, Colonel Habicht, and their staffs sat down at the long, blanket-covered table.

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch began. "The reason I have called you here today is to decide what we shall do next here in Buda. As you have all realized by now – even you must have Habicht – there will be no more attempts by our comrades to break through. We must assume that we have been written off by the High Command. In a way, that knowledge, gentlemen, is not as frightening as it sounds. For a change, we at the front can make our own decisions without reference to the Greatest Captain of all Times."

The others laughed at the ironic nod to Hitler, a bitter indication enough of just how much these powerful officers felt cut off from the Homeland.

"So we have the freedom of choice. The question is – how shall we exercise it? As I see it, gentlemen, there are perhaps three courses of action open to us. Let me first suggest the worst one – we could surrender to the Soviets."

There was a groan of dismay from most of the high-ranking officers and Habicht, his face flushed, cried hotly, "No!"

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch held up his hands for peace and said, "I was merely playing the Devil's advocate, gentlemen. The second alternative is that we rally what forces we have left to us and using your armour, Habicht, attempt to fight our way out."

"May I say a word on that, Corps Commander?" General Zehender asked. "In the cavalry divisions we probably have enough transport left and enough fuel to get most of the troopers out of Buda. However, what are we going to do about the auxiliaries? There are over two thousand of these females left in the city. Now I know what all you gentlemen think of these Field Mattresses. Probably some of my younger officers have had personal experience of their undoubted charms and toughness" – he coughed suddenly

– "in the horizontal position."

There was a rumble of soft laughter from the others.

"But when all that is said and done, they are German women and we cannot leave them behind to fall into Bolshevik hands. There again, I am not prepared to sacrifice valuable fighting manpower to find places in the vehicles for these non-productive females."

"That leaves us with the third alternative," Pfeffer-Wildenbruch intervened. "We stay and fight it out with the Russians here in Buda. The question is – how?"

Habicht sprang to his feet, his face flushed with both anger and excitement. "I shall tell you how, gentlemen," he cried.

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch observed the officer with mild amusement. Even at this late hour the man was still seeking some desperate glory, while all that awaited them was death. "Please be so kind as to do so, Habicht," he remarked.

"Gentlemen, I think all of us know that we are not going to leave Buda alive," Habicht began starkly. The faint smiles disappeared from his listeners' faces. "Once we are aware of that, I suggest the rest is easy."

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch sipped his drink and listened, but he felt a sudden quickening of his pulse at the prospect he knew the young crippled Colonel would hold out to them.

"There are two ways one can fight a siege, gentlemen," Habicht continued. "One can lie supinely like some fat whore with her legs open passively waiting to be taken. Or one can fight back against the rapist with tooth, nail, and claw." His voice rose a little. "We can make the Reds pay – and pay dearly – for every metre of territory they take. The defender in a built-up area is always at the advantage. For every casualty we take, we inflict four on the Reds. Buda can become a running sore on the side of the Red Army. As long as we are able to hold out here in Buda, Tolbuchin will not dare to penetrate deeper into Western Hungary.

"Gentlemen, we must not see ourselves as already dead and forgotten, but as men who are admittedly condemned to death but who are fighting against that sentence and making their fight visible to the world." His voice was shaky with excitement now. "Buda can well go down in German history, gentlemen, as another Kollwitz!" Habicht knew by the looks on the faces of his listeners now, from general to staff lieutenant, that he had them.

"We must change our tactics. Instead of waiting passively for the Reds

to attack, we must go over to the offensive. Small well-armed fighting patrols, led by the most aggressive officers and NCOs and guided by Hungarian volunteers, who know Buda like the backs of their hands, ferreting out Red CPs and HQs and destroying them. Larger groups working their way through the sewers and coming up in the Red lines of communications and creating panic and havoc there. A surprise armour thrust towards Gellert Hill to destroy that damned artillery concentration up there." He gasped for breath. "That should be our aim, gentlemen," he concluded, his face flushed crimson, "to drive the Reds mad. They will crush us in the end undoubtedly, but they will have to pay the price of their sanity to do so!"

Habicht's impassioned speech was received with excited chatter and comment. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch let the conference have its head for a few minutes; he let them talk, knowing how gullible the younger Armed SS officer was for such heady, exciting words. Of course, the man was a fanatic. Yet what alternative was left open to them?

Then he made up his mind. Tapping his glass on the table to attract their attention and that of the orderlies with the bottles, he waited until their glasses were filled once again. A little unsteadily he rose to his feet and gave them a sad, little, drunken smile, before raising his glass, knowing that very few of them would survive the next few days. "Gentlemen, I give you a toast. To the last days of Buda!"

"To the last days of Buda!" they chorused as one and drank the fiery spirit in a swift gulp.

Next instant glass after glass was shattered against the wall as if to symbolize the final destruction soon to come.

CHAPTER 21

The company-sized NKVD patrol caught them at dawn, just as they were emerging from the sewer. Schulze's group had carried out a very successful raid that night, destroying a whole vehicle park of the 7th Mechanical Corps, without a single casualty. But obviously one of the many communist infiltrators, who were now everywhere among the Hungarian civilian population in German-held Buda, had betrayed them. The NKVD murder specialists, who were dug in among the shattered ruins all around the square where Europa patrols generally left the great underground sewage system, waited until the full patrol of some thirty men emerged, then they opened up with their automatic weapons.

It was a massacre. On all sides the young Europeans fell on to the suddenly blood-red snow, screaming for help in their own languages and the one word of German they all knew – "*Hilfe!*"

But there was no help to be won. The god of Colonel Habicht's 'holy crusade against the heathen Bolshevik' was deaf to entreaty. The NKVD systematically slaughtered the young SS men, trapped in the ruined square. Then the fire stopped as suddenly as it had started, and Schulze, hidden behind a body next to Hung realized why. There was a sudden whoosh like a dragon's breath and a monstrous sheet of evil blue flame hissed across the heaving pile of young bodies.

"Flame thrower!" Hung screamed in a paroxysm of fear.

"Come on," Schulze cried. "The sewer!"

The flamethrower spoke again. Behind them as they ran crazily for the entrance, the human bodies began to blaze. Slugs beat a pattern around their flying feet. Without the slightest hesitation, Schulze dived head-first down the stinking hole, his fall softened by the noxious, unthinkable brown deposit which lined the bottom of the dark shaft. Next instant, Hung fell beside him.

They dodged away from the entrance just in time. The first dark shapes of grenades came hurtling down. They exploded with a tremendous, ear-splitting noise, magnified tenfold by the round echoing shaft. Red-hot, razor-sharp fragments of steel flew through the narrow confines of the tunnel, whining off the dripping, lime-encrusted walls. The two survivors of the ill-fated patrol blundered blindly away from the entrance and the cloud of

poison gas that was already being pumped down the shaft.

The ill-fated patrol was the third that Schulze had led that week, each worse than the previous one. Habicht gave the Regiment no rest. Every hour of every day brought fresh deaths and fresh casualties. The regimental hospital, the cellars of a shattered store, was a crowded scene of butchery. Above ground the streets were littered with Europa's dead and the charred, burnt-out wrecks of their vehicles, the result of Habicht's dynamic, unrelenting aggressiveness.

Now, as Schulze and Hung, their chests heaving wildly, sat in the stinking shaft, well away from the scene of the ambush, listening to the scampering of the huge, pink-eyed rats which were everywhere, the big Sergeant-Major realized that, at last, he had had enough. He handed the Chinese the damp remainder of his last cigarette and sighed, "The time has come for Mrs Schulze's boy to get back to Hamburg and Mother."

"Hung, he come with, yes?"

"Yes, Hung he come with," Schulze answered wearily, "but Christ knows how."

"How about Jew-boy?" Hung suggested."He got us in – he get us out."

Schulze sat in thought for a moment. He knew that the Regiment's days were numbered and that Germany was nearly finished. The Russians were already in East Prussia and the Tommies and Amis in the Eifel fighting their way to the Rhine. The time had come to save his skin. He made up his mind. Wearily he got to his feet. "Come on Hung, let's get out of this shit heap and back to the Regiment."

"And then?"

"Then," Schulze grinned at him suddenly, "we go and find the Jew."

Two hours later Schulze reported to Habicht in his cellar CP. "They did not die in vain," he said fervently when Schulze was finished. "They died for the cause of Europe. Rest assured, Schulze, that one day they will be remembered."

Bollocks, Schulze thought. He'd had a bellyful of the Hawk's fanaticism. All he wanted to hear now was, "The war's over. It's peace!"

"Well, Schulze, I expect you're beat. See if the cooks still have anything for you to eat, then get some sleep."

"Before I go, sir," Schulze said slowly, "I'd like to report something."

"What?"

"Just before we were jumped in that square, I thought I heard the sound of tanks off in the direction of Kobanyai Street."

"Tanks?" Habicht asked eagerly. "They must have been Red. Ours are all wrecked." He strode across the cellar to the big street map of Buda and peered at it for a moment. "Kobanyai Street is well within the Red-held sector. I think the 8th Cavalry must have lost it last week."

Wearily Schulze clicked his heels together and played his new role. "Request permission to select my own patrol and go out tonight and destroy those tanks?"

The Hawk swung round, his single eye gleaming excitedly. "Permission granted, Schulze. Pick whoever you like."

Schulze pushed aside the blanket with a grim smile and left the little CP.

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Down the ruined streets of Occupied Buda, the refugees poured eastwards, backs bent under their pathetic bundles of possessions. Bearded Jews, who had somehow managed to survive the German persecution, in worn black frock coats; Hungarian aristocrats in their shredded finery; workers in overalls and quilted jackets; furtive deserters from the Hungarian Army, their uniforms hidden beneath tattered old coats. Everyone was attempting to leave the capital before the final attack on the German positions.

The refugees provided excellent cover for Schulze and Hung and the hand-picked patrol of trusted SS men as they emerged from the sewer system into the winter dusk. Schulze led his men through the maze of streets following the map he had imprinted on his memory, directing them skilfully through the flood of civilians.

Finally they reached their destination: Kobanyai Street. It was different from the other roads they had passed along. It was empty of refugees and the cellars beneath the rubble were still occupied. Schulze could tell that from the smoke emerging from their on chimneys which poked up everywhere from the ruins.

"All right men, spread out. You two Cheese-heads, get yourselves under cover at the head of the street. And keep down if you spot any Ivans. I don't want any trouble tonight. You Frogs get up to the other end and dig

yourselves in on both sides of the road." The Frenchmen sped away.

Schulze detailed the two remaining Danes to act as bodyguard and the little group began to check out the cellars.

At first they were unsuccessful. The cellars were crammed with gypsies and peasants from the surrounding countryside who had moved in once the owners had fled before the Russian attack. They had never heard of Csoki.

But just as Schulze was beginning to believe that the old Jewish pedlar had already made his escape from the doomed city, he found an old woman who knew him.

"The little chocolate drop?" she echoed the name, staring up at the soldiers quite unafraid. "Yes, I saw him yesterday."

"Where is he?" Schulze asked eagerly.

"Two cellars further," she answered readily and then for some totally unfathomable reason she began to laugh. She was still laughing when Hung knocked on the shrapnel-splintered door of the cellar indicated.

A boy opened the door. Over Hung's shoulder, Schulze caught a quick glimpse of an untidy kitchen, with children playing on the dirty floor, a woman with dark nervous eyes checking a girl's hair for lice, while beyond, a dark hunched figure in priest's robes sat at a wooden table, eating a pork sandwich and reading his holy book.

Then a woman appeared. Didn't they know the Russians would shoot her if they learned she had spoken to a German patrol? She threw up her hands in nervous extravagance. "God preserve us from the Germans and the Jews," she exclaimed.

"Amen!" the figure at the table said solemnly, without taking his eyes off the book.

"We'll cause no trouble, Mother," Schulze said appeasingly. "All we're looking for is a man called Csoki. We were told he might be here."

"Never heard of him," the woman said decisively and made to slam the door in their faces.

"Wait," the figure at the table commanded. "Did you say Csoki?"

"I did," Schulze said eagerly.

The priest said something quickly in Magyar. Reluctantly the woman stood aside and let them pass into the kitchen. She closed the door hastily after them and said in German, "They'll bring us trouble, take my word for it, Monsignor."

"The door of God's house is always open, my child," he said gently.

Slowly he turned to face them and Schulze's mouth dropped open as he recognized the man in the long black robe.

Behind him Hung gasped. "It's the Jew!"

CHAPTER 22

Janosz the Pedlar had changed since they had last seen him. His beard had gone and he no longer appeared as old. His face had fattened out and he had definitely got a small paunch, which went well with his new role of a God-fearing Churchman. Indeed all in all, it looked very much as if Janosz had not done too badly for himself since he had arrived in the capital.

Schulze swallowed the last of the sandwich he had been given, washed it down with a mighty slug of the wine and turned to the 'priest'.

"Come off it, you old hypocrite. What are you doing here, togged up like the sodding Pope, eh?"

"What can a poor Jew do?" he said softly and shrugged eloquently. "It's the best cover imaginable, Schulze. Those Russian soldier boys might be communist, but they're peasant first and they've got a lot of respect for a man of the cloth. It is surprising where one can go in Budapest when one is a Monsignor! But what do you want from me, Schulze?"

"You know what you said back there after we had crossed the river? Well, I and a few of the boys want out. We're finished here. We want to be gone before the end comes."

Janosz seemed pleased. "You have come just at the right time, Schulze. In twenty-four hours I am going to make my own departure too. I have what I came here to Buda to find, my fare to Palestine." He opened the breviary and took out a small envelope. Very carefully he let its contents fall on the opened pages. Perhaps two or three dozen stamps tumbled out.

"Your fare?" Schulze queried puzzled.

Janosz smiled. "Doesn't seem much to you, does it, eh?" He picked up one of them carefully by the edge: A five pound orange on blue paper, worth perhaps four hundred British pounds."

"You get money for stamp?" Hung said incredulously.

"Very much so, my Chinese friend. Hide them in the lapel of your jacket, say, or in its lining and you carry a fortune with you, able to turn it into any currency you like and in any country."

Hung's dark eyes gleamed with undisguised admiration.

"Can you take me and a few of my fellows with you?" Schulze persisted.

"How many?"

Schulze told him and he thought for a moment. "Yes, that would about do it, my friend."

"Do what?"

Janosz hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Schulze, my fare was paid by a certain number of citizens of this city who want to escape."

"Why pay you?"

"What do you mean, Schulze?"

"I mean they are fleeing by the thousand out there. Why should they pay you anything to do the same?"

Janosz beamed at him, as if he were a stupid child, who at long last was asking a reasonably intelligent question. "All those people you have seen are going east. My people want to go *west*. They are the kind of people who will not survive long in the glorious new socialist republic that will soon be founded here in Hungary."

Schulze nodded his understanding. "Now I get you. But how are you going to do it?"

"By courtesy of Comrade Marshal Maudlin of the Second Ukrainian Front."

Schulze sat up in amazement.

"I saw him two days ago and he gave me permission to move my – er – flock out of danger. It was a true expression of Christian charity." Janosz made a gesture as if counting money. "A train of three coaches and room for 180 people at 1,000 silver forints a person." He shrugged. "Even Soviet marshals are not immune apparently to the temptations of capital, eh?"

"So it would seem," Schulze said drily.

"We are all bound – God willing – for Palestine; you see, all the passengers will be Jews."

"But how the hell are you going to get to Palestine via the east?" Schulze protested.

"We are not going east. We are going *west*. Of course, the good Marshal does not know that. You see Schulze, I do not trust our Soviet friend. I feel that once we have handed over the money to him and we are safely out of the immediate area of Budapest, travelling eastwards; we are going to suffer an unfortunate accident."

"What do you mean?" Schulze asked.

"The train will be attacked by partisans, rogue Cossacks, who knows

what? But attacked we will be and the good Marshal will ensure that we go no further as living evidence of the little grease he has taken, and then he will loot our bodies for further gain."

"My God!" Schulze exploded in sheer admiration. "You think of everything!"

"I am a Jew, Janosz said, as if that were sufficient explanation. "That is why it is opportune that you have appeared now, Schulze."

"Why?"

"Because I would like to hire you and your good friends of the Armed SS to protect the train on its journey westwards against the dangers that face us."

"Hire a unit of the Armed SS to protect a trainload of Yids!" Schulze looked incredulous.

"It is my last chance to get to Palestine, Schulze, I must take every precaution. Now listen. Admiral Horthy's – that's our recently deposed dictator – his armoured train is still in the sidings at Buda main station. The locomotive and the carriages are all armoured and have machine-gun-turrets and that sort of thing. You'll probably know what I mean? Now for a large consideration – and as we have already obtained a clearance from the good Marshal to leave Buda – the station master of Buda Station will let us have that train, already fuelled and with a trusted driver at the controls. Again for a large consideration, the rail track staff at Buda and throughout Western Hungary will ensure that the train passes safely into Austria."

"You mean they're going to arrange it so that the train doesn't go east, as the Ivans expect, but westwards?"

"Exactly. My plan is to pass through Western Hungary into Austria, which is still in German hands. Hopefully, Christian charity will still prevail there among your fellow countrymen – at a price naturally – so that we will be able to continue into Italy. There with luck, the British and their new Italian allies will not stop us getting to the port. The *Hagannah* will..."

"The what?"

"A Jewish underground organization to which I happen to belong."

"You would," Schulze said, completely mesmerized by the little Jew.

"As I was saying, the Hagannah will ensure that there is a ship organized for us to run the British blockade off Palestine," He paused and looked up at the big NCO expectantly. "What do you think, Sergeant-Major?"

"I think – what do we get out of it?"

"A free trip out of this hell-hole."

"Not enough,Yid," the Chinese said before Schulze could speak. "You pretty shit-smart man. You pay more."

"Yes," Schulze grunted "What's in it for us?"

"One kilo of coffee, a half bottle of schnapps, one carton of cigarettes – American," Janosz said, his eyes on the ground sadly like a man whose heart had just been broken. "Per soldier."

"Make it two cartons and you're on?"

"One American – and one Turkish?" Janosz asked swiftly.

"Done!"

"Good!" Janosz beamed at him and stuck out his skinny hand. "You will receive them on the day."

"And when is that?" Schulze asked.

"Tomorrow night, at eight."

"Where?"

"We assemble in the yard of the old locomotive factory. You will meet us there with your men in Russian uniform. It is better."

"We'll get it," Schulze said and rose to go.

As the woman extinguished the light so that they could pass out unnoticed into the darkness, Monsignor Janosz intoned in his most saintly voice, "And may Jesus Christ, Our Lord, watch over you, my son."

"Bollocks!" was *his son's* sole reply.

CHAPTER 23

On the following morning, 12 February, 1945, Marshal Tolbuchin launched his final assault on the German SS divisions grouped around the *Burg*, Buda's Castle Hill. Heedless of the civilians still there, he began a massive two-hour long artillery bombardment as a preliminary to his advance.

One after another the German strong-points at the University, the museum, the radio station were knocked out and the surviving SS men sent streaming back to dig in furiously elsewhere. The bombardment ended as abruptly as it had started and the T-34s – hundreds of them, supported by infantry – began to move in.

For a couple of hours, a group of SS men from the 8th Cavalry managed to hold the Moricz Zsigmond Square against a huge force of Soviet tanks and Guards infantry. But in the end they broke too and fled towards the old castle, which dominated Castle Hill, and was the main German headquarters.

Made cautious by the defence of the square, which had cost him twenty tanks and a hundred Guards killed, the commander of the Narva Tank Regiment, leading the attack, radioed his HQ for artillery support.

To the surprise of the German interception experts crouched over their radios in the castle's ancient cellars, Marshal Tolbuchin himself replied from somewhere on the other side of the Danube. "The hour of decision has come," he barked over the air. "Now we must chop the paws off the German beast. Comrade Colonel – attack now, or don't bother to come back here!" The threat was undisguised and the commander of the Narva Regiment knew it. He threw in his tanks.

At their posts all around the Castle, the men of the 8th and 22nd SS and of the Europa, watched open-mouthed as the T-34s started to crawl up the twisting, turning streets which led to the heights. On all four sides the heights were black with the crawling metal monsters. It was as if a ring of steel were about to garrotte them to death. The SS commanders knew that their young soldiers might well panic and break, if nothing were done. General Rumohr, who like General Zehender and Colonel Habicht had taken up his place in the fortified line, grabbed a panzerfaust out of the hands of a mesmerized grenadier. "Follow me!" he shouted, springing out into the open.

A handful of his staff followed. Tearing down the hill, he stopped a hundred metres away from the nearest T-34. Standing completely in the open, ignoring the tracer cutting the air wildly all around, he aimed as calmly as if he were standing at some peacetime range. Blue flame jetted from the back of the anti-tank weapon. The long wooden projectile with its squat round metal head wobbled clumsily through the air. In the same moment that a burst of Soviet fire cut Rumohr down, the bomb exploded directly underneath the tank's turret. At that short range, the impact was tremendous. An instant later the turret ripped right into the air. Within seconds the rump was a sea of greedy red flames.

Rumohr's sacrifice broke the spell. Everywhere the young grenadiers opened up with their panzerfaust weapons. The air was suddenly full of the awkward projectiles. Tank after tank was hit, its covering infantry running wildly for the safety of the nearest house, tracked by German machine-gun fire. But still they kept on. It seemed Regiment Narva had an inexhaustible supply of T-34s. Slowly the panzerfausts began to give out.

Deep in his cellar HQ, filled with dead and dying grenadiers a drunk, desperate Pfeffer-Wildenbruch asked for volunteers to tackle the tanks with adhesive bombs. But there were no men left to volunteer, save the wounded and the medical personnel. In the end it was the men of the X-ray unit, pale-faced bespectacled medics, who seized the sticky bombs and went out to do battle with the metal monsters.

The *X-Ray Commandos*, as they called themselves during their short-lived existence, proved themselves bold, daring infantrymen. Perhaps it was because they did not realize the risks they were running. Time and time again one of them would dart out of the rubble and stick his bomb to the side of a T-34. The hollow clang of metal adhering to metal would alarm the Russian crew and they would swing their machine-guns round to deal with their attacker in one swift burst of fire. But there was nothing they could do about the bomb stuck to their metal side like a deadly limpet. A few managed to bail out, but only a very few. The rest remained in their battened down vehicle and waited for death with almost stoical resignation.

Within the hour the slope was littered with the bloody white-robed figures of the X-Ray Commando among the smoking, burning hulks. But the Russians still kept coming on. General Zehender's remaining positions were overrun. His SS Cavalry had no heavy weapons left to stop the tanks. The tankers ground their 30-ton vehicles round and round over the SS men's slit

trenches until the sides began to give in and the whole weight of their T-34s descended upon the terrified, screaming men below. When they emerged their tracks were red with blood. Zehender's SS Cavalry started to break. Here and there, panic-stricken young soldiers dropped their weapons, sprang out of their holes and raised their hands in surrender to the advancing Russian infantry.

Angrily Zehender attempted to stop the rot. "Get down you bastards!" he cried and sent a furious burst from his machine-pistol flying over the heads of the the men with raised hands.

The Russian infantry concentrated their fire on the man who had suddenly appeared only a hundred metres away, dressed in the uniform of an SS general. He didn't seem to notice. He kept firing at his own men running towards the advancing Russians, his heavy face flushed an angry red. The first slug struck him. He staggered, but kept after his men, crying, "Come, back, come back, do you hear?"

Another bullet hit him. He staggered badly. The machine-pistol fell from his hands and he sank to his knees. "Come back," he cried desperately, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"General!" a Russian in an earth-coloured blouse cried and pointed his Tommy-gun in the direction of the dying German. "Capture him and he's good for a medal and fourteen days' leave." The infantry surged forward with a guttural "Urrah!"

Zehender seemed to understand. His fingers fumbled with his pistol holster. Somehow or other he managed to get the Walther out. With a hand that trembled visibly, he raised the wavering pistol, placed the muzzle against his right temple, pressed the trigger and his head disappeared in a sudden spurt of scarlet.

After this sacrifice the heart finally ebbed from the German defenders of the hill. It would not be long now before what was left of them started to surrender.

Habicht put down his glasses. "Schulze," he cried above the roar of the Soviet artillery.

"Sir." Schulze dropped to his knees next to the Colonel outside the dugout CP.

"The Cavalry are having a very bad time of it," Habicht said. "They're taking tremendous losses: We must help them."

Schulze looked at him in alarm. The three or four hundred survivors of the Europa were in a good position. There they could be overrun and taken prisoner without too many casualties. Schulze thought he had done his duty by the men; now it was time that he and his little picked band should make their way to the locomotive works. "What do you mean – help them?"

Habicht did not seem to notice that he had omitted the 'sir'. "A flank attack. That is what is required. We could catch them off their guard. We'd be through them like a hot knife through butter. The Red bastards think they've got it all worked out. But they haven't reckoned with the Europa, have they Schulze?"

"Did you say – flank attack?"

"Yes," Already Habicht was surveying his front, working out a rudimentary swift plan of attack. "We'll go in on both sides, taking him down there where –"

"But goddamit, they've got a score of tanks down there to our front!" Schulze exploded. "How in Christ's name are we going to break through them? – *with tin openers?*"

Suddenly Habicht became aware that the Regimental Sergeant-Major was shouting at him, his face crimson with rage, the veins standing out at his temples an angry red. "Why are you talking in this manner?" he demanded coldly.

Schulze gasped for air. "Because you're crazy!"

Habicht glared at him, his hand falling to his pistol holster. "You mean you intend to disobey my order, Sarnt-Major?" he yelled.

"Of course, I do, you stupid bastard!" Schulze yelled back, beside himself with rage, not caring any longer. "Flank attack. What good will that do? We're finished – kaput!" He swallowed hard. "Let them surrender, run away, disperse, do any goddamn thing they like." He indicated the men dug in all around with a furious sweep of his big hand. "But don't make them die NOW!"

Habicht's fingers fumbled with the flap of the holster, but the big NCO did not allow him to complete the movement. His boot lashed out and the pistol went flying from Habicht's hand. He yelped with pain and cried, "This is mutiny, Schulze!"

"Of course it is. You have had your day, Habicht. Let them go. If you want to die – then die." He extended his hand towards the Russian positions.

"Die?" Habicht echoed the words, his face completely mad now. "Of

course – die."

Words died on Schulze's lips as Habicht pushed by him and ran down the slope towards the Russians. The enemy reacted at once. Bullets whined all around the running man, but he seemed to bear a charmed life. Nothing seemed able to touch him. He kept running and screaming that one final word, "Die... Die... Die..."

Suddenly he faltered. A burst of Russian Tommy-gun had ripped his skinny chest open. He struggled on a few more paces. Another burst slammed cruelly into his stomach. Still he staggered on, his legs giving beneath him. "DIE!" he screamed one last time in a voice that made the hairs on Schulze's neck rise in terror. And then he slumped face forward on to the pitted snow without another sound.

For one long moment an echoing silence seemed to descend upon the battlefield. Even the Russians seemed to hesitate, as if awed by the manner of the Hawk's death. Then Schulze pulled himself together, clapped his big hands around his mouth, and cried to the young volunteers crouching around him, "Bugger off, lads! It's all over. Go home while you've still got a chance."

The boys in their holes did not move.

"Bugger off, I say, get back to your mothers, you stupid young sods!" Schulze yelled, his eyes wild with rage.

Still they did not move. Schulze could not wait any longer. He had his own plans. He fired a furious burst at the Europa regimental flag still flying proudly over the CP. The pole splintered. Slowly the flag began to descend to the ground.

It did the trick. The survivors of SS Regiment Europa broke. Screaming and shouting in half a dozen languages, they fled, fighting and clawing at each other in sudden panic, running desperately from the men in earth-coloured blouses who were now beginning to advance on their abandoned positions. The great European Dream was dead.

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Schulze doubled up the hill towards the ruined tram shed in which he had positioned the men he was taking with him. The floor of the shabby blue tram was lined with sandbags and the windows covered with corrugated iron sheeting, with slits cut in it for their weapons. This wreck would take them to Janosz and their train.

Schulze took it all in in a glance. "All right, Cheese-head, get in." The big Dutchman swung himself up into the cab and grabbed the twin brass steering handles in his big paws.

"Are you ready, the rest of you!" Schulze yelled above the hoarse triumphant cries of the advancing Russians.

"Ready!" the men, waiting to push the tram out of the wrecked shed cried back.

"Now!" Schulze bellowed and jumped in, Schmeisser at the ready.

The young men heaved. The train started to move. "More!" Schulze bellowed.

The men shoved with all their strength. The tram edged out of the shed. Ahead of it stretched the steep twisting cobbled street, packed with advancing Russians. The men to the rear gave one last shove and scrambled hastily to swing themselves aboard. The old tram started to gather speed. The Russians were not slow to react. Bullets howled off the metal side-plates. At the driver's side, Schulze swung his Schmeisser from side to side, hosing the Russians with lead, A group of soldiers caught unawares went flying out of the way, save one. The tram lurched unpleasantly and for one awful moment Schulze thought it was going to stop. But it continued its crazy progress, leaving behind it a dead Russian on the tracks, his head and legs grotesquely amputated.

They swung round another bend and before them loomed a hill which Schulze knew they would never get up. But they were through the Russians by now and the nearest entrance to the sewer system was only fifty metres or so away. It was time to go and find the real train.

As the tram began to lose speed, Schulze slung his machine-pistol and yelled, "All right, it's time to abandon ship! Come on Hung, let's go." Two minutes later the whole bunch of them were entering the sewers.

CHAPTER 24

Budapest was dying in flames, but the anxious group of middle-aged Jewish men and women had no eyes now for the city in which they had been born and spent half their lives. Budapest was the past. They saw only the future, symbolized by the ugly black armoured behemoth steaming in front of them on the siding.

"Well?" Janosz demanded, obviously proud of his achievement, "what do you think, Sergeant-Major?"

Schulze took a long look at the locomotive, the three coaches and the little guards van at the back, which would be occupied by the SS. It looked good. The locomotive had three-centimetre thick armour and a heavy iron reinforced prow to cut through any obstruction. The coaches were similarly armoured, with slits and gun-ports running their length, while the guards van, armoured too, had a raised tower-like structure on its roof, in which a machine-gunner and a look-out could be posted to cover the length of the coaches' roofs.

"Excellent," he said. "But with all that armour, it's going to be slow, isn't it?"

"Yes," a guttural Magyar voice answered the question for him, "at the most thirty kilometres an hour."

Schulze swung round. A squat man in greasy overalls stood there, wiping his oily hands in a piece of cotton waste.

"Attila Pal, the driver," the Jew said.

"Christ, what next?" Schulze exclaimed. "Now we've got Attila the Hun on board too."

"We'll hit plenty of snow and more than likely get stuck," the driver grumbled. "Then the switches will be frozen up and we'll have to thaw them out before we can go on. And I don't know if I've enough sand in the sandbox to scatter under the driving wheels on a slippery slope. And God on high only knows what would happen if the fire in the firebox went out, the pipes would freeze and burst." He shook his dark head sadly. "It's not going to be easy at all."

Schulze looked at him in awe, impressed by such unremitting pessimism. "Christ! what do you do for laughs – go and visit the cemetery?

Get into that cab of yours and raise steam; we'd better get out of here before some nosey Popov comes checking up."

Janosz hurried the last of his 'flock' into the coaches and followed up the steps himself. In front the locomotive shuddered as it let off steam. "Well, my friend, we're ready to go. Palestine ahead." He smiled at Schulze. "We've done it."

Schulze shook his head. "Palestine ahead, what would the Führer say?"

Five minutes later the train left the dying city behind. Budapest was finished.

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On the hill the battle entered its final stages. As the Russians swarmed into the old castle, General Pfeffer-Wildenbruch ordered the sweating radio-operator to send the 9th SS Mountain Corps' last message.

It read: "*After fifty-two days of heroic battle, the Armed SS must end the fight this day. Peoples of Europe whom we once defended against the attacks of the Asiatic barbarians listen to the alarm bells now ringing in Budapest. It will be your turn next.*"

There was a burst of automatic fire from the next room and someone screamed out in agony. The radio operator's finger hesitated on the key wet with his own blood.

"Carry on," the drunken Corps Commander ordered, drawing his pistol.

The radio operator completed the message: "*Remember us Europe, for we have died for you.*"

The next moment the door caved in and a horde of firing soldiers poured through.

Far away in Berlin, the operator who had picked up the message heard a long continuous buzz. Then there was only silence.

BOOK 6 – THE ARMOURED TRAIN

CHAPTER 25

During the night the train had left the plain surrounding Budapest unnoticed by the Russians, and was climbing slowly into the mountains, chugging gently through a long, fir-wooded valley. Snow was falling, not too many kilometres ahead.

In the firecab, Attila the Hun, assisted by a fireman called Gypsy, divided his attention between the controls and the weather. He did not want to be caught on an ascent in new snow.

"More coal," he barked to the fireman. "Move your lazy Gypsy ass!"

"Cracking the whip again?" Schulze said cheerfully, dropping down on the swaying cinder-littered metal floor of the cab from the tender. "How we doing?"

"Lousy."

"What's wrong now?"

"That's wrong." Attila pointed to the grey sky ahead. "If that lot comes down on us while we're on a gradient like this, with the weight we've got to pull, then we could be in trouble. There are still a hundred kilometres to go before we're out of Russian-held territory.

Schulze swung himself back on to the tender and began to pick his way over the heaped-up coal towards the first coach. The refugees had just finished eating their breakfasts when Schulze flung open the door for an instant and let in the freezing air. They raised their heads with the look of alarm common to the persecuted.

"Anything wrong, Schulze?" Janosz asked.

"Not much, but that happy-go-lucky Magyar at the wheel seems to think its going to snow again soon and that's bad according to him."

Janosz nodded his understanding. "Please sit down, Schulze, I'd like to show you something." Schulze sat down at the table opposite him and Janosz pulled out a map from his robe and spread it on the tables. "Western Hungary is occupied up to here, beyond Stuhlweissenburg, by the Russians, though your people are back in charge in the town itself I am informed. Now if we continue as present we shall run to the north of Stuhlweissenburg, along the northern bank of Lake Balaton to where the main Russian front line is located – here at Hidekut. Or so my informant at Russian HQ tells me."

"Another recipient of Christian charity?" Schulze asked mockingly, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together.

"Problem number one is to get there quickly before Marshal Tolbuchin finds out that we have gone westwards and not eastwards. Problem number two will be how to get through the front. But we'll worry about that one when _"

His words were drowned by a screeching, banging clamour as the train started to slow down, the bumpers smashing into each other.

"Shit, what's up now?" Schulze cried and grabbing his machine pistol, he doubled out and dropped on to the snow at the side of the train, as the coaches came to a stop. "All out there," he yelled at the men peering out of the door of the guards van. "Gunners man the turrets." The big NCO ran through the deep snow to the locomotive. "What's wrong, sunshine?" he cried up at the driver, who was fumbling with the controls.

"The steam regulator," Attila called down. "Perhaps the retainer nut has come off."

Anxiously Schulze looked up at him. "Is it serious?"

"Of course it's damn serious! It'll cost us five or ten minutes to fix. But we'd better get it started before the snow starts. On this slope and with this weight, it could be bloody difficult to get it started otherwise."

Schulze ran back to the van, where the men not manning the turret were assembled, shivering a little in the icy air after the pleasant hothouse fug of the van. "You Frogs!" he rapped, "get yourselves up to the front of the train and keep guard over that Magyar maniac at the controls. At the double now! Pat and Patichon," Schulze said to the two Danes, "you follow me."

Together the three of them, weapons at the ready, swung round to the other side, conscious of the scared eyes watching them everywhere from the coaches as they headed for the thick fir forest which fringed the track. Down below there was a heavy silence, broken only by the steady whack of Attila's hammer. The men split up, on the look-out for partisans.

In spite of his confident grin, Schulze was worried. Attila had been right. Any moment now, it would start snowing and that would spell disaster. He kept his eyes peeled, but the two Danes didn't share his worry.

Pat was caught off his guard. He had just rested his Schmeisser between his knees when a sudden slither of snow dislodged from one of the firs alerted him to the danger. Less than three metres away, a bearded,

wolfish face under a shaggy black fur cap was smiling at him cruelly. The partisan had a knife, raised ready to throw, in his hand. There was no time to level his Schmeisser. The Dane acted instinctively. His right hand grabbed a handful of the frozen snow and in that same instant, flung it at the partisan's wolfish evil face. It caught him off balance. The knife aimed for the unsuspecting sentry's heart struck him in the shoulder. He yelped with sudden agony, but the searing pain did not stop him diving forward. His good shoulder thumped hard into the attacker's stomach.

The partisan went down with a gasp. But then his hands reached up and grabbed the knife stuck in Pat's shoulder. The Dane screamed as the man snatched it out ready to strike again. But he knew he must overcome the pain. He was fighting for his life. His hands sought and found the partisan's shabby fur jacket. In that same moment he flung himself backwards with all his remaining strength and with his back supported by the snow, he rammed both his heavy boots straight into the other man's stomach. He screamed and went flying over the prostrate Dane's head.

Pat was on his feet first. His head swimming wildly, his vision blurred, he grabbed his Schmeisser, just as the groaning partisan attempted to get up. He pressed the trigger. At that short range, the wild burst virtually sawed the partisan in half. He collapsed against a tree trunk, trailing bright-red blood after him.

The burst of fire acted as a signal. Suddenly the wood was full of hoarse cries in Russian and Magyar, as the partisans started to run from cover. Pat, his eyes glazed, swung his nattering Schmeisser from side to side, backing out of the trees into the open.

A bullet struck him just after he had cleared them. He dropped to one knee, his pale young face contorted with agony. Still he kept on firing. Then the Schmeisser tumbled from his limp fingers and he pitched forwards into the snow and lay very still.

Schulze reacted at once. "Patichon back off – move towards the train. At the double!"

From the shelter of the trees, the partisans poured a stream of inaccurate fire at the two figures sprinting across the gleaming white surface of the snow. Suddenly the armoured train opened up as the twin Spandaus were brought to bear on the wood. At a rate of 700 rounds a minute, the slugs tore into the trees in one long, high-pitched burr. The partisans went down everywhere, falling in agony among the flying wood chips and the severed

branches. Schulze made the cab. He reached up and sounded the steam whistle. The signal for all his men to withdraw.

"Get moving!" he yelled to Attila.

The Hungarian eased open the throttle, just as the first howling grey wave of snowflakes enveloped the train, covering the rails in an instant. There was the hiss of escaping steam and the metallic chatter of racing wheels. But nothing happened. The driving wheels were not gripping.

Attila rapped out an angry order to the fireman. Outside the snow was so thick now that Schulze could no longer see the advancing partisans and he knew his turret machine-gunners would be firing blind. The fireman jerked at a wire above his head. Schulze knew he was opening the sandbox, which allowed sand to drop on the track around the driving wheels. He said a quick prayer that this time the wheels would grip, just as the first dark shape of a partisan loomed up out of the whirling grey gloom.

He ripped off a burst. The partisan was bowled over screaming, as if he had been punched by a gigantic invisible fist. Behind Schulze, Attila eased the throttle open once more, hoping against hope that the sand had not already been dissipated in the new snow.

"Look out!" the fireman cried wildly.

Schulze swung round. A dark shape was clambering across the heaped coal of the tender, the whirling, grey-filled wind tugging at his clothes. In that confined space Schulze could not fire for fear of ricochets. He let the Schmeisser drop to his chest by its strap, and seized a piece of thick pine firewood. It whirled madly through the air and caught the partisan in the chest, just as he was about to jump down. He disappeared screaming over the side.

Behind Schulze Attila opened the throttle more. Slugs were pattering along the whole length of the train now. This was their last chance. The driving wheels spun on the slick rails. The laboured puffing of the engine increased. Clouds of smoke belched from the stack. In the howling gloom outside a grenade exploded in a burst of angry scarlet. Shrapnel howled off the metal side of the cab. A face appeared at Schulze's feet. His heavy dice-beaker crashed into it. The partisan disappeared into the snowstorm.

"Come on! Come on!" Schulze cried, leaning his body forward, urging the locomotive forward physically.

Slowly the wheels bit. Attila gave the locomotive more power. She started to move forward. The green needle on the speedometer began to creep

upwards. As the armoured train's speed increased, the hail of fire against her steel sides diminished. Sergeant-Major Schulze leaned weakly against the cab side and gasped, "Never do that again, Attila. I've just pissed myself."

CHAPTER 26

The whole staff was drunk, with the exception of the Marshal himself and the Commander of the Grey Eagles, who was still brooding over his losses of the previous month.

Stalin had called Tolbuchin personally from the Kremlin to congratulate him and there had been an official cable from the Stavka, the Soviet High Command. The new puppet Communist government, picked long before in Moscow, had made a brief appearance, fighting their way to HQ through the long stream of their fellow citizens being herded eastwards by the NKVD, armed with whips, "to thank our Soviet brothers for the boon of freedom now conferred upon us".

Now the Russians were alone, celebrating their victory in the typical Russian fashion by getting blind drunk, as if that were the only way to escape from the grim reality of their daily lives. But Tolbuchin, renowned throughout the Army for his drinking ability, had no stomach for the celebration. Despondently he sipped his pepper vodka and waited for news of the missing train.

That damned priest had turned the tables on him. What if it came out that he had taken a bribe? He took a hasty sip at his vodka and shuddered slightly at the thought. Everyone in the top echelons knew just how corrupt Stalin and the rest of his cronies of the Kremlin's inner circle were, with their women, the orgies, their accumulation of treasure; all the same Old Leather Face tried to maintain the appearance of simple peasant morality to the outer world. He would not hesitate one minute to punish even a Marshal of the Soviet Union if he thought he had been bribed.

The telephone on the desk in front of him rang. No one else noticed it save a gloomy, sober Suslov. Tolbuchin picked up the phone and barked "Speak!" Suslov watched the Commander of the Ukrainian Front curiously, wondering what was so important about the telephone call.

Tolbuchin eventually put down the receiver and stared blankly into space for a while. Abruptly he became aware of Suslov's scrutiny. He flushed almost angrily and then his red-faced, angry look was changed to one of thoughtfulness. He crooked a big finger at the Major.

Suslov rose immediately and shoving his way through the drunken staff

officers came to attention in front of the Army Commander. "Comrade Commander!"

"Suslov, I regret that I was not in a position to allow your Grey Eagles to take part in the final assault on the position of those SS swine. It didn't fit into my plans, although I know you requested that honour as revenge for what they did to your battalion in the Vértes Mountains."

Tolbuchin looked up at him cunningly. "What would you say if I told you that all those Fritz SS men did not perish on the Castle Hill?"

Suslov looked at him sharply. "What?"

"Yes, that phone call just reported that one of our partisan units has brushed with a train-load of Hungarian civilians – capitalist trash the lot of them – fleeing westwards to their German allies. During the course of the fighting they noted SS men among the defenders. The sole German casualty bore the armband of the Europa. Now what do you say to that, Suslov?"

"What are we doing about it, Comrade Marshal?" Suslov asked, trying to control his excitement.

"Under the present circumstances and weather conditions in the mountains, very little until they reach our front line." He paused slightly.

Suslov rose to the bait. "Comrade Marshal," he said. "in the name of my dead Eagles and their living comrades, I request permission to deal with those Fritz SS. They owe my Eagles a debt – in blood."

Tolbuchin's brain was racing. Suslov was a very violent and a very loyal man. In his present frame of mind, neither the Germans nor the Hungarians would ever survive if he and his Eagles caught up with them. They would wipe them out in revenge for the Vértes Mountains business. But he had to make quite sure that Suslov would keep his mouth shut later, come what may.

"You realize the difficulties, the weather, the terrain, the fact that the Fritzes have somehow or other stolen a small armoured train?"

"I know no difficulties, Comrade Marshal. I see only murdered Eagles, who demand their revenge from the other side of the grave."

"How would you do it?" Tolbuchin inquired, still not revealing his hand. "The terrain is so snowbound now that none of our own armour in the area could ever get through in time. And infantry wouldn't have a hope in hell against an armoured train."

Suslov seized eagerly at the chance offered him. "Paradrop – somewhere twenty or thirty kilometres ahead of the train in a spot where I

would have time to prepare a defence – perhaps destroy the track, that sort of thing, Comrade Marshal."

"Paradrop!" Tolbuchin exclaimed. "You must be mad, Suslov – in this weather!"

"Comrade Marshal," Suslov said proudly, his eyes gleaming. "Every last one of my Eagles is prepared to lay down his life to pay back the debt in blood."

Tolbuchin knew he had the fool. The man was too good to be true. "All right, Suslov," he said slowly, "I shall let you and your Eagles go – but you go without permission. If anyone finds out, I know nothing. You understand that?" he added severely.

"I do."

"Good. Let me give you this piece of advice to avoid future complications. When you ambush that train make sure that not a single Fritz or Hungarian civilian remains alive." He looked hard at the other man. "Is that clear?"

Suslov's face was expressionless, but when he spoke, his words were eloquent testimony of just how ruthless he would be. "Clear, Comrade Marshal. Not one of them, soldier, civilian, man, woman or child will survive. My Eagles will see to that."

CHAPTER 27

The train was deep in the spectacular mountain country, which bordered Lake Balaton. The snow blizzard had passed and from where Schulze sat, he could see the rails, glittering in the winter sun, as they wound round and round the frozen mountainside, through the white firs, until they reached the spidery, gleaming metal bridge spanning the gorge ahead. Everything was bright, sparkling, seen with the preternatural clarity of vision that always follows a fall of snow.

"Sergeant-Major Schulze, could I have your attention?"

Schulze took his eyes from the view.

The old Jew was speaking. "On the other side of that bridge, Schulze, there is a very steep descent almost to the valley floor along which the main Russian line runs. Now if my information is correct, the Russians have barricaded the line there. They have not destroyed it because they hope to use it to transport their own troops westwards once their advance starts again. Nor have your own people on the other side of the valley destroyed their section of the line. Presumably they have the same hope of using it if they resume the offensive again. Look!" He shoved the map across the table towards Schulze.

The descent looked very steep indeed to judge from the contours, with the track swinging round a bend and going straight down to the valley floor. He used his thumb to measure the length of the straight run against the distance scale. It was about a third of a kilometre.

"Well?" Janosz asked finally.

"Well, what?"

"Have you any suggestions on how to get through that barrier? According to my informant it is composed of old track and wooden sleepers from the permanent way, reinforced with drums of concrete."

"We could ram it," Schulze said thoughtfully, stroking his big unshaven chin. "This train carries some weight."

"But we could well derail the train and block the line by doing so," Janosz objected.

"Yes, you're right there." He thought for a few moments. "What about using one of the coaches as a battering ram?"

Janosz considered the suggestion for a moment or two, then shook his head. "No good, Schulze. Firstly you can see how packed we all are in here. We need that coach. Secondly, an armoured coach like that would make all further progress impossible if it crashed into the barrier and remained across the lines. Our locomotive would not have the power to remove it and pull the rest of the train at the same time."

Schulze grunted his agreement and for a few minutes the planners sank into a gloomily silence, as the heavy train chugged closer and closer to the bridge. But in the end it was neither of them who came up with the answer. It was Hung.

Shuddering and turning his green face away hastily from the window as he spotted yet another sheer slope falling hundreds of metres to the valley, he said: "Hung think van."

"Hung think van," Schulze mimicked him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Van, he break up when hit barrier. Van, he can be steered. Van, he –"

Janosz held up his skinny hand for silence. "Of course!" he exclaimed. "The van has its own steering, enough to keep it on the track at high speed."

"And it's not as heavy as the coaches," Schulze agreed eagerly. "Now if I could get my boys in position on either side of that slope without the Popovs spotting them down below, we could steer the van into that barricade and in the confusion, my boys could fix the Popovs' hash for them. Then Attila could bring the train down and well be off towards the German lines."

"But who go drive van?" the Chinese asked in all innocence.

Schulze beamed at him wickedly. "Who you think go drive van? Hung and me!"

***

The Jewish refugees worked with a will clearing the deep frozen snow from the loop line at the top of the height. Behind them, Attila was de-freezing the locked switch from the main to the branch line with a blow torch, while his fireman, shovelling mightily, was keeping up the steam pressure, knowing that at this height it could not be allowed to fall.

Schulze himself was busy with his handful of young men. He had divided them into two groups. Now clad in white sheets as snow camouflage, they waited expectantly. Schulze glanced hastily at his watch. "You've got

about fifteen minutes. I want you around the bend and in position on both sides of the track by then. Once the van is within a couple of hundred metres of the barricade, you go in – hard."

Moments later the men had disappeared round the bend and were advancing cautiously on the Soviet positions far below. The working party had cleared the snow and the points were free. The train could move in. Schulze grinned at Janosz, leaning broken-lunged on his shovel. "Harder than sitting in your parlour counting your money, ain't it?"

Now things moved swiftly. Attila drove the train into the loop and uncoupled the engine. He backed down the track and came up at the rear of the little guards van. Swiftly he and his fireman uncoupled it from the train, coupled it up to his engine and drew it out of the loop on to the main line. With a clatter of driving wheels on the steep icy rails, Attila pushed the van almost to the top of the slope. There he and the fireman again uncoupled the van.

"I'll shunt you beyond the height just where the slow curve begins, After that you're on your own. The best of luck." He said the final words as if they were the last he would ever address to the two SS men.

Schulze dismissed him, very businesslike now. "All right, Hung, you stand by the door all the time, savvy?"

Hung, his face green already, could not answer. He nodded his head fearfully.

"It's your job to see that it stays wide open, whatever happens. When I give the word you jump. Because if you don't, I'm going to give you a big kick up your yellow ass, which will send you out all right – then I'm coming after you."

Behind them the locomotive's wheels clattered on the slope and it began to take the strain. Slowly they edged their way towards the bend. Schulze gulped and seized the brass handle of the steering wheel to the rear of the van. This was it!

The van rolled forward very slowly. Not more than ten kilometres an hour, Schulze judged. The rock wall of the bend loomed ever larger. To their right, the mountain fell away in a sheer drop. Schulze tightened his grip on the brass handled wheel.

And then they were around the bend. Far below Schulze caught a glimpse of a few dark houses and some tiny figures plodding stolidly through the deep snow. The barrier guards. He concentrated his attention on the van

which was gathering speed. Schulze licked suddenly dry lips and felt the wheel shiver violently in his sweating grip. He held on desperately, fighting with all his great strength to keep the van on the track.

Now the countryside was hissing past in a crazy white and green blur. Schulze leaned forward and with all his strength applied the brake. Blue angry sparks flew from the wheels – so high that he could see them flashing by the open door. Nothing happened! He stared at the wild blur outside in horror. He had to slow the thing before the barrier so that they could jump to safety!

"STOP, YOU BASTARD!" Schulze screamed and thudded his shoulder against the brake with the last of his strength. The screech of the locked wheels reached a terrifying pitch. It seemed as if death itself was rushing remorselessly towards them. Then when it appeared the van would never brake, the terrible bedlam of screeching metal diminished. The blur steadied to a series of identifiable objects. Schulze waited no longer. He raised his big boot and planted a tremendous kick in Hung's baggy pants. He screamed and went sailing out into the snow.

Schulze raised his boot once more and smashed it against the brake. As the van started to accelerate again, he dived full length through the door. He landed heavily in the deep snow, all breath knocked from his body. Below, little white-clad figures were running clumsily through the heavy snow on both sides of the track towards the dark barricade. They were his men and the surprised Russians had still not reacted, though they were now doubling towards their positions.

Just as the first of them swung themselves behind the machine-guns, tearing them round to face the attackers, the van smashed full tilt into the barricade. There was the great echoing sound of metal striking metal, followed an instant later by the detonation of the High Explosives with which Schulze had packed the front of the van as an afterthought. Next moment the barricade turned to a mass of flying debris, thick black smoke, and flying bodies. Schulze raised himself and started to look for Hung. The path was open again.

CHAPTER 28

The armoured train rolled to a stop in the shattered little station. Behind it, the Russian fire which had pursued the train through no-man's land started to peter out. Cautiously the infantry of a second-class Luftwaffe field division guarding that part of the line raised their heads from their positions in the ruins to stare at the train. It was decorated with the crossed flags of Germany and Hungary on the front of the locomotive, and both sides of the leading coach bore a large swastika.

The elderly Captain, a comb-out from the Luftwaffe Ministry, Berlin, watched as the door of the leading coach opened. Two young SS troopers – he could tell they were SS from their camouflaged overalls – sprang out smartly and took up their positions, machine-pistols at the alert. They were followed by another who unrolled – of all things – a strip of red carpet. A fourth appeared. A giant of a man, an NCO obviously, his barrel chest covered with decorations. He took up his position facing the door, waiting expectantly.

The Captain made a decision. The train was all right, and judging from the SS men, it contained someone of importance. He thrust his pistol into its holster and snapped: "All right on your feet and follow me." Reluctantly his collection of frightened old men and boys obeyed his command.

On the platform, the three SS men had crashed their boots down on the battle-littered concrete and sprung rigidly to attention, as if the Führer himself were going to make an appearance at any moment.

The figure who emerged was small and old and very wrinkled, with a dark, hook-nosed face that the captain took to be Hungarian. He was dressed in a light blue uniform, his skinny chest almost covered in decorations, on both sides of the tunic. For no apparent reason as he stepped on to the red carpet, he touched his hand to his high, shiny-peaked cap, with that casual manner of saluting which always, in the Captain's experience, indicated a very high-ranking officer.

"*Heil Hitler!*" the three SS men bellowed in unison, as if they were on guard outside the Berlin Reich Chancellory and Hitler himself had just appeared. "*Heil Hitler, Herr Generalfeldmarschall!*"

Field-Marshal! Captain Blomberg of the 4th Luftwaffe Field Division

could hardly believe his ears. A Field-Marshal in his section of the front. In the last four weeks, the highest ranking visitor he had received in this remote part of rural Hungary had been the divisional surgeon making inquiries about his company's VD incidence. He started to walk towards the train, from which a group of civilians were now beginning to descend.

The big SS NCO heard the sound of his boots. He swung round and viewed the scruffy old company of Luftwaffe soldiers coming out of the ruins, weapons now slung over their bent shoulders. "Officer in charge?" he bellowed.

"Here," Blomberg heard himself saving, like a schoolboy reporting at the morning roll-call. "Here Sergeant-Major." He felt himself flushing even as he said the words. "Blomberg is my name – Captain Blomberg."

"Over here, Captain Blomberg," the big NCO barked. Blomberg marched forward and clicking his heels together in his best imitation of the elegant staff officers at the Ministry, he saluted.

The Field-Marshal acknowledged his salute. "Report?" he said in excellent German.

"Captain Blomberg, Commander of 8th Company, 1st Regiment, Fourth Luftwaffe Field Division. Four men sick, one man wounded, one hundred and thirty effectives, Field-Marshal," he barked, looking at some distant object behind the skinny Hungarian's right shoulder in the approved fashion.

"Thank you, Captain Blomberg," the Field-Marshal said and held out his wrinkled hand graciously. "My name is Jerzcy von Stuhlweissenburg. I am responsible for bringing out the last Hungarian cabinet." He extended a hand towards the under sized, middle-aged, somewhat shabbily dressed civilians standing a little uneasily behind him on the platform.

Captain Blomberg was overwhelmed. "But how... what... why?" He seemed unable to get the questions out.

"We have escaped from Budapest at the risk of our lives and with the help of your brave SS soldiers." He indicated the massive NCO, who towered above the civilians and the shabby Luftwaffe soldiers. "Now we are tired. We need rest and food – and help." With a spontaneous gesture, he unpinned one of the myriad decorations on his skinny chest, pinned it on Captain Blomberg's unadorned tunic. "The Star of St Stefan, First class, Captain," he announced. "It is yours in anticipation of the help you will give us."

"Anything that is within my power, Herr Generalfeldmarschall,"

Blomberg snapped, already feeling several centimetres taller.

"Good," the Field Marshal said graciously. "Let us get my people under cover. We shall of course need hot food. Then I shall want you to telephone all along the route we will be taking to Berchtesgaden –"

Oh, my God, Blomberg said to himself, *they're on their way to see the Führer!*

"And ensure that we have no difficulties with petty officialdom. We have wasted enough time as it is – and time is of the essence, is it not, Captain?"

"Of course, Field-Marshal," Blomberg agreed hastily. "But please follow me, if you would be so kind."

As he swept past the SS men, who were standing rigidly to attention, Field-Marshal Janosz winked solemnly at Sergeant-Major Schulze, whose face was full of admiration. They had pulled it off. They were through the German line.

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That long afternoon, while the Luftwaffe men, harassed by an anxious Blomberg, prepared a gigantic pea-soup, Schulze and Janosz planned the rest of their route into Austria.

"From Mencsel," Janosz explained, "the direct route leads to Vienna. But that is too dangerous. There are too many unpleasant questions that could be asked and we don't want that, do we?"

Schulze agreed. The closer they came to the Reich, the more he was becoming aware of the danger. These desperate days, the authorities were quick to act once the 'head-hunters' of the military police picked up a deserter: it was against a wall and a quick burst of machine-gun fire. Courts-martial were looked on as a waste of time.

"That uniformed fool will fix up our route to Berchtesgaden via Vienna. Once he has done that we shall switch direction at Bratislava. From there we will bear south-west and enter Austria in the Burgenland area – here. It is a country of little villages, few towns and a poor populace, who are not immune –"

"To Christian charity," Schulze beat him to it.

"Yes, money will make our way easier," Janosz agreed. "Now I intend that we move on to the secondary line – here – and cross the Austrian frontier

at the small village of Pamhagen. If we are lucky, we shall only have to contend with the single frontier guard who is also the local gendarme and undertaker."

Schulze could guess that Janosz had been engaged in this business of smuggling people – Jews most likely – across frontiers for a long time now. In 1938 and 1939 there had probably been many Austrian and German Jews he had helped across that lonely frontier.

"What about us after that?" he asked instead.

"You could go with us the whole way."

"To Palestine?" Schulze cried.

"You are a useful man. We of the Hagannah will have need of you in the days to come."

"What and have my dick shortened? No thank you, Janosz." He paused. "But it's a long way back to Hamburg and the head hunters are everywhere in Germany today."

"I shall help you, if that is your wish."

"You mean you've got some of these Hagannah Jews of yours in Germany, too?" Schulze asked incredulously.

"Yes. We have. We are everywhere." He smiled slightly. "Once the people have eaten and the train has been refuelled, we shall leave. I don't want to spend a night so close to the front line. One never knows when the Russians might attack."

Schulze rose and slung his machine-pistol. "All right, Field-Marshal, let's go and see if the Hungarian cabinet have finished stuffing their guts with pea soup and sausage yet."

CHAPTER 29

The jump in the blinding snowstorm had been a catastrophe. Suslov had warned his Grey Eagles of the danger in advance, but not one of them had backed down. Revenge for their murdered comrades overrode all other considerations. At ground level the wind velocity had been forecast as seven metres per second. Instead it turned out to be twice that speed. The casualties had been appalling. Man after man had had his chute caught by the howling wind, fought desperately to empty the air out of it, and been borne away across the white waste never to be seen again.

By dawn Suslov had collected exactly one hundred survivors and of that pathetic handful of men some twelve were seriously injured and had to be left behind – at their own request. But that was not all. As soon as the snow had ceased to fall and he had been able to orientate himself, he had found that instead of being well inside the Soviet lines in Hungary, he was twenty kilometres behind the German front!

The Grey Eagles had been cut off behind the Fritzes' line often enough in the past. What concerned Suslov more was that he no longer knew which direction the runaway train was taking inside the German front.

Fortunately the sole surviving radio operator had managed to pick up Tolbuchin's message that 'object X' – as he put it so carefully – had broken through the Soviet front at Mencsel. Suslov did some quick map work. There was no branch line leading off either north or south from the track which ran westwards from Mencsel to Bratislava. The line did not divide until the Austrian border where branches were needed to deploy as many troops as possible quickly along the frontier.

It seemed that he could be sure that the missing train was continuing in the direction of Bratislava. He must stop them somewhere along that line. But where? The train's speed would have to be greatly reduced. It had to be somewhere where he could spring an ambush. After all, his men were armed with nothing heavier than automatic pistols.

One hour after receiving Tolbuchin's message, he found the ideal spot. It was some thirty kilometres to the east of Bratislava. A small hamlet, at the foot of a very steep ascent, where, according to his detailed military map, there was a watering and fuelling stop as required by any train approaching

the height. His mind made up, he had ordered a speed march to the little, lonely railway hamlet. His men had performed splendidly, covering the twelve kilometres in two hours, despite the snow. The place had been just what he wanted. The railway track ran through a steep gully beyond the collection of wooden cottages and tiny station which made up the hamlet and then began to climb rapidly. On one side the track was bordered by an almost vertical cliff; on the other, the shallow slope was strewn with snow-covered rocks, deposited there in the previous century by the engineers who had blasted a passage through the mountain. They would make ideal cover for the bulk of his force.

The Eagles had killed the handful of inhabitants as a matter of routine; they could not afford any betrayal so far behind the enemy lines. The only man Suslov spared was the ancient, ashen-faced station-master. Suslov needed him to stop the armoured train.

His plan was complete. Up among the rocks above the hamlet, he had sixty men in position, with the remainder hidden about the rickety wooden station, ready and alert. Satisfied he turned to Schmitt, a Volga German, and said idly: "Ask him what they call this place?" He jerked a careless thumb at the trembling station-master.

Schmitt put the question into German. For a minute the station-master was unable to answer. He opened his mouth, his white lips trembled, but nothing came out but meaningless grunts.

"Punch him!" Suslov ordered. "But not too hard."

Schmitt punched him in the stomach and then slapped him across the face for good measure, before putting his question again.

The old man quavered something or other.

"Well?" Suslov demanded, not taking his eyes off the line.

"Dodemann Pass," Schmitt answered. "That's its name in the local dialect."

"And what does that mean in Russian?"

"Dead Man's Pass, Comrade Commander."

Suslov smiled icily. "An appropriate name," he commented, "a very appropriate name – *for them!*"

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The armoured train was slowing down now to conserve fuel. Attila knew that

once they did not show up in Bratislava, the station authorities would start making inquiries; they would have to go all out then along the branch line to get to Pamhagen. Perhaps, the surly driver considered, he should make a fuelling stop at Dodemann Station. In the leading coach, most of the tired civilians and SS troopers sprawled on the gangway floor were snoring gently, believing now that they were out of real danger.

Schulze and Hung, who had kicked a couple of the younger Jews out of their seats on to the floor in order to sit in comfort, discussed their own plans softly, while the others slept.

They stopped short, suddenly all tiredness and the projected acquisition of a Reeperbahn brothel gone from their minds. The train was slowly coming to a halt, although no stop was scheduled until the Austrian border. Schulze sprang to his feet and simultaneously blew his whistle and kicked a snoring SS man in the ribs to waken him.

In an instant all was noisy confusion as the middle-aged civilians and the soldiers started from their sleep, the civilians fearfully, the soldiers solely concerned with grabbing their weapons and getting to their posts in the armoured train before it came to a final halt.

Attila swore viciously. The station-master was standing ill the middle of the track, opposite the empty platform, waving his red-and-white tin *kelle* signalling device, as if he were at Budapest's main station instead of this provincial dump. He could either run the silly old fool down, or stop. He decided to stop. Perhaps he could coal up here after all.

He began to ease the brake back and close the throttle. The driving wheels locked, there was a soft clatter of buffers and the armoured train finally came to a halt just as Sergeant-Major Schulze dropped into the cab with an urgent: "Why are we stopping?"

Attila took his hand off the throttle. "Him," he said laconically. Schulze peered over the side towards the old man, dressed in a shabby uniform. "The old boy looks as if he's going to wet his knickers at any moment," he commented.

Schulze felt there could be nothing to fear this far behind the German front. Besides, apart from the old Hungarian, the place appeared deserted.

"I'll see if he's got any coal in his bunker for us," Attila said. "Yes, the old Monsignor'll give him some of his famous Christian charity if he comes up with the goods."

"You have any coal?" Attila the Hun cried, leaning out of his cab. "We'll see there's something in it for –" He never finished the sentence.

Firing from the open station window, Suslov, who had had his automatic pistol trained on the cab these last sixty seconds, caught the Hungarian driver with a full burst. Attila screamed, his face suddenly ripped apart and jetting blood. He was dead before he reached the snow-covered earth.

"Down!" Schulze screamed, just as the little hamlet erupted with angry small arms fire. As he hit the cinder-covered metal floor, he knew, with a hopeless sinking feeling, that they had walked right into a trap.

CHAPTER 30

Schulze sagged against the inside of the door. "Shit!" he breathed, and mopped his sweat-lathered brow in relief. "I thought the bastards had done for me back there."

Janosz, unafraid but clearly very worried, tugged a small bottle out of his pocket and thrust it towards the bareheaded NCO. "Here, drink some of my medicine," he cried above the vicious snap and crackle of the battle outside.

Schulze seized the bottle gratefully. He downed its contents and coughed throatily. "It's bad out there," He commented, a frown creasing his forehead. "The engine driver's copped it. They're dug in in strength on both sides of the rail and there's a lot more of the Ivan buggers further up the slope. I've got the Swede on the cab with the fireman – he's got the other Spandau and we've taken no casualties, except for a couple of flesh wounds from ricochets."

"The fireman – can he drive the engine?" Janosz demanded.

"Yes, I think so. But at the moment, he's scared shitless – there's not much we can do with him. He's certainly not going to move the train forward."

"*Forward*, you say," Janosz emphasized the word, a sudden flash of hope in his dark eyes. "What do you think they'll do?"

"They can't hang around here for ever, so far behind our lines. My guess is they can do one of two things: they'll ask us to surrender or they'll rush us as soon as it is dark enough to do so. In both cases they'll attempt to collar the train for themselves so that they can barrel their way through those hopeless Luftwaffe sods back there into their own positions."

"And if we surrender?"

Schulze made a gesture with his big forefinger, as if he were pulling a trigger.

"But why?" Janosz protested. "We haven't injured them in any way. Why are we so important?"

Schulze shrugged. "Better ask Stalin that. But if they think we're important enough to send troops in so far behind enemy lines, you can bet your last *matzo* they're not going to just shake our hands and tell us to go

home – the game's over. No, if we surrender, we're for the chop!"

"Do you really think so?" Janosz said horrified

"I don't *really think so* – I know so."

"Ceasefire!" Suslov yelled, hands cupped around his mouth.

"Stop firing everywhere – there's no need to waste any further ammunition!" Across the way in the trapped armoured train, the firing ceased too, as if in anticipation of the ambushers' next move.

The echoing silence which followed was broken by the voice of Schmitt, the Volga German, speaking the dialect that his German forefathers had brought to Russia nearly three centuries before. It was strange yet comprehensible, as it boomed through the megaphone: "Germans, you have one chance – surrender!"

"Fuck off!" Schulze yelled.

"Come out with your weapons," Schmitt went on. "Throw them to the ground immediately you leave the train and then raise your hands. Continue walking to the station-house. You will not be harmed. All we want is the train. You can go on your own way. We will not harm you," the metallic voice echoed and re-echoed across the battle-littered snow. "Surrender now!" Schmitt lowered the megaphone and waited.

There was no reaction from the train.

"Fritz bastards," Suslov cursed. He knew that time was running out for the Eagles too. In spite of the fact that they had cut the wires connecting the remote hamlet with the outside world, it was after all on the main line to Bratislava. Someone would discover them on the German side sooner or later. He glanced at the afternoon sky. It was darkening rapidly. The snow would begin to fall again soon.

He jabbed his elbow angrily into the Volga German's side. "Try them again!" he ordered.

"All right, Gypsy, are you ready?" Schulze asked, crouching next to him in the armoured cab.

"Will they fire?" the fireman quavered.

"Well, they won't exactly be throwing roses at us," Schulze snorted. "You ready too, Swede?" The dour blonde Swedish SS man, manning the machine-gun on the tender grunted a moody acquiescence.

"All right." Schulze commanded. "NOW!"

The fireman let go of the brake and opened the throttle wide. For one brief moment, the driving wheels spun on the icy rails and the clouds of dark smoke belched from the stack purposelessly. Then the wheels bit. The armoured train began to roll.

"The Fritzes are moving, Comrade Commander!" Schmitt cried. Suslov sat up and peered through the shattered window. "Fire!" he yelled angrily. "Fire – Eagles!"

"But they're moving, Comrade Commander!" Schmitt protested. Instead of moving up the slope ahead, the train was rapidly puffing back down the way it had come, the Eagles' fire wildly off mark.

"Ceasefire...ceasefire." He rose to his feet and shouted the command, knowing that his men were wasting their ammunition. The train was already almost behind the cover of the next bend.

"What will they do now, Comrade Commander?" Schmitt asked. "Our patrols have torn up the track a kilometre from here. That's as far as they will be able to get."

"What will they do?" Suslov echoed his question. "Once they know that there is no way back, they will attempt to rush the slope with their train – even if they abandoned the train, there is no road, no other way up over the mountain save that railway pass. And when they make that attempt we will have a little surprise waiting for them, Schmitt – a very unpleasant little surprise."

"Here they come again, Comrade Commander!" Schmitt shouted. Suslov awoke immediately from an uneasy doze. He sprang to his feet, machine-pistol at the alert. The armoured train was steaming round the bend at top speed, a menacing black outlined against the streaming white of the snowstorm. Suslov fired a quick burst into the air to alert the men in the station and higher up on the slope. "Stand by!" he barked and dropped behind his cover once again.

Ragged firing broke out on all sides. Suslov could hear the slugs whining off the train's metal sides. He took careful aim as the locomotive, great clouds of brown smoke steaming from its stack, came ever closer. He fired, but the tracer bounced off the cab's armour like hailstones. With a great clatter of wheels and hiss of escaping steam, the train hurtled through the station, not one shot coming from it.

The black locomotive smashed through the barrier they had erected across the line, tossing the sleepers high into the air, as if they were made of matchwood. It rattled on, its speed obviously diminishing now, as it started to take the steep slope. Suslov cried to his men to follow him and they ran heavily through the streaming snow towards their comrades dug in higher up.

The train, its speed considerably slower now, laboured up the steep slope ever closer to the Eagles' positions. Thick smoke streamed from its stack and the waiting men, tensed over their weapons, could hear the strain the locomotive was undergoing.

It was almost alongside them now. Behind the rocks, the Eagles tensed. The senior NCO raised his hand and then brought it down sharply as the locomotive came level with is hiding place. A line of violet flashes ran the length of the Eagles' positions.

Tracer flew through the snow like a swarm of angry red and white hornets and slugs whined off the armour. Yet still there was no answering fire from the train. It might have well been some ghost train, steaming through the dark, eerily impervious to human influence. Now the Eagles were standing up everywhere, unafraid and confident that the men within were condemned already. Their faces, wet with melting snow, were wild like those of country boys at some local fair blazing away at a shooting booth. Still the train did not falter in its course.

It passed through the last Russian position and began the final stage of the ascent, the Eagles' fire dying away behind it.

All noise, save that of the locomotive labouring its way upwards, ceased as the Russians shouldered their weapons and watched it go to its death.

Crump! The crash of the first explosion, accompanied by a blinding white flash, merged almost simultaneously with the second. For a moment nothing seemed to happen, and Suslov thought with a flash of horror that his trap had failed. Then the train came to an abrupt halt and the two rear coaches toppled sideways, hesitating as if they were fighting to avoid the terrible fate awaiting them. Next instant they sailed out into the void of the precipice. Almost lazily they turned over in mid-air, while the Eagles watched, their mouths open in awe, and then with ever increasing speed they tumbled to the valley floor below. With a thunderclap of sound, they crashed to the bottom.

The locomotive and the first coach still teetered on the edge of the line.

Steam was escaping furiously from the locomotive's ruptured boiler. Then the first coach began to sway, until it could be held by the shattered locomotive no longer. Amid the rending of metal and the splintering of heavy sleepers, the great black monster was dragged inexorably over the edge of the precipice. A full four seconds later it hit the valley floor and exploded with a great echoing roar that seemed to go on forever.

CHAPTER 31

"Well?" Suslov demanded.

The snow-covered Eagle hauled himself over the edge of rock and slumped down in the snow, his big chest heaving with the effort of the long climb.

"What did you find?" Suslov asked again, impatient to hear just how successful their operation had been so that they could begin making their way back to their own lines under the cover of the snowstorm. The Eagle swallowed hard and looked up at his C.O., his face crimson and wet with melting snow. "Nothing, Comrade Commander," he answered.

"What?" Suslov's voice expressed utter bafflement – a shattering of comprehension.

The climber pulled himself to his feet. "I said, Comrade Commander, that the coaches were empty. There wasn't a soul in either of the two I managed to reach."

"But that's... that's impossible," Suslov stuttered, his legendary calm destroyed for the first time in many years of war. "It can't be..."

The climber shrugged, an air of injured patience on his broad White Russian face. "Then I suggest you go down there and have a look yourself, Comrade Commander."

Suslov was too shaken to notice the impertinence. "Did you check the locomotive?" he snapped quickly.

"Yes."

"And what did you find?"

But the broad-shouldered climber never answered that question. For at that moment, Sven Hassel, the Swede, his lean face set in a look of implacable cruelty, squeezed the trigger of his Spandau and sent a high-pitched burst of bullets into the group around the climber. The stream of lead ripped into the climber's broad chest and he sailed over the edge of the precipice, trailing a long, thin scream after him.

The burst of machine-gun fire from the height overlooking the Eagles' positions was the signal the little force of SS men had been waiting for. Machine-guns burst into frenetic, frightening life.

Suslov screamed desperately. But it was already too late. The attack

caught them completely in the open. Man after man went down, some screaming, some silent, some with a violent, threshing of their arms, some gently as if they were eager to lie down on the soft carpet of snow and die. *It was a massacre!*

"Every man for himself," Suslov cried desperately, knowing that his Eagles were finished. Now it was a question of saving one's skin. Everywhere his Eagles dropped their weapons and tried to run for it. It was futile. They fell on all sides, mown down by the murderous weight of fire.

Suslov was consumed by a burning, overwhelming hatred which triumphed over all fear. If he had to die, then he would make the Fritz bastards pay the price for his death. Raising his head as much as he dared, feeling the cold wind of the bullets scything through the air only millimetres above it, he surveyed the scene. There were machine-guns on the three heights to their north, south and east. The sheer side of the precipice was not covered though. Why should it be? The Fritzes obviously thought no-one could get out that way. No-one but Major Suslov, Commander of the Grey Eagles.

Suddenly he was up on his feet and running, bounding nimbly over the bodies of his dead soldiers, pushing those still not dead out of his way, running straight for the cliff-edge. The Fritzes spotted him almost instantly. Lead struck the ground all around him. He zig-zagged crazily. Time and time again the bullets missed. Then he was hit: a burning, searing pain in his right thigh. For a moment he felt he must fall. Abruptly the pain had gone and in that same instant he was diving over the edge of the cliff and out of sight.

Schulze took off his helmet and waved it over his head wildly. "That's it," he cried, jubilation in his voice that the plan had succeeded. They had a long walk in front of them to Austria, but now the way was clear at last. "Stop your firing. Knock it off there. Reluctantly the young SS troopers took their fingers off their triggers, as if they could not get enough of death, eyes gleaming with an almost sexual excitement.

Janosz left the gun he had been manning and started to limp over to Schulze. The killing had finished and he was glad. There had been too much killing in Europe, a whole half a decade of it. He wanted to see no more of it. Palestine would mean peace.

He halted in front of Schulze, who was by the cliffside surveying the dead Russians lying everywhere in the snow in front of them. "I shall go and

fetch my people now."

Schulze nodded and turned to Hung. "You'd better go with him and give him some cover."

"Right-o, Schulzi," said Hung, who had suggested the way of jamming the locomotive's throttle which had formed the basis of their plan.

Now the Jews were without a train, but Schulze could imagine that Janosz's cunning mind and a liberal use of Christian charity would find some other way of getting his refugees to Italy. There was no doubt about that.

"And make it snappy," Schulze ordered. "We want to be over the border by morning."

"I make Yid move like very hell," Hung said happily, slinging his rifle. "Schulzi and Hung must get Hamburg, open knocking-shop –"

A face suddenly appeared over the edge of the cliff-side. A terrible face, torn, lacerated, flayed into a mass of red gore by the rocks, out of which blazed two absolutely wild, animal eyes, filled, with unspeakable hatred. A claw-like hand, from which the flesh trailed in dripping red strips, rose into the air.

Hung saw the black round object it held. "No!" he screamed and held up his hands, as if to ward it off with his naked flesh.

But it was hopeless. The grenade sailed through the air and exploded at his feet. It caught Hung in its blazing, whirling fury, threw him high into the air, and when his terribly mutilated body smashed to the ground again, something rolled a few paces away to come to rest at Schulze feet in the snow. It was Hung's head.

Schulze screamed. In a bound he had grabbed the dying Suslov and dragged him over the edge of the cliff. His face contorted by a bestial fury, he brought down his heavy boot, studded with thirteen hobnails, and crashed it into Suslov's face. Time and time again. Bone splintered. Blood spurted out in scarlet jets from nose, ears, eyes. The eyes disappeared. Still Schulze did not stop. On and on he went, the only sound that of his own savage grunting breath, the moans from the man who was being stamped into the ground, and that persistent crunch-crunch of heavy metal against soft flesh.

Janosz could not bear to look. He had never seen such unspeakable ferocity in a human face in all his long life. It belonged to another world.

And finally Schulze was done. Sergeant-Major Schulze, the last survivor of SS Wotan sank into the snow beside the man he had just killed, the tears streaming down his suddenly transformed, sweat-lathered face.

"This fucking war," he sobbed. "This fucking, awful war."

ENVOI

Schulze had been drunk for the whole week they had been waiting in Graz. One by one or in small groups, he had seen his little band of SS troopers, clad in the civilian clothes Janosz had bought them on the black market, depart. Now they were all on their way to face the brutal uncertainties of their own countries in which they would be regarded as renegades and traitors and not the bold "defenders of Western European culture against the red Bolshevik plague", as the black and red SS recruiting posters had once screamed. Some of them were going to their death, some to long terms of imprisonment; but those of them who survived the bitter years ahead would carry to the grave the terrible stigma of being Europe's lost sons – ex-members of *SS Regiment Europa*.

Now Janosz himself was ready to leave on the next leg of the long journey to that land of "milk and honey", as he was calling it openly. With a sizeable portion of that seemingly unlimited Christian charity of his, he had bribed a fat Wehrmacht transport Major, who had supplied him with a dozen ancient Wehrmacht trucks, complete with ex-Italian POW drivers, glad of this opportunity to return to their own homeland before the Russians came. They would take him and his refugees into Italy and the Allied lines.

Now the time had come for the incongruous pair, the towering, barrel-chested SS NCO and the undersized Jew to part. They stood in the soft-falling snow. Above them, hidden by the grey snow clouds, Soviet bombers were droning westwards on their way to Vienna. They could both hear the rumble of the guns at the front, softening up the German positions for the new offensive.

Janosz jerked a thumb in the direction of the artillery barrage. "They'll be here soon, Schulze," he said.

Schulze shrugged. "So what?"

"Europe has got rid of one tyranny," the little Jew said softly. "But it will soon be replaced by another one, which will be much worse. I have seen it. Hitler is a novice in cruelty and repression in comparison with Stalin. You will see." He held out his hand. "Well, Schulze, this is the parting of the ways. I must get back to my flock. We move out in thirty minutes, once I get those Italian drivers away from fornicating with the local women."

"Those Macaronis have got the right idea," Schulze said, "fuck not fight." He took the old man's hand. "The best of luck, Jew."

"The same to you, German." Without another word Janosz turned and walked away, his skinny shoulders bowed against the snowflakes.

Schulze watched him go. He had come a long way with the old Jew – they all had. Nov it was all over. For a long moment he stood there on the empty slushy pavement, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, the snow falling sadly on his shabby black-market overcoat, with all his worldly possessions – soap and razor, a handful of useless marks and two hundred Turkish cigarettes – stuffed into its pockets. Ex-Sergeant-Major Schulze felt drained and very, very tired.

Suddenly a soft, winning Austrian voice impinged upon his consciousness, "Is the gentleman looking for a good time this afternoon?" it inquired.

Schulze spun round, his pensive mood forgotten in an instant. Two teenage girls stood there, dressed in identical peasant costume, their cheeks prettily flushed by the cold air so that a casual observer might well have taken them for country girls. But a delighted Schulze knew otherwise. Their scarlet lips and the knowing look in their wise eyes told another story. "You're twins!" he exclaimed somewhat stupidly.

"That's right," the one who had spoken said, "you catch on fast."

"You're going to catch my dick before you're much older, my little cheetah."

"It'll cost you one hundred schilling for a jump," she replied, unimpressed. Which one of us do you fancy?"

"Which one?" Schulze roared, tugging out the carton of two hundred cigarettes and noting the sudden look of interest in their foxy eyes. Not one, but both of you!" He thrust the carton at them and putting a big hand around each girl's plump young breasts, he cried out loud, so that the shabby, bent-shouldered civilians on the other side of the street turned in alarm, "Point me at the nearest bed, my little Austrian darlings! It's going to be the screw of the century, that I can promise you!"

Ex-Sergeant-Major Schulze, the last survivor of that doomed, elite brotherhood, had just declared a separate peace. Now he could begin to live again.

– THE END –

THE SAND PANTHERS

DOGS OF WAR – VOLUME EIGHT

by Leo Kessler

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The Sand Panthers

At that moment von Dodenburg had never felt gloomier in his life. His 1st Company had just suffered tremendous losses beating off the Tommy landing at Dieppe and now with the gaps in their ranks filled up with raw lads from the Reich, they were expected to go into action again – with Rommel in Africa.

"They don't like the SS out there, you know, Schulze," von Dodenburg broke the heavy silence, disturbed only by the slither of the shingle on the beach below. "All those sniff-noses of the *Afrikakorps* want to fight a private war with the Tommies, as if they were all fifteenth century knights in armour. They don't fancy the Black Guards' methods, I hear."

"Maybe, sir," Schulze commented, his lecherous blue eyes gleaming suddenly. "But they've got those belly dancers out there, all bust and backside. Lovely grub! And sirs we'll get our knees brown!"

Von Dodenburg's gloom vanished. "Of course, we'll get our knees brown!" he echoed excitedly.

As the first shrill silver notes of the bugle outside alerted the company, Major von Dodenburg cried, "Africa, here we come!"

ASSAULT REGIMENT WOTAN WAS GOING TO WAR AGAIN!

Conversation between Major
von Dodenburg and Sergeant-Major
Schulze, 1 September, 1942

Book 1 – Plan of Attack

"Now you are going to show those bucktoothed Tommies back in the Delta how to *really* put in a commando raid."

Field-Marshal Rommel to Major von Dodenburg, Tobruk, 1942

Chapter 1

"*Sie kommen!*"

"*Die Tommies?*"

"*Jawohl, Herr Generalfeldmarschall!*"

The Desert Fox, Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, swung round from the excited young Lieutenant of the Afrikakorps, who had just burst into the underground HQ with the news, and faced his staff. "Gentlemen, the English commandos have begun their attack on Tobruk! Precisely on time as expected. The Tommies are very exact in their habits."

There was a polite ripple of laughter among the bronze-faced staff in their sweat-blackened khaki, which died with the sudden wail of an air-raid siren and the throaty crump of Tobruk flak.

The Desert Fox frowned. He looked at the Major with the Knight's Cross around his throat and the silver SS runes on his collar, but with the pale face and knees of a newcomer to the desert war. "Major von Dodenburg."

"Field-Marshal?"

"Major, the English have been carrying out commando raids in the desert for two years now. And they have become very good at it. I should know: they nearly killed me last year. Fortunately we are in position to know exactly what their plans are *in advance*." He emphasised the words and paused, as if he expected the handsome SS Major to say something.

But the CO of the 1st Company of Assault Regiment Wotan, who had only arrived in Tobruk with his tanks the day before, remained silent. He was new to the Desert and bewildered by the strange type of battle he had found himself plunged into so suddenly. Rommel nodded to Captain Schmidt, his bespectacled adjutant. "The radio," he barked.

The hot underground room was filled immediately with a confused babble of voices speaking in German and English, being transmitted to the HQ by the Afrikakorps' interceptor unit.

"The Tommy commandos are attacking in three groups," Rommel explained. "Two groups from the sea and one from the land. The aim of the land force is to establish a bridgehead to the south side of the harbour. When they have that, the other two forces will land from torpedo boats and motor launches. Together the three groups will remain within the Tobruk perimeter

for twelve hours, wrecking our installations and destroying the bombproof oil tanks, which hold my reserve supplies of fuel."

Major von Dodenburg's face must have reflected his disbelief at the accuracy of Rommel's outline of the enemy plan-of-attack, for the Desert Fox said, "It is true to the very last detail, Major. Believe me, our sources of information in the enemy camp are unimpeachable." He wiped the beads of sweat from his high forehead. "That is the Tommies' plan. But, as you know, today is Friday 13 September – and it is going to be a very unlucky Friday the thirteenth indeed for the Tommies."

The Field-Marshal's face hardened and von Dodenburg, puzzled by Wotan's sudden summons to the Middle East and by Rommel's personal attention to an officer of his low rank, could see why the Tommies called him the Desert Fox. There was something very sly about his ruthless, vulpine face. "Today we are going to exterminate them, von Dodenburg."

***

It was dark but Colonel Haselden's SAS men and the German Jews, who, dressed in German uniform, had got them through the Afrikakorps perimeter without difficulty, knew exactly what to do. They had trained long enough for this operation. Forming up into small teams, each with a German-speaking guide, they headed for the searchlights on the dock.

Colonel Haselden in the lead nodded his approval. Above them the twin-engined RAF Mitchells were zooming in, right on time, ignoring the flak which peppered the night sky all around them. At tree-top height they roared over the desert. Evil black eggs started to tumble from their bellies in lethal profusion.

Haselden raised his voice above the racket of the exploding bombs. "Come on, lads, let's give them hell!" he cried.

Next to him, Sergeant Hayden raised his Tommy gun and fired a burst at the nearest searchlight. There was a scream of pain, a clatter of breaking glass and suddenly the silver finger of light poking the clouds vanished. A second later they surged forward to the attack.

Green and red *Verey* lights, hissed into the sky. White tracer zipped through the air, and suddenly there was the angry snap and crackle of small arms fire everywhere. A commando went down, then another. A German Jew followed, cursing madly in German in his dying agony.

"Christ!" Haselden cried. "Now the shit has really hit the fan!"

"You can say that again, sir," Hayden gasped. "You'd think the buggers'd known we were coming..." the high-pitched burst of Spandau fire nearly cut him in half. He tumbled to the ground, almost bringing the Colonel down.

"Are you hit bad, Hayden?" Haselden shouted.

"I've 'ad it, sir. Took half me sodding chest away," Hayden slurred the words through a mouth which was rapidly filling with hot, salty blood. "Fer Chrissake, bugger off out of here..."

The words ended suddenly. Haselden peered down at Hayden's eyes, unnaturally large and startlingly terrified. His head lolled to one side just as the survivors of Force B's first wave went to ground, unable to advance against the withering German fire. In spite of the slugs hissing through the air like angry fire-flies, Haselden seemed unable to move. He was too dazed. Just as the first bullet slapped him a tremendous blow in the right shoulder and flung him against the wall of the nearest hut, he knew that the operation was already a failure. The Germans had known they were coming. As he started to slither down the wall, dragging a bright red trail of blood behind him, the dying Colonel realised with a sense of overwhelming bitterness that they had been betrayed!

***

For a moment the loudspeaker in the claustrophobic staff room fell silent. Von Dodenburg started to wipe the pearls of sweat from his face. The loudspeaker crackled into life again and von Dodenburg's hand remained where it was. That horrible, pain-racked voice of the dying British naval officer, trapped in the sinking torpedo boat filled with dead sailors and soldiers, came through again.

It was breathless with hysteria. "*Oh Christ, I can't stand it... My foot's fallen off... Where's my bloody foot?*"

Von Dodenburg felt the hairs at the back of his neck stand erect and he shuddered in spite of himself.

There was a pause, broken only by the dying man's harsh breathing. Then he sobbed, "*They're all dead... All dead... They've left me. My God...*"

Over the loudspeaker came the most unnerving sound of all. The wailing, uncontrolled sobs of a man breaking down altogether. Rommel

nodded to his adjutant. Schmidt reached up and clicked off the loud speaker. Outside the sound of firing was dying away. Inside the underground HQ, the staff officers stood there transfixed, horrified by the slaughter of the British force, even though they were all hardened veterans who had undergone the mayhem of the trenches in the First World War.

Rommel remained unmoved. His face was set in a smile of ruthless triumph. The Desert Fox had beaten the British again and he was unable to conceal his sense of delight. Suddenly he brought his fly swat down on the map table with a smart crack. the staff officers jumped, startled.

"*Meine Herren,*" he announced. "Those who are left of the Tommies are running now into the desert for their lives. We have beaten them decisively!"

There was a murmur of agreement from the assembled officers. Rommel slapped his fly swatter down on the table once again.

"Gentlemen, what you have just experienced is already history, and we'll leave the Tommies to reflect upon the past – they are very good at it. We Germans have other and better things to do."

He turned and stared at von Dodenburg, as if trying to see something behind the young officer's face. "So, Major, you have seen your first desert commando raid," The Field-Marshal thrust out his pugnacious, obstinate chin aggressively. "Now you are going to show those buck Tommies back in the Delta how really to put in a commando raid." He pulled on his peaked Afrikakorps cap and nodded to Schmidt. "Attend me at zero hundred hours tomorrow morning, von Dodenburg. I have work for your SS ruffians. *Gute Nacht, meine Herren*." Casually touching his fly swatter to his cap, the man who had beaten every British general in Africa for the last two years, went out into the blazing Libyan night.

Chapter 2

Major von Dodenburg shivered and dug his chin deeper into the collar of his greatcoat. In the weeks to come he would always associate the stink of gasoline in the cold African dawn with the desert.

He turned and stared at the sand waste beyond Tobruk's perimeter. Behind him Field-Marshal Rommel was hurrying from his command half-track to his portable thunderbox. As always before a crisis, the Swabian General's stomach was upset. Two soldiers stood by, shovels over their shoulders, at the ready.

The scene of the night's attack was strewn with wrecked British equipment: rifles, machine-guns, bits of paper, uniform, used cartridge cases – and dead men, sprawled in grotesque postures. Further on, the vehicles, which had brought the Tommy Commandos to the perimeter wire, were still burning, sending up pails of thick smoke into the overcast dawn sky. Von Dodenburg shivered again. It was a sombre sight.

He adjusted his collar and doubled over to the command half-track, its many radios already humming and crackling with the business of a new day at war. He snapped smartly to attention in front of the waiting Field-Marshal.

"*Hauptsturmführer von Dodenburg zur Stelle, Herr Generalfeldmarschall!*" he reported, staring at the distant horizon behind the Desert Fox's right shoulder, and realizing to his horror that Sergeant-Major Schulze and his crony Corporal Matz were busily looting from the back of the Field-Marshal's supply truck the British rations which his own staff had taken from the dead Commandos one hour earlier."

That damned Schulze, he told himself hotly. *I'll have the nuts off him for this!* Then he breathed a quick prayer that the two looters would get away with it without being discovered. The SS were not exactly popular with Rommel's staff as it was.

"Morning von Dodenburg," Rommel said easily, although his broad face was drawn and grey from the new bout of his stomach complaint. He flicked his fly swatter casually to his peaked cap. "I suppose you are wondering why I have had you and your armour posted to Africa away from the flea pits of France?"

"One doesn't wonder – at least out loud – about the reasons for a Field-

Marshal's actions, Sir," von Dodenburg replied.

Rommel's tight mouth relaxed into a little smile. "Typical SS, von Dodenburg. You are never ones to be impressed by rank. All right, you saw what happened last night on the perimeter, and the Tommies might have pulled it off – the operation was well planned by them – if it had not been for our friends in Alexandria and Cairo."

"Friends, sir?" von Dodenburg ventured and breathed an inner sigh of relief. Schulze, a huge sack of looted British goods over his massive shoulder, was stealing back to the Wotan lines followed by Matz, similarly laden.

"Yes. The Egyptians are sick of the Tommies. At least the intellectuals and most of the younger officers are. They want to be rid of the English. So far all they have done has been to supply us with information about the movements of the Eighth Army. Hence last night. But now the Delta is almost wide-open for us, they are prepared to go a stage further." The Desert Fox sighed like a man who has just too many burdens to bear. "However, like our dear Italian allies, the Egyptians are not the bravest of the brave. They need – how shall I put it? – a little backbone." The full rage of his frustration broke through and he snorted, "Spaghetti-eaters and Arabs, what a pathetic bunch of allies we have!"

Von Dodenburg did not rise to the outburst. Beyond the command half-track the Arab grave-diggers under the command of German NCOs were swarming out into the desert to collect and bury the British dead. The Field-Marshal was always very correct about the dead. After he had photographed them for his scrapbook, he always insisted that they should be buried, whatever the circumstances.

"Well, von Dodenburg, as I say they need backbone – and now I'm prepared to give them just that." He took his fly swatter and drew a straight line in the sand. "The Tommy positions ahead of us to the East, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Qattara Depression. Just as I would do, the Tommy generals have positioned their forces with an unturnable flank to their right – the sea – and another on to their left – the salt sea of the Qattara Depression, which is totally unsuitable for heavy vehicles. Clear, von Dodenburg?"

"Clear, sir," the SS Major answered smartly, the little snake of apprehension already beginning to uncoil itself in his brain.

"Now, those commandos last night came into our positions through the

back door into Libya – here."

Rommel drew a wavy line far below the spot where the Qattara Depression would be. "Starting from the Mustafa Barracks in Alexandria, the Tommies drive south west until they reach *Ain Dalla Oasis*. There, according to our Egyptian informants, the Tommy commandos plunge into the Great Sand Sea." He tapped the second line. "About here. It is a large sloping wall of sand which runs up a summit of rock. Again according to the Arabs, the ascent is not easy, but it can be done, as we saw last night. Once that ascent is taken, there is nearly 800 kilometres of almost uncharted desert to cross. But the Tommies manage to cross it regularly."

Von Dodenburg intervened: "But the Tommies do not use tracked vehicles, Field-Marshal!"

The Desert Fox beamed at him, as if he were a schoolmaster pleased with a particularly bright pupil. "*Ach, mein lieber von Dodenburg*, you have seen through me?"

"If you mean, sir, you have a plan to send my Wotan through the desert into Egypt, yes I have. But to what purpose, if I may ask?"

"Well, von Dodenburg, I have just said that those Arabs in the Delta need some backbone before they do anything." He licked his cracked lips, and stared directly at von Dodenburg's pale, hard face. "Major, you and your Wotan are going to be the ones who give them that backbone. Now listen..."

Chapter 3

"*Muck 'em all,*
Muck 'em all, the long and the short and the tall
You'll get no promotion this side of the ocean
So cheer up my lads, muck 'em–"

"Shut your cake-hole, or I'll have yer on a fizzer you idle man!"

The raucous North Country voice died immediately at the roar of some angry NCO from within Alexandria's gleaming white Mustafa Barracks. At the gate the skinny little Arab with a bold hook of a nose jumped visibly and clutched at his skinny-ribbed donkey's rein.

The regimental policeman – all gleaming brass, brilliant white-blancoed equipment, sparkling boots and crisp starched khaki – raised his swagger cane and snarled out of the side of his mouth, "Sod off you dirty Gypsy – and get that poxy nag out of here before he pisses in front of the guardroom!"

The little Egyptian pedlar was unafraid. Indeed he moved closer to this lance-corporal on guard and held up the pictures he had concealed in his skinny brown claw.

The sentry gasped and took in the first picture: dark skinned, middle-aged woman with a twenties hairdo doing something he had thought impossible with a yellow-toothed donkey. "You dirty Gypsy bugger!" he exclaimed, not taking his eyes off the photos. "That's all you filthy lot think on – dipping yer wick and half inching our rations." He waved his swagger cane at the grinning pedlar, his face crimson with righteous indignation. "Now be off with you, or I'll have you inside the nick in double-quick time!"

The Egyptian shot a furtive look to both sides. Urgently he whispered out of the corner of his mouth in perfect Upper Class English. "That's exactly what I want you to do, Corporal."

The MP's mouth dropped open stupidly. "What did you say?"

"You heard me, man! Get me inside and make it look as if you are arresting me for loitering. I must see Brigadier Young at once – and they have spies everywhere. Now move!"

The sentry moved! Next instant a wailing, protesting pedlar was dragged into the barracks by the scruff of his skinny neck, leaving his loudly

braying donkey behind him. Major Slaughter had done it again.

***

"Well, Slaughter?" Brigadier Young barked. Above him the mechanical fan barely stirred the stiflingly hot air.

"A total failure," Slaughter answered, removing his disguise. "The Jerries knew Haselden was coming. They wiped the floor with our poor chaps. I doubt if we'll get a dozen of them back through the Sand Sea in the end."

"Treachery?" Young, a white-haired, red-faced officer with a trim Regular Army moustache queried.

Slaughter nodded slowly.

"By whom – our people?" the Brigadier rapped, leaning forward in anticipation.

Slaughter took his time. Outside a harsh military voice was barking, "*Now swing them arms there!... Bags of swank!... and open them legs, you bunch of pregnant penguins – nothing will fall out, you know!*"

"No sir. It was the Gypsies. That crowd around Nasser and the rest of those young Gypsy officers. They'll go to any length to get us out of Egypt." Young bit his bottom lip.

"They've got their eyes and ears everywhere. When our chaps from the SAS or the Long-Range Desert Group prepare to move out into the blue, there are Gypsy mess waiters, the sanitary wallahs, the Gypsy hawkers, all taking note of our every move and passing it on to the Nasser crowd."

"*It's damnable!*" Brigadier Young exploded, his face flushing angrily. "Why the devil don't we sling the whole greasy bunch of them inside, once and for all? Skulking around here in the base area and betraying all those good men up there in the desert."

Slaughter shook his head slowly. "Afraid no-can-do, sir. Then we'd really set the cat among the pigeons. Even the Fat Boy" – he meant the grossly overweight Egyptian king – "would have to forget about his whores and come out on the side of the young officers. We'd have the whole of the Delta up in arms and at the moment with this new chap General Montgomery preparing a fresh offensive up the blue, we can't afford that kind of thing, sir."

Young sighed and looked up at the flaking white ceiling, as if seeking

solace up there. "I suppose you're right, Slaughter. You always are."

"Mostly, sir," Slaughter replied without a trace of irony. For eighteen years he had been in the political intelligence section of the Cairo High Commissioner's office and he had lost his English sense of humour – if he had ever possessed one. In nearly two decades in Egypt, mixing with the Egyptians and the desert Arabs for months on end without ever speaking to another Englishman, he had adopted many Egyptian mannerisms, including taking everything completely seriously. "Once we have beaten the Hun in the desert and the Delta is no longer threatened, then the High Commissioner will act. He'll put the lot of them behind bars where they belong. But at the moment, everything is on a knife edge. Only last week, the Fat Boy had the audacity to tell the British Minister Lampson: *When the war's over, then for God's sake put down the white man's burden – and go*."

"I understand, Slaughter. All right, what can we do? I presume you are here for a reason."

"I am, sir." Slaughter hesitated a fraction of a second, as if he were finding it a little difficult to formulate what he had to say next. "Assuming, sir, that the situation in the Delta is on a knife edge, with Gypsies ready to have a crack at us any day now, what do you think it would take for them to make a move?"

Young laughed coarsely. "A bloody miracle, Slaughter!" he exclaimed. "You know better than I do what a bunch of cowards they are. When your back's turned, all right, they might risk sticking a knife in it, but if you turn and face them..." he shrugged. "They're off with their tails between their skinny legs."

"Agreed, sir. But in this case I think we've got our backs to them. The troops are pretty thin on the ground down here with Montgomery preparing for his offensive in the desert, and – with all respect – I don't think the staff wallahs at GHQ, Cairo would frighten them if it came to trouble.

"Now, sir," Slaughter went on, "what if the Gypsies receive a stiffening of Germans?"

"Huns? But who and how?"

"I don't know about the *who* sir, but the *how* is not too difficult. Through the Sand Sea!"

Young looked at him aghast. "But they've never tried it before," he stuttered. "I mean..."

Slaughter looked at him coldly. "I've good reason to believe that

Rommel is planning something of that sort, sir."

"How do you mean, Slaughter?"

The English agent lowered his brown eyes almost demurely. "My boys, of course, sir."

"Of course," Young echoed, grateful to Slaughter that he did not have to look him in the eye at that particular moment. The Major had been in Egypt too long. He had taken up too many of the Arab vices, including that one. "But if your boys are correct in their estimate, what can we do? All I could give you to cover the exits from the Sand Sea is what is left of the SAS and LRDG." He shrugged. "Perhaps a couple of score men at the most."

"I'll take them, sir – with thanks," Slaughter said hastily. "But I want more – I want the Horsemen of St George, lots of them."

"Horsemen of St George?" the Brigadier queried. Slaughter laughed coldly. "That is what the desert Arabs call golden sovereigns. Sir, I want to call out the tribes. For every German they capture, I'll promise them twenty Horsemen. It's a small fortune for them."

The Brigadier shuddered in spite of the heat. "Call out the tribes," he exclaimed. "My God, you know what the desert Arabs do to a white man!"

"I do! But it's either that or the Germans will get through into the Delta."

The Brigadier sighed, and ringing the little bell on his desk, said, "You know, Slaughter, you've been too long in this damned country. It has corrupted you."

Slaughter's dark brown eyes gleamed momentarily. "I expect it has, sir," he said calmly enough. "Now do I get the Horsemen of St George?"

"You do, Slaughter, you do..."

Five minutes later an observer of the entrance to Alexandria's Mustafa Barracks would have been treated to the sight of a burly sergeant-major sending a skinny little Arab flying out of the gate, propelled by the gleaming toe of the NCO's size eleven ammunition boot.

The little Arab glared malevolently up at him from the dust, but he said and did nothing, until the NCO had turned and stamped back into the barracks. Then he struggled to his feet, hawked, and spat defiantly onto the baking ground. Limping badly he struggled back to his waiting donkey. With a grunt he slung his new burden over its back. The pathetic creature brayed in protest. The Arab dug his nail-tipped goad into its hide and it moved forward,

back into the desert, bearing with it the exact price of two hundred dead Germans.

Chapter 4

Sergeant-Major Schulze, Assault Regiment Wotan's senior NCO, cursed and thrust his peaked cap to the back of his shaven head. "What's this? The feeding of the bloody five thousand?"

He stared across at the hundreds of men milling around the soup kettles, waiting for their breakfast, while cooks, stripped to the waist, the sweat running off their naked arms into the food, tried to feed them. "How can I be expected to grub up my guts with that mob rushing the goulash cannon, eh?"

Corporal Matz, Schulze's crony, glanced up at the big blond ex-docker, a look of contempt on his wrinkled, leathery face. "You are the senior NCO in the senior regiment of the senior division of the SS, ain't yer?"

"Agreed, my horrible little wet dream," Schulze said.

"Then what are you standing there for – like a big fart in a trance? You go automatically to the head of the queue. It's your right. After all, we are the Wotan, you know." Matz jingled his mess tins in anticipation. "Well, what are we waiting for? Come on!"

Brutally the two SS non-coms pushed their way through the disgruntled Afrikakorps men, crying "Make way for a naval officer!" Here and there a soldier turned and began to protest, but their angry comments died on their cracked lips when they saw the black and white armbands of the Armed SS on the two NCOs' sleeves. Not even the veterans of Rommel's Afrikakorps wanted to tangle with the SS.

The first cook looked up at them dully. "First canteen – coffee soup. Second - rations." Schulze accepted the steaming black ersatz coffee in his first canteen and soup in the other. Together he and Matz pushed their way through the sullen crowd and walked across the desert to a half-track, its bogies almost half buried in drifting sand, a little outpost of blackness in that gleaming white. It offered shade, but no coolness.

With a sigh, Schulze and Matz dropped to the burning ground. Schulze put down his canteens and pulled out a can of the British beer he had looted from Rommel's supply truck the previous day. Taking his bayonet, he punched a hole in it, thrusting the can to his lips swiftly before the warm beer had a chance to spurt out.

He took a few sips, then he dropped the can in disgust. "Bloody sand – it's half full of sand," he snarled. "This desert! God knows why the Führer wants it! There's sand in the food, sand in the coffee, fucking sand in everything. If there was any nooky in this damned desert, I wouldn't be surprised if there was sand up there, as well!"

"There ain't, yer know," Matz said, greedily finishing the last of his soup.

"Ain't what, you asparagus Tarzan?" Schulze asked morosely.

"Sand up there," Matz replied easily.

Schulze's bottom lip trembled. "You mean...you mean," he breathed in awe, "that...that there's nooky *here?*"

Matz finished the last of the soup with a flourish and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "What?"

"Tail, pussy, nooky, something to snake." He grabbed Matz's jacket and pulled the little corporal to him eagerly. "*All that!*"

"Oh, that," Matz said casually. "Course there is."

Schulze released his hold and breathed out hard, a sudden gleam in his eyes. He crooked his big forefinger at Matz and said, "Give."

"Down by the Quay near the cranes."

"And you mean you didn't tell your old pal, Matzi?"

"Officers only," Matz answered and finished the last of the beer.

"Officers," Schulze barked contemptuously, "I've shat 'em!" His blue eyes sparkled. "All that good Tommy bully beef yesterday really put me on. It put so much lead in my pencil, 1 don't know who to write to first!"

"Whores from spaghetti-land. Last month the Tommies dropped a bomb on the place and that little garden dwarf of a king of theirs awarded the ones wounded a medal for bravery. Our officers who were killed were listed as K.I.A."

"What a way to go – knocked off on the job!" The big Sergeant-Major rose hastily to his feet. "Well," he demanded, "what are you sitting there for, growing corns on your ass? Let's go. I'm limping already, just thinking about it."

Von Dodenburg, smoking his post-breakfast cigar, smiled and watched the two NCOs plodding away through the thick sand to the coast, telling himself that it would take all their celebrated ingenuity to get them into the brothel, which was reserved for 'golden pheasants' and staff officers over the rank of

major. Then he dismissed the two NCOs from his thoughts, and grinding out the cigar, walked to the operations tent for his first meeting of the day.

Captain Professor Dr Hans Reichert was already waiting for him inside. The elderly Captain who rose to salute von Dodenburg seemed as cool as a spring day despite the intense heat. There was not a trace of perspiration on his face. *The man must have ice-water in his veins*, von Dodenburg told himself a little angrily as he motioned the Captain to a seat.

"I've been told by Field-Marshal Rommel that you will brief me on the difficulties of the operation, Captain... er... Professor Reichert?" he said.

Reichert, who had once been the University of Heidelberg's leading Egyptologist, cleared his throat importantly, as if he were now about to deliver a lecture. "That is so, I believe, Major."

"I know, Reichert," von Dodenburg snapped, irritated by the heat and the man's academic manner. All the same he knew that he had spent half a lifetime in the desert and was the Afrikakorps' foremost expert on it. He needed his assistance badly. "Now this is the problem. I have been ordered to take my Mark IV tanks and my half-tracks through the Sand Sea into Egypt. Ten tanks, ten half-tracks and 150 men. Now what am I going to be faced with?"

Again the ex-Professor cleared his throat. "There are many problems," he said carefully. "*Very* many."

"All right, tell me them," von Dodenburg snapped. "Come on get on with it!"

Reichert's face flushed like that of a maiden lady who had just felt a man's hand thrust up her skirt. "There is the question of navigation for example," he began. "The Sand Sea is featureless – rather like the Luneburg Heath with no outcrops of rock. You'll have to use the sun compass."

"Sun compass?" von Dodenburg questioned.

"It is a very simple way of navigating. It depends upon knowing the exact sun time. From this we can determine the sun's bearing throughout the day. I have personally always found it easier to remember that at midday, when the sun is due south, the shadow falls due north. Hence the direction of movement at right angles to the shadow will obviously be either due east or west. Once one has absorbed that fact, one needs only to note the distance one has travelled to determine to within a few hundred metres one's position in relation to the starting point. Is that clear, Major?"

Reichert did not wait for the Major's response, but carried on as if he

had reached a particularly important point in one of his *Hauptseminars* and did not want to be stopped by some foolish question. "Then there is the problem of driving. Once the sand has dried after dawn, one finds that each vehicle is followed by a huge plume of sand which not only gives one's position away for kilometres, but also–"

Major von Dodenburg held up his hand. "Hold it, hold it, Professor!" he commanded. "Let me ask you one question – and one question only. Do you think we can make it?"

"From Cufra, our last outpost in the desert, you will have to cover virtually one thousand kilometres of uncharted desert with one hundred and fifty men who are not yet acclimatised, plus twenty heavy vehicles which will eat up tremendous amounts of fuel and water – where there is not one solitary well." Reichert paused and stared up at the young officer. "With luck, you'll make it, Major," he concluded.

"Excellent," von Dodenburg exclaimed. "And I am especially glad. For your sake, Professor."

"My sake?"

"Yes, my dear sir." Major von Dodenburg grinned at the other man's sudden bewilderment. "Because you are coming with us, as our guide and mentor."

"Oh, my goodness!" Professor Dr Hans Reichert slumped weakly in his chair. "Oh my goodness me!"

Von Dodenburg rose to his feet and reached for his cap. "All right then, Prof," he snapped, "let's get our fingers out. We've got a lot to do today." Briskly he strode out into the desert's sun burning white brilliance. Wotan had exactly forty-eight hours left before it moved out.

Chapter 5

The next forty-eight hours flew by. There were a hundred and one problems for von Dodenburg to solve. In the oven-hot air, the half-naked Wotan men sweated over the vehicles, preparing them for the long trek into the unknown desert. The blond Major, his face already burnt a brick-red by the sun, was here, there and everywhere, knowing that to relax for an instant would be fatal.

He strode from crew to crew, checking them and their vehicles and coming to loathe the burning-red ball of the sun, which beat down upon them so relentlessly. He thought longingly of the cool French coast which they had just left for these burnished sands and stifling opaque haze, which shimmered blindingly.

On the first day, von Dodenburg, Schulze, and Captain Reichert concentrated on checking that the tanks and half-tracks were correctly fuelled up and armed. Forcing himself to walk slowly, von Dodenburg inspected the outside of each vehicle in that stifling heat, and then clambered inside the red-hot metal boxes to check the mass of dials, the speedometer, the revolution counter, the pressure gauges, the cannon-firing mechanism.

On the morning of the second day he took his own command vehicle for a hard ride into the desert, accompanied by Schulze and the Prof, with Matz at the wheel. Within two hours, each man was reduced to the state of a wet rag. Time and time again the metal pins joining the track-plates broke on the hard, stony ground of the desert, leaving them with the back breaking task of hammering in another.

At midday von Dodenburg began to call on his fellow COs of the armoured regiments all around, whose Mark IIIs and Mark IVs were equipped with specially hardened link-pins, designed specifically for the desert. But none of them had pins to spare for Assault Regiment Wotan. Fuming with rage, von Dodenburg cried to Reichert, "You would think we were the bloody enemy – and not the Tommies, *goddamit!*"

Reichert allowed himself a faint smirk, "But, if I may be forgiven for saying so my dear Major, you are."

Von Dodenburg spun round on him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean, eh?"

The look of naked fury in his eyes wiped the smirk off the Professor's face. "I meant that the gentlemen of the Afrikakorps think you of the SS are lowering the tone of the war in the desert. As they see it, the sooner the SS vanishes into the desert – for good – the better everything will be."

Von Dodenburg slumped weakly against the burning canvas of the HQ tent. "Oh, my back," he croaked. "What a bloody war!" Wearily he wiped the sweat off his dripping brow, only to feel the second wave of perspiration swamp his forehead the very next moment. "What in hell's name am I going to do? By Christ, I'll go right to the Field-Marshal about this!"

"With respect, Major, the gentlemen of the Staff would probably never let you get within sniffing distance of His Excellency."

Von Dodenburg slammed his clenched fist on the table violently. "I must have those pins!" he cried.

"Sir." It was Schulze, who had been standing at the flap of the tent all the time.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sir, I think me and Matzi might be able to get those pins for you," he ventured with unusual hesitancy.

"But how?" the Major cried. "Come on, don't stand around like a spare prick at a wedding. Out with it!"

"Well, sir, perhaps you remember yesterday morning, me and Matzi went of down to the Quay – to look for supplies."

"You mean – whores," von Dodenburg corrected.

Schulze stared down at his big dusty boots. "I suppose you might put it like that, sir," he said. "Well, sir, me and Matzi found out we weren't particularly welcome at the house, sir. It seems it's only meant for senior officers of the staff. But we thought we'd come a long way to get inside them pearly gates and it was going to be a long time before we'd be able to rip off another piece, so we had a bit of a think and we came up with this." He reached inside his trouser pocket and brought out a pair of epaulettes, heavy with the gilt of a full colonel.

"You mean you put these on your shoulders and passed yourselves off as officers!" von Dodenburg gasped.

"In the Afrikakorps, they could shoot you for that," the Professor exclaimed.

"But I can't see what your obscene pleasures and obvious infringement of military law have got to do with my link-pins, Schulze?" von Dodenburg

interjected.

A look of both embarrassment and wicked amusement appeared in the big Hamburger's blue eyes. "Well, sir, the macaroni-eater took a fancy to us. She said we could have seconds – for nothing. But we'd have to wait till her next customer, Colonel Hartmann, had completed his daily session of mattress gymnastics."

"You mean Colonel Hartmann – of Supply?" von Dodenburg cried incredulously.

"The same, sir," Schulze answered and looked down modestly. "Every day, on the stroke of twelve, he's in there for two solid hours. He's a bit long in the tooth, sir, and it takes him a while to raise – er – a smile."

"Schulze, I'm ten kilometres ahead of you, speeding at a hundred an hour. Correct me if I'm wrong. But you're going to break military law yet again by assuming a false rank and while Colonel Hartmann is enjoying his luncheon break, you are going to borrow his vehicle, proceed to his HQ and do a little impromptu requisitioning. Right?"

Schulze beamed down at him. "Right, sir!"

"Then what are you standing there for, you great oaf – get on with it! It's already thirteen hundred hours. You've only got sixty minutes left."

"Sir!" Schulze flew through the door.

Professor Reichert slumped back in his chair. "*Ache du lieber Himmel!*" he sighed weakly. "The methods of the Armed SS! My God what have I got myself into now?"

"What indeed?" von Dodenburg grinned at him, happy for the first time that day.

Chapter 6

Two o'clock came and went and there was still no sign of Schulze and Matz. Half past two arrived and von Dodenburg surveying the distance between their camp and the quay through his binoculars, still could not make them out. Three o'clock struck and he was beginning to worry that for once, the two rogues had really run into serious trouble.

Thirty minutes later, a great plume of sand, thrown up by several vehicles hurrying towards Wotan at great speed made von Dodenburg's heart leap excitedly: Schulze and Matz had pulled it off.

But he was mistaken. The man who got out of the leading half-track was none other than Field-Marshal Rommel himself. He pushed back his sand goggles, saluted the SS men standing rigidly to attention in the burning sun, and took von Dodenburg by the arm with a curt, "We shall go for a little walk, Major."

Anticipating the worst, von Dodenburg allowed himself to be guided into the desert, watched by the curious eyes of his own men and those of Rommel's staff.

But Schulze and Matz had not been found out. Rommel's first words indicated that he had come to Wotan's HQ on a completely different matter.

"Walls, you know my dear Major, do have ears – although we have very few of them in the desert," Rommel began and stopped, obviously confident that he was out of earshot. "Von Dodenburg, I have come up to give you your final instructions and I would suggest you keep them to yourself and don't reveal them to that old fart of a schoolmaster you've picked as your adviser."

Von Dodenburg grinned at the Desert Fox's description of Professor Reichert. "I understand, sir," he said.

"Good," Rommel swung his swatter at an importuning fly. "My Intelligence section has information that the Tommies are pushing out a wide screen of light tanks and armoured cars to the front of their positions at El Alamein. Obviously that new general of theirs is planning something. I want you to avoid that screen. If you do chance to bump into it, destroy it completely; prisoners will not be taken! You understand? I want no word of your operation to get back to the British HQ. Clear?"

"Clear, sir."

"Two." Rommel ticked off the points on his fingers. "There will be no turning back. Once the Tommy patrols out there in the Sand Sea discover your tracks, they will attempt to block the route and I might well need it again. Understand this, you either make it, or you don't come back at all." Rommel looked hard at the younger man and von Dodenburg realised that the Prof was right. The gentlemen of the Afrikakorps did hate the SS: Rommel had just issued a virtual sentence of death.

"Three. Once you are through the Sand Sea–"

If, a cynical little voice at the back of von Dodenburg's head interrupted.

"–And down the Ascent, I want you to make at full speed for the Ain Dalla Oasis, which is held by the Egyptian Army and a handful of Tommies who are there to watch them. There you will meet your contact."

Von Dodenburg looked at the Desert Fox's ruthless face. "But who is my contact, sir?" he asked a little helplessly, raising the point which had puzzled him ever since the mission had been proposed.

"Don't worry about that. You will be contacted all right, once you are there. Never fear. He suddenly Rommel burst out in a guffaw of coarse laughter. "He will see to that."

He thrust out his hand. "Major, from now on it's march or croak!" he rapped.

"March or croak, sir!"

Rommel grinned. Von Dodenburg grinned. They understood each other: the young Major and the middle-aged Field-Marshal, who would kill himself at the Führer's order, within two years.

Five minutes later, he was gone. Von Dodenburg would never see him again.

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It was five o'clock when the big half-track, flying a full colonel's flag on its bonnet, rolled into the camp, followed by a captured British 3-ton truck laden up to the roof with link-pins, and manned by a half-a-dozen grinning Italians. Matz at the wheel drew up with a flourish and tipped Schulze, who was standing upright with a pair of black lace drawers wrapped around his head, neatly over the open windscreen onto the sand directly in front of von

Dodenburg.

The young Major looked down at him and groaned, "Oh God! As pissed as a rat!"

Schulze grinned and struggled to his feet. Swaying wildly, he flung his CO a magnificent salute – and missed his forehead completely. "Sir, my tonsils is floating in chianti and Tommy whisky."

Von Dodenburg glanced at the grinning Italians and realised they were drunk too. "Matz," he barked at the little corporal, who looked sober. "What the devil have you rogue's been up to?"

"Better not ask, sir," he said darkly. "All I can say is we've got what you wanted, we've adopted half the spaghetti-eaters' Army," he indicated the drunken Italian soldiers, "and this." He pulled back what looked like a silken bed-spread which covered the rear end of the half-track to reveal bottle after bottle of champagne, cases of cigars and a pile of what appeared to be frilly female underwear.

Von Dodenburg's mouth dropped open in dismay. "Where did you get that?"

"All I can say, sir," Matz replied ponderously, "is this. That house down on the quay will never be the same again. Colonel Hartmann has suffered an unfortunate accident which will keep him on his back for several months, I'm afraid – and..." He hesitated.

"And what?" Von Dodenburg demanded.

"I think we'll have about till dawn before the head hunters come looking for us..."

Book 2 – Into The Great Sand Sea

"Two thousand years later, Major von Dodenburg, they are still out here, having in the meantime become more vicious and stranger in their ways."

Professor Reichert to von Dodenburg, in the Great Sand Sea

Chapter 7

Von Dodenburg was already awake. Through the open flap of his tent, he could see the sky paling imperceptibly so that the desert all around took on a series of different hues.

For a moment he lay there in the warm, comforting sleeping bag casting his mind over the many problems ahead and wondering whether he had forgotten anything, made a mistake anywhere. He knew from the Prof that a false estimate of the amount of water they might need to cross the Sand Sea, even a mistake in the number of salt tablets, so vital in that intense heat, could spell disaster.

Finally he decided it was too late to worry now, and with a groan rose from his sleeping bag. The new day had begun.

The next hour passed swiftly. While von Dodenburg strode from vehicle to vehicle, checking that everyone would be prepared to move out on the signal, the crews prepared their breakfast, for there would be no more cooking until they were well out into no-man's land and away from prying British eyes.

Briefly von Dodenburg exchanged a few words with a very pale Schulze, who had his head wrapped in a rag soaked in vinegar and spoke in an unusually soft voice, as if he were afraid that any loud noise might shatter his skull for good. The major tapped him slightly on the shoulder and said in commiseration, "If you feel like you look, you big rogue, you must be feeling rotten. All the same thank you for those links. The crews worked all night hammering the new ones in."

At precisely 0630 hours, 14 October, 1942, 1st Company SS Assault Regiment Wotan started to move out. Standing on the turret of his command tank, next to a morose Schulze, and the Prof, von Dodenburg watched his force begin their advance into the desert.

The clatter of the tank tracks, the rattle of the towed 88mm guns, the thump of the half-tracks bouncing over the rough ground were the only sounds to be heard. The men's cries and shouts had died immediately in the cloud of dust raised by the departing vehicles. Now the troopers, standing in the turrets and on the decks of the half-tracks, had their sand goggles down

and their scarves pulled up over their mouths to keep out the choking dust. Von Dodenburg surveyed the young faces of his men. They looked worried at the prospect of the long journey into the unknown that lay before them, but not afraid.

The Prof seemed to read the Major's thoughts, for he said, "They won't let you down, Major."

"Bunch of asparagus Tarzans – still got the eggshell behind their spoons," Schulze growled grumpily.

Von Dodenburg touched his throat mic. "All right, Matz – roll 'em!" he commanded.

Matz let out the clutch. The 25-ton metal monster lurched forward. They were on their way.

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Wotan moved in a long column with the Prof in von Dodenburg's lead tank navigating for the whole force. To their front the desert lay bare and ominous. To von Dodenburg's rear, the tanks were strung out over two kilometres, with a space of two hundred metres between each vehicle. Each tank and half-track was followed by a plume of sand, highlighted by the slanting rays of the morning sun, as it pitched and rolled over the uneven surface. Von Dodenburg told himself they would make an ideal target for Tommy fighters – they could probably be seen for kilometres – but according to Rommel's staff, the British were not using fighters in this section of the front. He hoped the rear echelon stallions were right, and concentrated on the task in hand.

The hours passed leadenly. At midday von Dodenburg allowed the men, bruised and exhausted by the violent progress of the vehicles, a ten minutes' break. After greedily drinking a quarter of his daily ration of two litres of water, which was to be used for all purposes, he made a quick inspection of his force. The tracks were holding up well, but the men were already beat. The heat, the dust and the motion of the vehicles were beginning to tell. The troopers were sprawled out full length in whatever shade they could find behind their vehicles, eyes closed, dead to the world, not even aware that their CO was looking down at them.

Schulze recognized von Dodenburg's concern. Recovered a little from the night before, he said, "Don't worry about the wet-tails, sir! They'll make out." He grinned suddenly. "We'll break out that champagne we borrowed

tonight. That'll perk 'em up."

Von Dodenburg returned his grin. "I don't know whether you'll make soldiers of them, Schulze, but you're going the right way to make them into drunkards."

Schulze clapped his big hands around his mouth and bellowed. "All right, you bunch of warm brothers masquerading as soldiers, up on those twinkle-toes! Make dust! Scratch a corner! Press on the tube. LET'S GO!" Their weary journey into the blank desert continued.

***

They were working their way through a very bad patch: an area of small boulders, filled in with solid tufts of scrub. As the Prof had explained in his usual pedantic manner when they had entered it: "One's usual conception of the desert is of an endless stretch of smooth sand rather like the dunes on the Baltic where one spent one's school vacations. But it is not like that at all. There are great variations in the topography – like this."

Now the long column worked its way across the boulder-strewn ground, where every dip and hole was flattened to the eye by the almost perpendicular rays of the burning sun so that they cast no shadow to warn the drivers. The result was that the drivers could not avoid the crashing bumps, and the weary, sweat-lathered crews could not brace themselves in time. Thus the tanks and half-tracks rattled and swayed their way forward with painful slowness, making less than ten kilometres an hour, with von Dodenburg, his head rent by a violent headache, staring to their front grimly through red-rimmed eyes.

It was about four when Reichert announced through cracked lips, "Another kilometre and we should be out of it. According to the charts – and they're not very reliable naturally – the terrain returns to what the layman might call normal thereafter."

"Good," von Dodenburg said. He pressed his throat mic. "Matz, hit the tube. I want to get ahead of the rest of the column and see what the ground ahead is like. We might be able to make another couple of hours before dark, if it's suitable." He could hear Matz's hollow groan from the depths of the tank, but the little corporal replied dutifully enough, "Yes sir."

Next instant they started to draw away from the rest of the column, to which Schulze was already signalling to maintain the present speed. For half

a kilometre or so, Matz kept the tank at a steady twenty-five kilometres an hour, in spite of the terrible terrain. But then they hit a long ascent and he was forced to climb it in low gear.

It was fortunate for Wotan that he did so. For just before they breasted the rise, von Dodenburg had time to spot what lay waiting for them below and cry urgently, "Halt!" Matz hit the brakes in a flash and they jarred to a bone-shaking stop.

"Christ on a crutch," Schulze gasped, all breath knocked out of him. "The buck-teethed Tommies!"

Chapter 8

Von Dodenburg lowered his glasses and announced grimly, "It looks as if they're going to settle in there for the night, Schulze."

The big NCO nodded his agreement. "You're right, sir. Look at 'em down there with those baggy long drawers of theirs, boiling up more of that tea-shit that they always swig by the litre. They're settling in as if they're gonna be there forever!"

Von Dodenburg took one last long look at the British positions: a circle of armoured cars and light tanks, with men squatting round blue-flickering petrol fires, while the officers gathered round the radio truck for some sort of conference. He made his decision. "We'll have to attack, Schulze. Come on, let's get back to the tank and get on with it.

Bodies bent low, the two men scurried back to the command tank, which was now dug in in the hull-down position in the centre of the others. The commanders, poised alertly on their turrets, looked at him anxiously and von Dodenburg placed his hand on top of his khaki cap, fingers outstretched in the infantry signal for them to rally on him (he had ordered complete radio silence one hour before). A moment later they had dropped from their turrets and came doubling over to where the CO stood.

"All right, we are going to attack. For two reasons. One, we can't waste any more time here. Two. Now that they've stopped their own motors, they're bound to hear us, even if we did attempt to sneak our way round them." He paused and glanced around at the dust-covered faces. Their weariness seemed to have vanished almost instantly and their red-rimmed eyes gleamed with sudden excitement. Young and as inexperienced as they were, they were obviously eager for battle. Von Dodenburg noted the point gratefully. "Now most of you are new to battle," he continued, and I don't want you taking any foolish risks. So this is the way we're going to do it. I shall take my tank up to the top of the ridge and show myself. My guess is that the Tommies will assume there is only a lone tank facing them and although that tank out-guns those 37mm popguns their vehicles are armed with, they'll have a crack at me with their light tanks. Once they start their motors, you start up. Meier, you'll command the left wing. Seitz, the right."

The two 18-year second-lieutenants snapped to attention.

"Once I open up with my 75, you will come in from the flanks in a wide swoop and envelop them like this." He drew in his arms as if he were hugging a girl in a passionate embrace. "You, Sergeant Doerr."

"Sir," the one-eyed veteran NCO in charge of the panzer grenadiers barked.

"As soon as the two flanks go in, I shall advance down the slope and you'll follow with your half-tracks."

"*Jawohl, Hauptmann*," Doerr snapped. "My boys'll tickle up those Tommies' asses for you, sir."

"I don't want their asses just tickled," von Dodenburg answered with unusual severity. "Understand this – all of you. I want all those unfortunate Tommies killed. Not one of them must escape. All right, be off with you – and the best of luck."

"Best of luck to you, too, sir," they replied breathlessly and doubled back to their tanks.

Wotan was going to battle again!

***

"All right, Matz. Start up – now!" The 300 horsepower engines burst into life with a tremendous roar. Matz thrust home the gear and the tank rattled to the brow of the hill. Down below the Tommies had spun round to discover the cause of the sudden row. If what was going to happen next had not been so tragic, von Dodenburg could have burst out laughing at the comic look of surprise on their gawping British faces.

It seemed to take them an age to react to the appearance of an enemy tank in their midst. Then suddenly a white-haired man dropped the canteen from which he was drinking, and started to pelt for the radio truck with surprising speed for such an elderly man. "Stop him, Schulze," von Dodenburg rapped.

Schulze crouched behind the 75mm, pressed the trigger of one of the machine-guns almost automatically. A burst of tracer zipped flatly across the desert. The elderly officer faltered, flung up his hands dramatically, and flopped to the ground. The burst of machine-gun fire finally roused the British. They scattered in sudden alarm. Drivers tumbled into their tanks. Gunners flung themselves behind their weapons. Officers and NCOs barked hasty orders. In an instant, all was confusion and movement.

"Ten o'clock – radio truck – HE!" von Dodenburg barked.

Schulze swung the 75 around. He had already loaded the high explosive shell. The circle of the sight flew along the line of tanks and trucks. It settled on the radio truck, whose driver was frantically attempting to start it. Schulze centred the calibrated lines on the rear of the truck in which the radio equipment was housed. He hesitated for a fraction of a second and then pulled the firing lever.

The big 75 erupted. A spurt of purple flame shot from its muzzle. The turret was filled with the stink of burnt explosive, and the steaming empty shell-case came clattering out of the breech into the waiting collector bag.

Just as the first of the British light tanks started to climb towards them, the radio truck disappeared in a vicious flame and began to burn furiously. No one got out.

The leading Tommy tank was handicapped because it had to shoot uphill and the rays of the setting sun were in the eyes of the gunner and driver. Von Dodenburg ignored the first 37mm shell which flung up a fountain of sand and stones a dozen metres away which showered down on them like heavy rain on the turret. He had to lure the Tommies to an attack on the lone intruder before he threw in his two wings. "Hold fast!" he ordered above the racket and grabbed the shaking side of the turret as the Matilda fired again and the Mark IV swayed with the impact of the near-miss like a ship at sea.

"Oh, my goodness," the Prof quavered, "these things can be dangerous."

"Quite," von Dodenburg agreed and ducked instinctively as a 37mm shell struck the turret a resounding hollow blow and went whizzing off, unable to penetrate the thick armour.

He nudged Schulze's broad, sweat-soaked back. "All right, Schulze, let him have it now," he commanded. "They've bought it."

Schulze swung the great sinister hooded gun round. From von Dodenburg's position on the turret it seemed at least ten metres long. He grunted and pulled the firing lever. The white blob of the AP shell hit the British tank squarely in the engine. For a moment nothing happened. The tank still continued its laborious crawl up the steep hill. *Whoosh!* The Matilda's petrol tank exploded. In an instant it was a blazing inferno. With a thick asthmatic cramp, its ammunition racks exploded, piercing the black, oily smoke with a stab of violent scarlet flame.

A man staggered out of the lower escape hatch. His face was pitch-black and both his clothes and hair were alight. He stumbled a few metres, his legs getting progressively heavier; then he fell and in a frenzy of agony rolled back and forth on the hard sand in a desperate attempt to put out the flames. His flailing, tormented arms and legs moved more slowly. With a convulsive heave, he lay still.

Von Dodenburg made his decision. The whole of the British tank force, followed by the armoured cars, was now advancing up the hill to where the stricken Matilda blazed away fiercely. "Matz," he cried through the throat mic, "advance! Schulze!"

"Sir?"

"Fire at will!"

As Matz thrust home his gears and began to rumble towards the attacking force, von Dodenburg heard the roar of the concealed tanks and half-tracks starting up their engines. The trap had been well and truly sprung!

It was a massacre. The Tommies realised too late that they had walked into a trap. The armoured cars tried to break away, relying on their superior speed to escape, but they could not evade the two young second-lieutenants' gunners. One by one, the 75s knocked them out. Soon a couple of square kilometres of desert were littered with the burning armoured cars.

Von Dodenburg, followed by the panzer grenadiers' half-tracks, charged straight into the mass of British tanks. Schulze firing from right to left, smashed Matilda after Matilda to a flaming standstill, while Sergeant Doerr's young grenadiers mercilessly mowed down those of the crews who managed to escape.

Here and there individual Tommies tried to stop the German advance, standing in the path of the metal monsters and attempting to hold them off with rifles and revolvers. But within seconds they disappeared screaming under the churning tank tracks to fall behind – mutilated chunks of flesh in the bloody sand.

Eventually von Dodenburg had had enough of the slaughter. "Stop firing!" he cried thickly, sickened by the bloodshed, but knowing that there was more – and worse – to come.

He turned and repressing the wave of nausea that threatened to overcome him at the sight of his blood-red tracks, through which protruded a severed naked arm, the fingers outstretched as if pleading with God for

mercy. He signalled to Doerr to do what had to be done.

Wearily he closed his eyes and slumped against the hot metal of the turret. He tried to ignore the whimpering pleas for mercy, and cries of fear of the Tommies, which always ended in the sharp crack of Doerr's revolver; but he failed lamentably. Every time the revolver cracked, he twitched convulsively.

Next to him, the Prof whispered over and over again, "Oh my blessed saviour... Oh my blessed saviour!"

One hour later they moved on, leaving behind them the silent heaps of dead and the still burning tanks, outlined a sombre black against the blood-red ball of the setting sun.

Major von Dodenburg, his face pale and buried deep in the collar of his greatcoat in the sudden night chill, did not look back. *He couldn't.*

Chapter 9

On the afternoon of the second day, Wotan entered the Sand Sea. At first the going was good, apart from a couple of bad patches of soft sand. But towards evening they ran into a series of dunes which swept to the darkening horizon. Most were razor-backed and it demanded a great deal of skill on the part of the driver to traverse them.

Matz soon showed that he had an excellent eye for terrain and just what an experienced driver he was. He had the special technique at his finger-tips. He would position the tank at the base of the dune and charge at the mountain of sand at full speed. just before the tank was about to lurch alarmingly over the top of the dune, perhaps to face a sheer drop of ten or twenty metres on the other side, he would jam on the brakes, swing the steering round violently and rattle down the other side at a frightening, hair-raising angle.

Some of the other drivers, especially those in the half-tracks which did not have equivalent traction, were not so successful in their attempts to surmount the dunes. Regularly a cursing driver would get bogged down helplessly in the sand. Then the rest of the crew would have to get out and begin the back-breaking task of freeing the tracks and digging holes beneath them so that the metal sand channels could he placed underneath to allow the trapped vehicle more traction.

That afternoon they hardly made twenty-five kilometres, and by nightfall von Dodenburg had had enough. He called a halt and told the crews to prepare their evening meal. The men formed the defensive laager for the night and dropped onto the sand, exhausted, grateful for the start of the night breeze after the murderous heat of that day.

Von Dodenburg supervised the activities of his own crew and while the Prof and Schulze set about preparing the evening meal, he decided to 'take the spade for a walk'.

With the spade over his shoulder and a wad of newspaper in the other, he slogged up the nearest dune and down the other side. There out of sight of the camp, he emptied his bowels and was just about to begin using the spade when he caught the glint of glass a long way away.

For a moment he thought his eyes were playing him tricks after the strain and glare of the long day. But then he saw it again. He dropped his

spade and fumbled for his own binoculars. But he was an instant too late. At that moment the sun slipped beneath the horizon and the desert was plunged into darkness. The gleam had vanished.

Thoughtfully, von Dodenburg walked hack to the busy little camp. Someone had been watching him out there. The question was – who?

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In spite of his exhaustion, von Dodenburg awoke at two and could not get to sleep again. He was due to relieve Prof at three for his hour of guard-duty anyway, so he lay there, hands propped underneath his head, staring at the cold silver infinity of the stars and listening to the singing of the sand. For a while he lay there – planning the next day and glancing at the dial of his wrist-watch.

Then, by instinct, he unzipped his sleeping bag. Shuddering a little in the night cold, he pulled on his desert boots, flung his black leather jacket around his shoulders and clambered on to the turret in which the Prof was keeping watch.

"You're early, Major," the Prof whispered, obviously not wishing to disturb the men snoring heartily all round.

"Couldn't sleep any more, Prof," von Dodenburg answered.

For a few minutes the two officers stood there in silence, staring up at the stars which seemed low enough to touch. Then von Dodenburg broke the silence. "Prof, I'd like to ask you a question. Does anyone live out here in this miserable wilderness?" Swiftly von Dodenburg explained what he thought he had seen the night before, almost doubting his testimony as he did so.

Reichert seemed to take a long time before he answered. "It is a long story, Major," he said finally. "You know that there is a theory that the Sahara is constantly expanding outwards. Once, it is thought, this was probably the bread basket of the Ancient World, an exceedingly fertile place, though it is hard to believe now, is it not?

"Be that as it may, a combination of changing trade winds and the fact that the Romans chopped down most of the forests on the littoral to obtain timber for their galleys changed the whole weather picture of the area. The rains washed the humus from the fertile fields, leaving the bare rock which eventually turned into sand. With no vegetation, there was no rain. So we have an arid, barren area which cannot support much in the way of

population. The people began to leave. But not all. Some remained behind and because of the climatic conditions they changed from peaceful farmers into robbers, men who preyed off the coastal settlements and who had their own laws and customs, completely different from those of their brothers who had moved north. Two thousand years later, Major von Dodenburg, they are still out here, having in the meantime become more vicious and stranger in their ways."

"But how do they live?" von Dodenburg asked, intrigued by the fact that men actually lived in this burning sand waste.

"Just as their forefathers lived. Raping and plundering. I'm afraid it's a little beyond my own particular province, Major," the Prof continued, 'but I have heard that in this section of what you choose to call a miserable wilderness, there lives the Blue Veil People."

"Blue Veil People?" von Dodenburg echoed "A strange name!"

"And a strange people, too, Major. Like the Toureg, the men veil themselves. But for different reasons. The Blue Veil are, I regret to say, given to the English perversion."

"You mean homosexuality?"

"I do."

"But how do they continue as a tribe," von Dodenburg objected, "If they're warm brothers? Where do the kids come from?"

"At regular intervals prescribed by their tribal laws, they seize women and procreate. In the mid-thirties the Italians had a great deal of trouble with them when they began to carry off the wives of the Italian settlers. But in essence they find the Greek vice a more noble form of sexual activity... But do not be misled by the fact that they are homosexual," the Prof pronounced the word as if it were in quotation marks – "they are a bold, brave and completely ruthless tribe."

"So you think I might well have seen a Blue Veil out there?"

"You might indeed."

"And on whose side are they?" von Dodenburg queried, "The Italians' or the Tommies'?"

Reichert's leathery face cracked in a weary smile. He made a gesture signifying money. "On the side of those who pay most, my dear Major. And now I think it is time for me to retire for what is left of the night." With that he was gone, leaving Major von Dodenburg staring into the desert, as if he could already visualize the strange, veiled tribesmen crawling towards the

sleeping encampment.

Chapter 10

Next morning von Dodenburg's sense of foreboding had disappeared. The sky was perfect and the air was cool. Followed by Schulze, he strode purposefully from vehicle to vehicle checking them and their crews, ensuring that the drivers turned over the engines with the starting handle to avoid any chance of damage to the bottom cylinder by a hydrostatic lock.

By six, the column was on its way again, ploughing ever further into the depths of the uncharted sand-sea.

Now the character of the desert started to change. The razor-edged dunes gave way to rough terrain, broken here and there by flat-topped hills. The column picked up speed, much to von Dodenburg's pleasure. All the same he was worried by the terrain: ideal country for an ambush. Leaving the navigation completely to the Prof and guiding of the column to Schulze, he scanned the desert ahead constantly with his binoculars for any sign of life. It remained empty. At midday, after covering nearly forty kilometres, von Dodenburg ordered a thirty minutes halt. While Schulze and Matz cooked looted Australian sausages over the petrol-and-sand fire on the blade of a shovel, von Dodenburg and the Prof conferred over the map. But von Dodenburg could see the other man's mind was elsewhere and finally he asked, "Come on, Prof, what is it? You've got a face like forty days' rain."

The Prof pointed to the sky. "Look at that."

Von Dodenburg looked up. The sky was the colour of wood smoke. From it the sun shone down like a coin seen dimly at the bottom of a dirty country pool. "Well," he demanded.

"Do you not notice that the wind has stopped blowing? All the signs are there, my dear Major," the Prof said severely, pursing his cracked lips.

"All the signs of what?" von Dodenburg barked, biting into a red-hot sausage.

"Sand storm!"

The sand storm reached them one hour later. A gust of wind hit the tank with such force that it shuddered violently. In an instant it was as black as night. "I told you so!" the Prof screamed above the sudden vicious howl.

"Oh shut up!" von Dodenburg yelled. He grabbed the mic.

"Commander to all vehicles," he roared above the ever increasing howl, trying to ignore the sand particles striking his face like angry hailstones, "Proceed to the high ground at two o'clock and stop motors! I repeat – high ground at two o'clock and stop motors. Over and out!" He dropped the mic and ducked behind the cover of the turret as the sandstorm struck the column at 150 kilometres an hour. Next to him Schulze howled with pain as the flying sand particles cut into his broad face like a myriad, red-hot stilettos.

The rest of the column vanished in the whirling storm of sand. Breathing became difficult. Von Dodenburg felt as if he were being garrotted. The hellish fog of sand snatched the air from his lungs. Next to him Schulze and the Prof were choking for breath like asthmatics.

Pulling down his sand-goggles, von Dodenburg glanced over the turret. If the rest of his force was there somewhere, he could not see them. They had vanished into the flying wall of sand. For all he knew they were all alone in this crazy anarchic world. Full of apprehension he ducked his head behind cover again.

Somehow Matz managed to drive on, while the wind shrieked furiously across the desert, as if some God on high had ordained that these puny mortals, who had had the temerity to venture into this burning world, should be wiped from the face of the earth.

Over the intercom von Dodenburg heard Matz curse. The Mark IV lurched to a stop. Had Matz managed to reach the ridge at two o'clock? Or had something broken down? At that moment, von Dodenburg neither knew nor cared. Nothing mattered, save the task of surviving the elemental fury of the storm.

Then as suddenly as it had started, the storm declined. The terrifying howl gave way to a lower keening, which soon disappeared altogether, leaving behind an echoing silence.

Like blind men the soldiers in the turret stretched out their hands to feel their bodies. Von Dodenburg rubbed his sand-goggles clean. Next to him Schulze and the Prof were clearing away the thick layer of sand which covered their bodies. He stood up, sand pouring from his body and stared over the turret.

The desert was transformed. The ridge he had directed his vehicles to had inexplicably vanished. So had the rest of the column. They were alone.

"Christ Almighty!" he cursed and pressed his throat mic urgently. "Matz, get the thing started up again. We've got to find the rest of the column

– at once," he ordered.

"Sorry, sir," Matz's voice came over the intercom. "I think we've shot a track. I'm getting no traction."

"*Scheisse!* All right, Matz, I'll have a look."

Swiftly von Dodenburg dropped over the side into the sand which had buried the lower track. He grubbed away the sand the whole length of the track, trying to find the source of trouble. Then he found it. Something had caught a connecting pin and had twisted it out of all recognition. One of the pin's jagged ends had been carried over the sprocket wheel until it had become embedded in the sand-shield on that side of the tank. Now there was a mass of tangled metal stuck there.

Matz joined von Dodenburg. "What a shitty mess!"

"What a shitty mess, indeed!" von Dodenburg agreed.

For a few minutes the two of them stood there surveying the wreckage in silence until Matz said, "It can be fixed, sir. But it'll take a bit of time. And I need that big Hamburg lump up there to give me a hand."

"All right," von Dodenburg made a quick decision. "Prof you give these two rogues here a bit of cover. I'm going to see if I can find the others. They can't have got far," he added hopefully. He pulled down a water bottle and slung it over his shoulder next to his machine pistol. "If I don't find them in the next fifteen minutes, I'll come back and give you a hand. We'll try to raise the rest of the Company by radio, though God knows how I'll be able to give them a fix on us when I don't know where the hell we are." With that he started on his search.

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He could barely hear the clang of Schulze's sledge hammer on the jammed metal and the tank itself was hidden behind a ridge. He glanced at his watch. He had already been walking ten minutes. But there was still no sign of the rest of the column. Von Dodenburg frowned with irritation. Had they gone blundering on, blinded by the storm, and thinking that the command tank was still in the lead?

"Damn the two of them," he cursed the 18-year-old second-lieutenants. "They should have tumbled to the fact that we're missing by –" The angry words died on his lips.

On the far horizon, a line of dark figures had suddenly appeared. He

breathed a sigh of relief and pulling his binoculars out of their case, focused them hurriedly.

He saw immediately that they were not his men. The strangers, strung out in a long line, were dressed in the flowing robes of the desert Arab and they were riding on camels. He adjusted the glasses more finely and tried to pick out the details of the first rider. Suddenly he gasped and lowered the glasses hurriedly. An instant later he was running heavily through the soft sand the way he had come. The leading rider's face was covered by a blue veil!

Chapter 11

Von Dodenburg tensed over the radio. "Here Sunray... here Sunray," he called desperately. "Do you read me, over?" He flicked the mic switch and waited anxiously, while the other three stared up at him in taut anticipation.

There was no answering crackle.

Angrily he thrust the mic back on its hook. "The damned fools must be on radio silence – or something equally idiotic," he snapped.

"What now?" the Prof asked.

Von Dodenburg straightened up and stared out of the turret. The horizon was still empty. "All right," he decided, "we'll continue working." He unslung his machine pistol and slapped it in the Prof's unwilling hands. "I'm going to help Schulze and Matz. You stand guard."

"But I've never fired one of these," Reichert protested. "I don't know how it works."

"Well, now is obviously a good time to find out," von Dodenburg cried, seizing the pin and holding it against the jammed part, while Schulze grunted and brought down the sledgehammer.

One blow sufficed. The track-pin parted and landed with a tinkle of metal on the pebbles, while the sound of the sledge echoed and re-echoed across the desert. Von Dodenburg dropped the other pin. Close at hand he heard the crackle of camel-thorn shrubs, or so he thought. He straightened up. The horizon was still empty. All the same, every nerve of his body tensed for the shock of discovery and rattle of rifle-fire which would follow. Surely the Arabs must have heard!

He tried to dismiss the Blue Veils from his mind and snapped, "All right, Schulze, grab one of the crowbars! Matz. Schulze and I will lift up the sand shield, you grab the track. When I say heave, – heave!"

Matz nodded. He took hold of the severed piece of track and prepared to pull, while von Dodenburg and Schulze thrust the crowbars underneath the sand-shield. The Major spat on his palms and commanded, "One, two, three – *heave!*"

There was a rending, metallic sound which von Dodenburg thought must have been heard for kilometres, but still Matz was unable to pull the trapped section free.

"Christ on a crutch!" Schulze roared in sudden anger at Matz. "What are you – a shitty pygmy or something? Too much wanking, Matzi, that's your trouble. Sapping your strength you are!"

Von Dodenburg glanced at the horizon. It was still empty, thank God! "Come on," he gasped, 'let's save our breath and get on with it!"

Twice more they tried to free the section of trapped track and twice they failed. By now von Dodenburg's nerves were jangling. His imagination was prey to every terror. Shapes which he had marked out of the corner of his eyes as bushes or patches of camel-thorn suddenly moved or disappeared. New shapes appeared momentarily where there had been none before.

"Come on, he croaked, wiping away the beads of sweat which threatened to blind him, 'let's have another go at the sodding thing!"

Angrily the three of them took up their positions once more. "Now HEAVE!" von Dodenburg cried.

There was the searing sound of metal freeing itself and then Matz was lying on his back in the sand, with a length of track draped across his skinny body. Slowly the rest of the track slithered over the runners and flopped to the ground like a suddenly severed limb.

Schulze dropped his crowbar and glared at Matz, pinned down by the weight of the track. "Well, don't just lie there, you cripple, like a pissy-arsed spare prick in a convent. Get up!"

"I can't," Matz said through gritted teeth. "I've got this shitty thing on my chest, you stupid bastard!"

"Quick," von Dodenburg ordered. "There's no time to be lost!" Together the two men pulled the length of damaged track off Matz's chest and then ran to the spares bin. Schulze grunted, and exerting all his tremendous strength, hauled out a replacement section of track. He dropped it to the ground. Swiftly the men went to work to fit the new section.

While von Dodenburg sweated and strained to loosen the idler wheel adjustment, Matz and Schulze linked the new part to the old track and started to thread it across the runners once more. The noise the three of them made was tremendous. But von Dodenburg knew it could not be helped. The Blue Veils would discover them soon and even behind the 80mm armour they would not be safe from them. It was an old adage in Assault Regiment Wotan that an immobilized tank was nothing better than a coffin, once it was surrounded by determined infantry. A carefully placed hand grenade would ensure that the biggest tank was soon dead. Thus he laboured with the others,

sweating and cursing, expecting Reichert's shout of warning at any moment.

It came in a frightened quaver. "Major... Major von Dodenburg, look!" The Prof pointed a skinny finger, which trembled visibly, to the horizon.

On the horizon, silhouetted against the setting sun like some classical frieze, twenty or more of the riders were strung out in a long line gazing down at them in silence.

"What shall I do?" the Prof asked fearfully. "They're the Blue Veils all right."

"Don't worry, Prof." Those rifles have – at the most – a range of a hundred metres. And they're more than two hundred away. If they get closer, give them a quick burst." While the three of them continued in their desperate attempts to link the two sections of track, a group of the Blue Veils dismounted from the camels. Under the command of an Arab they began to unpack a shining cylindrical object from the back of one of the kneeling pack-camels.

Just as the three SS men managed to pull the two sections of track together and Schulze started to hammer home the link-pin, von Dodenburg glanced at the Blue Veils. His heart sank. The Arabs were setting up a mortar on the heights, and if they did not get under way quickly, they would be sitting ducks in the hollow at that range. He had underestimated the Blue Veils.

"*Mortar!*" he gasped.

"I'll get the pincers," Matz cried. "You fit the cotter-pin, Schulze."

"No time," the sweating giant cried through gritted teeth. He inserted the pin which held the track-link in place and taking a deep breath, he turned it with his powerful fingers, feeling metal dig deep into his flesh as he did so. "That'll do," he yelled and kicked the track with his big hoot. It held. "Come on, get the lead out of your ass, Matzi! Into that driving compartment!" Matz saw the danger at once. He scrambled for the driving seat, while von Dodenburg and Schulze clambered onto the turret.

The light mortar opened up with a cough and a frightening howl. Crouched in the turret, the SS men could see the black blob of the mortar bomb launch skyward, and then wobble downwards through the darkening blue of sunset. It exploded with a thick crump. Sand shot up in a great liquid splash some twenty metres away and showered the tank with pebbles and small boulders. They ducked instinctively.

On the ridge, the Blue Veils under the direction of a little Arab made an

adjustment and reloaded. Down below in the green-glowing driving compartment, Matz completed all his frantic starting checks. just as the second mortar bomb began to howl towards them, he pressed the starter-button. *Nothing happened!*

Chapter 12

Schulze swept the ridge with the machine-gun, but the Blue Veils had anticipated that. They had dragged their camels hurriedly behind the cover of the height and after a moment's pause had begun firing once more from beyond it; and from the way the first bomb came winging down only a dozen metres away, von Dodenburg realised with a sinking feeling that the man who was directing the firing knew his mortars.

Below Matz wrestled with the engines. Frantically he pressed the starter time and time again. But it would not start. Desperately von Dodenburg clenched his fists in anxiety and willed the shitty monster to fire. Soon he knew the little Arab would get lucky and land a bomb right on the turret, or on top of the engines. Even if they survived the explosion, which was unlikely, then they would be easy meat for Blue Veil infiltrators. Matz had to start the engines!

Cursing furiously, Matz fought to start up. And then he had it. There was a long, low groan like some eerie unearthly dirge. Von Dodenburg glanced to the rear, just as another mortar bomb landed so close that the blast ripped the shovel away from its clip on the turret. A stream of black smoke was pouring from the twin exhausts. Matz was doing it. He pressed his throat mic urgently. "It's working, Matz," he cried. "Come on... come on!"

The noise grew in intensity. The Mark IV shivered violently. Its every plate rattled, as if it might fall apart at any moment. An ashen-faced Prof hung on grimly, his lips moving rapidly in prayer. A sharp series of backfires. A burst of bright white smoke. Next moment the twin engines roared into full life. Frantically Matz gunned the engines, and slammed home the gear.

Just as the bomb intended to land right on the trapped tank's turret came hurtling down out of the dark sky with a stomach-churning howl, the big tank lurched forward. With his engines still not reliable enough for him to brake and turn, Matz made his own decision and rolled straight ahead, right into the Blue Veils' positions.

Too late to brake, too late to slow down, the 25-ton monster shot over the ridge. In panic the Arabs around the mortar scattered. A boy fell screaming under the tracks and Matz caught a quick glimpse of rouged cheeks and

painted eyebrows, before he was dragged under, churned to a bloody pulp of flesh and bone by the great tracks. However, he had no time for the Blue Veils, left behind in the tank's wake. His whole energy was concentrated on keeping the tank from overturning on the almost sheer descent which had suddenly loomed up before his horrified gaze.

The left-hand track hit a hidden boulder with a bone-shuddering impact. Instinctively Matz braked the track. In a blinding flurry of sand, the tank swerved to the left. Somehow Matz managed to keep control with hands that were dripping with sweat, as it began to slither sidewards down the slope. One false move now and they would be over. Behind them the Arabs lying in the sand were taking wild angry shots.

Gingerly Matz started to brake the right track. The Mark IV wobbled violently. Sand showered up from the tracks. They were only a matter of metres from the bottom of the descent now. Matz exerted more pressure on the right track. It screamed as it churned up sand. Matz tensed for the bone-breaking crash that must come. A huge wake of flying sand was following their progress down the slope in a hellish howl of protesting metal. Then the track caught. Revolving frantically, showering up stones and rocks, the other track caught hold. They started to swing around. Matz pressed his foot down hard on the gas pedal, and chanced more pressure on the right track. The Mark IV did not let him down. Now it swung right round and in a flash they were hurtling down the steep incline, with Matz holding onto the controls, his stomach seemingly floating somewhere high above his sweat-drenched head.

Just before the tank ran full-tilt into the depression, Matz braked, let go, and braked again. The trick worked. They hit the bottom at less than ten kilometres an hour. At any other speed, it would have shattered there. Just before the tank came to rest, Matz tapped the accelerator. The twin engines responded at once.

They throbbed sweetly, and swiftly built up power. The tracks bit into the soft sand of the ascent on the other side. *They held!* Matz breathed a sigh of relief. Slowly but surely, the battered *Panzerkampfwagen IV* started to climb, while behind them the sound of the Blue Veils' firing grew fainter and fainter. They had escaped!

Thirty minutes later they bumped into the stalled Italian truck, its back filled with the Italian soldiers Schulze had kidnapped from the quay. They were drunk and unhappy, eating sticky chocolate sandwiches and drinking the

Chianti they had stolen from the German Supply Depot. They were lost too and frightened, very frightened.

For a moment von Dodenburg was bewildered. While Matz and Schulze grabbed what was left of the Chianti, he leaned weakly against the side of the truck, drained of energy. However, the crackle of the radio in the truck's cabin soon shook him out of his reverie.

By some stroke of good fortune, the Italians' radio was on the column's net!

Thrusting the anxious Italians out of the way, von Dodenburg grabbed the mic and bellowed into it. "Hello, here Sunray...here Sunray. Are you reading me?"

One hour later they had rejoined the column.

Chapter 13

Angrily Slaughter scooped out the two yolks of the precious fried eggs with his fingers, Arab-fashion, and swallowed them. By the light of the flickering camel-dung fire, Yassa looked at him silently and thoughtfully, smoking his cigarette in the Mohammedan manner so that his lips did not come in contact with the tobacco, as the Prophet had prescribed. He was an incredibly wrinkled old man beneath his blue veil, his eyebrows plucked in what he thought was a seductive curve and great smears of *kohl* below the tired yellow eyes. Yet if the Blue Veil Chief's face and manner were pathetic attempts at female coquettism, there was nothing weak or un-masculine about his determination.

Stretching one painted hand to the warmth of the fire, he said, "We shall ride all day and all night. We might not catch them the night of the morrow, nor the night of the day after that."

"When?" Slaughter demanded angrily, stubbing out his cigarette in the white of one of the fried eggs, as if he were grinding out the socket.

"Do not worry, my friend," the Chief answered easily. "We shall earn your Horsemen. Perhaps in three nights."

"*When?*" Slaughter persisted. He knew his Blue Veils, his 'boys' as he always called them to his superiors in Cairo. One had to pin them down: they were as skittish and as capricious as women.

"Three nights, I have said," the Chief replied. "Like all infidels, they will rest at night. We will not. We will catch them, Englishman, and then –" The Chief grinned at him over his veil, though there was no real warmth in his faded old eyes. "Then," he echoed, "we shall ensure that they never leave the desert."

Slaughter shuddered in spite of the fact that the Blue Veils had been his lovers and employees ever since he had begun to use them for espionage purposes against the Italians in Libya in 1935.They would slit the Germans' throats and unspeakable atrocities would follow that. Slaughter, his voice suddenly dry and husky, asked, "Where?"

"The Great Ascent," the Chief said simply and with a gesture of finality tossed his cigarette into the fire. It flared up for a moment, illuminating the old man's perverted face, and eyes which flashed with cruel anticipation of

the slaughter to come.

Book 3 – The Oasis

"Madam is the bravest of the brave. Not even Nasser and Sadat surpass her in courage and hatred of the English."

Major Mustafa, Egyptian Army, to von Dodenburg, Ain Dalla Oasis

Chapter 14

It was furnace-hot. In that heat the sand shimmered a crazy wavering blue. Wearily the column steered its way onwards.

"It's the *khamsin*," the Prof explained through cracked lips. "Blows in from Central Africa across hundreds of kilometres, being heated more and more all the way."

Von Dodenburg had never experienced a wind like this before, not even in the Caucasus. It was not like the heat that came from the sun, from which there was some relief hi the shade. The *khamsin* was a searing, blistering heat that made one blink with shock, as if an oven door had been flung open to release a fearsome blast of burning air.

"Jesus, Mary, Joseph!" Schulze groaned, "you'd think it was bad enough with the Tommies and those Arabs out there somewhere trying to croak us – without this shitting wind roasting the nuts off us."

The almost unbearable heat was also making the young drivers of the sections of the column commanded by the two 18-year-old second-lieutenants more and more careless. Time and time again they drove into patches of soft sand because they were not alert enough and the whole column had to stop while the trapped vehicles were dug out.

In the end, when yet another of Seitz's Mark IVs became bogged down, von Dodenburg's temper got the better of him. He stopped the column, ordered Matz to drive hack to where the weary young tank crew were staring numbly at the vehicle, which was up to its bogies in sand, and bellowed, "Seitz and Meier to me – at the double!" Both officers dropped from their vehicles and shambled wearily across to where von Dodenburg stood grimly on the turret, hands clamped to his hips. "*At the double!*" he bellowed again. "Get the lead out of your damn tails, will you!"

Sergeant Doerr, whose half-tracks had not bogged down once because his drivers were exceedingly scared of him, guffawed. But the rest of the Wotan men were too weary to laugh even at the sight of two red-faced, sweat-lathered officers doubling through the sand as if they were green recruits back at Sennelager. Gasping painfully, their shirts black with sweat, the two of them came to a halt in front of von Dodenburg and stood to attention.

Von Dodenburg's red-rimmed eyes flashed angrily. "You call yourselves officers," he barked bitterly. "Officer means someone who commands, leads, makes decisions, advises. You two pathetic creatures have done none of those things. You have idled in your turrets and allowed your men to make the decisions – the wrong ones. That's why tank after tank of yours has bogged down. Well, I have had enough of it. You must be taught to be officers the hard way!"

He turned to the crestfallen corporal in charge of the tank which had bogged down. "All right, get all of your crew except the driver out of there, corporal." The crewmen dropped to the sand and stood staring up at their crimson-faced CO. "Corporal, clip off the turret shovels and give them to the officers!"

Silently the Corporal did as he was commanded and stood to one side, leaving the young officers staring down at the implements in embarrassed bewilderment.

"Now, you two. You will clear the sand away from this one by yourselves till the driver can start," von Dodenburg announced grimly. "And you will clear away the sand from every other one of your vehicles that bogs down after this, personally and unaided! Perhaps that will teach you both to ensure that your drivers and commanders don't sleep at their posts. Now get on with it!"

Embarrassed, hurt, on the brink of tears, the two young officers began the back-breaking task of clearing the tracks, watched by equally embarrassed and sympathetic Wotan troopers.

Thereafter there was no further bogging down of vehicles in the rest of the column, but the mood among the men, von Dodenburg knew, was rebellious. He longed to reach the Ascent and leave the hell of the Great Sand Sea.

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That morning passed with leaden feet. At midday, von Dodenburg allowed the column to stop to prepare a meal. Here and there a soldier dropped to the sand gratefully and tried to urinate. But the exercise was very painful. Their kidneys had suffered too much from the battering and jolting of the last four days and the men had to clutch the sides of the vehicles to fight back the burning pain as they emptied their bladders. For the most part, the men

crouched where they were, all spirit knocked out of them by the hellish terrain.

Von Dodenburg dropped stiff-kneed to the sand and inspected his men. Their sweat-stained shirts were already bleached a faded yellow and their desert boots had turned near-white in the rays of the sun. Their faces were hollow and bronzed. Already they looked like veterans, as if they had been in the desert for years like the men of the Afrikakorps. But von Dodenburg knew that their appearance was deceptive. The men were not desert veterans: they were simply exhausted.

Behind him, the ever-present Schulze, who himself must have lost five kilos so that even his massive frame seemed shrunken, put the CO's thoughts into words. "The wet-tails are knackered, sir. What they need is plenty of drink and to be out of this hell hole to wherever we're supposed to be going." He looked curiously at the Major.

Von Dodenburg did not rise to the bait. Instead he grunted, "Break out an extra half a litre this midday. And with that he stalked off, leaving Schulze staring after him in angry bewilderment.

Finally, the big NCO spun round and cupping his hands round his mouth shouted, "All right, you bunch of lovely lads, Sergeant-Major Schulze has got a treat for you! By special permission you can all have an extra half litre of camel-piss, known to you as water, this afternoon!"

Later, concealed by a convenient dune and sharing his last bottle of champagne (cooled expensively in a five litre can of gasoline) with Matz, he grunted moodily, "I'd just like to know where we're going, Matzi! I really would!"

Matz pumped another squirt of the precious gas over the bottle propped in the sand to keep it cool and answered lazily, "Wherever it is, Schulze, it can't be worse than this. Nothing can."

"Ay," Schulze said dourly, "that's what you say. But 1 don't know so much." He stared at the silent, shifting dunes all around and shivered, in spite of the tremendous heat. "This shitting sandpit puts years on me Matzi... Give me shitting old Timmerndorf Beach near my old town any day."

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That evening in their laager, revived a little by the cooler breeze of the night,

the Prof chided von Dodenburg in his stiff, professorial way, saying he felt that the young Major was too hard on his men.

Von Dodenburg stared at the elderly academic across the blue flickering flames of the gas fire and said harshly, "You might be one of our leading Egyptologists, Prof, but I'm afraid you know little of soldiering, especially the kind or soldiering we of the Armed SS are used to. We cannot sustain ourselves with hope, for there is no hope for the SS. We cannot sustain ourselves with thought – belief in a cause," he uttered the words with a sneer, "faith that there is ultimately something of worth in what we are doing. There isn't!

"Our sole purpose is to kill and avoid being killed ourselves. The function of German industry is to put the weapons into our hands so that we can blow a hole in some unfortunate Russian or Tommy head. We exist as rock-bottom, guilty animals, who must be taught to survive, kill the other animal before he kills you." His voice softened as he saw the horrified look on the other man's face and he concluded almost gently, "The men must be hard as a favour to themselves, for the weak ones don't survive..." He emptied his coffee. "Now let me change the subject." He leaned forward so that none of the men could hear him. "When will we reach the Ascent?" he asked.

"Is that where we are heading?"

Von Dodenburg nodded.

Professor Reichert's faded elderly eyes flickered, as if he were going to say something hastily, but evidently he thought better of it, for when he spoke he said simply, "If in calculations are correct – early tomorrow evening."

For a few moments von Dodenburg absorbed the information, listening to the soft sounds of the camp settling down for the night: the hiss of urine on the still sand; the clatter of canteens being put away; the lazy banter of men lying sleepily in their bags, talking of the things all soldiers talk about – war and women. Then he said, "Prof, what can you tell me of the place?"

"The Ascent? There is not much I can tell you, Major. I've never been there myself. In my days in Egypt all this was named the Devil's Country and one kept out of it. Besides the handful of British who did penetrate it were not too happy about having Germans poking around it, especially after the Pact of Steel between us and the spaghetti eaters. However this I do know. One of their officers – a certain Major Clayton seems to have discovered it, apart from the Arabs naturally who have probably always known about it, in the late twenties. According to the few descriptions I have heard of it, it is a

great curving ramp of sand running up to a rock wall."

Von Dodenburg nodded. It was roughly the same description that Rommel had given him. "Can you tell me any more?" he asked. "What are the conditions that we may be expected to face tomorrow night, for example?"

"Not very much, Major, I'm afraid. Narrow gullies, framed by high rocks which I would expect would be too steep and too high for your tanks to climb."

"You mean we shall leave the Great Sand Sea through some sort of gully feature, which is already known to the Tommies?"

"Yes indeed. After all we of Afrikakorps Intelligence have known that the British have been using the Ascent since 1940. Indeed they call it the Easy Ascent."

"So if they knew we were coming, that is one of the places they would be waiting for us?" von Dodenburg demanded with sudden urgency.

"Yes, that is if they had enough of their special desert troops to cover the spot, which according to Major Saint of Afrikakorps Intelligence they don't. They are all up at the front." He stopped suddenly. The other man no longer seemed to be listening. For what seemed an age, von Dodenburg crouched there in front of the fire, lost in thought. Then he made up his mind. He rose to his feet. "Sergeant-Major Schulze!" he called. "Get me Sergeant Doerr of the panzer grenadiers at the double."

"At the double, sir," Schulze's huge voice came floating back through the glowing darkness.

Von Dodenburg looked at the Prof. "Now *Doktor* Reichert, I've got a little task for you this night before you sleep."

"Major?"

"I would like you to prepare a route to the Ascent for a one-eyed sergeant, who isn't too bright," von Dodenburg said with a smile on his face. "And at the double, Prof, if you please..."

Chapter 15

Von Dodenburg stared back along the column in the dawn light. There was a distance of fifty metres between each tank, as he prescribed the night before after they had reached the approach to the Ascent. He nodded to himself in satisfaction. His lesson had paid dividends. The two second-lieutenants had their crews well in hand now.

He turned and faced his front. The track which ran towards the Ascent was dangerously narrow – just broad enough for one vehicle – and as the Prof had predicted, they were hemmed in on both sides. To their right, the naked rock wall rose steeply above them, while to their left the abyss fell away to an unknown depth, veiled still in the pre-dawn mist. The approach was a dangerous place.

"Are you all right, Matz?" he called, pressing his throat mic.

"I went on the crash course, sir," Matz answered cheerfully enough, although the prospect before him would have daunted even the most experienced tank driver.

"All right, roll 'em!"

Matz pressed his starter. The tank's engines burst into life at once. The roar echoed and re-echoed back and forth. Von Dodenburg glared at the heights to his right. They were empty; then he concentrated on the task ahead, as Matz slipped out the clutch and the Mark IV began squeaking forward in low gear. Behind him the rest of the column followed.

The going was difficult, very difficult. In that confined space there was no leeway for even a fraction of an error. One slip to the left, the slightest skid, the merest extra pressure on the tracks and the 25-ton tank would hurtle over the side into space. In spite of the dawn cold, von Dodenburg found himself sweating furiously.

But the little driver seemed to have ice-water in his veins. Listening over the intercom, von Dodenburg could hear Matz's breath coming at steady regular intervals., he wasn't even cursing as was his wont when the driving became difficult. Matz was concentrating every ounce of alertness he could summon up on the task in hand.

Metre by metre the metal monster clambered up the steep track. In the turret, Schulze and von Dodenburg cocked their ears anxiously to one side,

listening urgently for the first sound of cracking shale or any sign of slipping which would carry them over the side. But none came. The tank crawled on.

Now they were totally boxed in, perhaps some fifty metres away from the summit, beyond which lay the Ascent. Silently, not daring to disturb Matz's total concentration on the job of driving, von Dodenburg nodded to Schulze. The big NCO understood. They had discussed it the night before. He raised machine pistol and leaned back, levelled it at the towering height above him. On the left of the turret, von Dodenburg did the same, aiming his machine pistol at the edge of the track, as if he half expected some enemy or other to appear over the side at any moment.

"Here they come, Englishman," the Blue Veil Chief hissed, raising his head from the ground, "I can hear them." Slaughter could not hear a thing, but then he did not have the phenomenal hearing of the desert Arabs. He nodded to Youssef, the 16-year-old Blue Veil who had become his lover during the midday break they had taken the day before after three days and nights without sleep. Shyly the handsome boy with his fluttering, coal-black eyelashes touched Slaughter's hand and then the two of them ran towards the gap in the rocks to the right of the spot where the uphill track ran into the Ascent. All around them, the Blue Veils did the same, merging and disappearing into the surroundings in a flash. Slaughter raised his Tommy gun, while the boy prepared his ancient, curved-butt rifle. They would fight together – and if necessary die together – as was the custom of the Blue Veils. Up front the aged Chief took one last look at his men's positions and apparently satisfied, ducked into a hole himself. The trap was well and truly set.

The big tank breasted the rise. Instantly von Dodenburg saw the danger – small round depressions in the sand to their front. "Stop!" he yelled desperately.

Matz had seen them only a fraction of a second after the Major and realised too what they were. He braked furiously, The tracks locked. Tearing up sand, rock, scrub, the tank shot down the incline with Matz fighting it frantically to a stop. He managed it. It came to a halt with its front sprockets hanging over the edge of the drop.

The next vehicle – the truck laden with supplies, driven by the Italians – was not so successful. The little Sicilian driver ran straight into the line of

mines. There was a tremendous explosion. Its front axle shattered, the driver slumped over the wheel behind the gleaming spider's web of the smashed windscreen, the big truck went plunging down the escarpment, completely out of control. Halfway down it struck an outcrop and went sailing high into the air, somersaulting to the bottom in a fantastic avalanche of sand, rock and bodies. With a great crash it disintegrated there.

Von Dodenburg had no time for the unfortunate Italians. Behind him on the trail, the long line of vehicles had ground to a confused halt and tankers were running up to the top to find out what was the trouble. Von Dodenburg cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Get back... For God's sake, get back there!" But even as he spoke, the Blue Veils sprang up from their hiding places and from the steep rock face to the left of the trail. A trooper went down, clutching his stomach. Another clapped his hand to his shoulder with a yelp of pain, swung round by the violence of the slug's impact. Another slapped the ground face-forwards without a sound. Then they broke and fled for the cover of the tanks. The Arabs had them completely pinned down, unable to use their big cannon because they were boxed in by the rocks and the narrow trail. Now it was man against man.

Von Dodenburg and Schulze reacted swiftly. As the first Blue Veils came running towards them, firing from the hip as they did so, the two SS men crouched behind the turret, and loosed a quick burst from left to right. The first wave of the Blue Veils were scythed down in an instant. The next wave suffered the same fate. But the third pushed home their attack boldly. Slugs whined and careered oft the tank's armour. The first grenade sailed through the air and landed on the steep glacis plate, rolled off and exploded directly in front of the driver's compartment. "Sod this for a lark!" Matz cried, "get me out of here!"

But the two desperate men on the turret had no time for Matz. The Arabs were swarming all around the tank now. It needed only one well-aimed grenade inside the turret and the slaughter would be complete. Even the Prof seemed to realise that fact. Just as the first Arab poked his cruel face over the top of the turret, he closed his eyes and jerked the trigger of his pistol. The bullet hit the Blue Veil directly in the face at two metres' range. His skull exploded. Shreds of gore and shattered bone flew high in the air and the headless body slumped dead on the armour.

Swearing furiously, an enraged Schulze risked his neck. Raising his body above the cover of the turret, he fired his machine pistol in furious

bursts from left to right, sweeping the other Arabs from the tank like flies. Next instant he ducked hastily as a hand grenade exploded on the side of the turret sending shards of red-hot metal howling frighteningly in every direction.

For a moment the Blue Veils held back from attacking. However, elsewhere the snap and crackle of small arms fire indicated that they were still coming forward. Von Dodenburg wiped the sweat from his brow, slammed a new magazine into his Schmeisser and dropped it inside to Matz.

"How are you fixed for mags?" he asked Schulze.

"Just one left sir," Schulze replied. "I got carried away a minute ago. Wasted too many slugs, I'm afraid."

Von Dodenburg nodded his comprehension and took out his pistol. He had a full magazine in it – nine bullets in all. It was ironic. Here they were in one of the world's most powerful tanks, armed with a 75mm gun and two 7.92mm machine-guns, packed with ammunition, which they were unable to use because the Blue Veils had already crept too close. They simply couldn't depress the guns that low.

"I wonder where that one-eyed arsehole Doerr has got to?" Schulze asked, slapping the machine pistol's magazine to check that it was fixed correctly.

The thick trump of a grenade shattered against the side of the trapped tank cut brutally into Schulze's words.

"Stand by," von Dodenburg yelled. "Here they come again!"

The turret armour sang and whined with the slap of slugs ricocheting off it. An Arab loomed up at the back of the turret. The Prof fired and missed. The butt of the Arab's rife slammed into the elderly academic's face. He crashed back against the armour, his false teeth hanging out of his shattered, bloody mouth.

Schulze spun round. There was no room to use his Schmeisser. He dropped it on the floor and thrusting out his right hand, fingers extended stiffly, poked two of them through the man's veil and into his nostrils. "Try that one on for size you bloody queer!" he grunted and heaved upwards. The Arab screamed shrilly. Hot blood spurted out of his nostrils and soaked his veil red. Schulze had no pity. He did not relax his terrible grip. Instead he ripped upwards even more, with the Arab wriggling frantically on his fingers like a hooked fish, blood streaming everywhere.

"Look out, Major!" the Prof quavered through bloody, toothless lips.

Von Dodenburg spun round. Two Arabs had appeared above the edge of the turret behind him. He fired instinctively. The right one threw up his arms with a scream of sheer agony and disappeared. The other lunged at the Major with a curved knife. He pressed the trigger of his pistol but nothing happened. He had run out of ammunition! The Arab's dark eyes above the veil sparkled with cruel triumph. His knife sliced through the air. just in time von Dodenburg parried it with his pistol. Steel locked against steel. Desperately von Dodenburg pulled back his pistol. Before the Arab could lunge again, he thrashed the pistol across his face. The man's nose bone snapped like a twig underfoot in a dry summer. Great gobs of thick red blood spattered the front of von Dodenburg's shirt. The Arab disappeared over the side of the turret, screaming.

The next moment another appeared, just as Schulze let go of the man he was holding. He dived for his machine pistol. On the turret-edge, the Arab levelled his rifle at the bending man's broad back, a look of triumphant anticipation in his night-black eyes. His finger crooked round the trigger. At that range he couldn't miss.

Just before he fired, a furious burst of 9mm slugs ripped his back away, and hands fluttering frenetically, he fell down to the sand. Von Dodenburg slumped to the bloody, cartridge-case littered metal deck in exhausted relief. There was no mistaking that sound. It was the high-pitched, hysterical hiss of a German machine pistol. Sergeant Doerr had found his way through the rock ridges after all. They were saved!

"*No!*" Youssef warned, as Slaughter raised his Tommy gun to tackle the panzer grenadiers who had appeared on the scene so dramatically and who were now pouring down the slope, firing from the hip at the completely surprised Blue Veils. "Don't fire!"

Before Slaughter could react, the boy had knocked the Tommy gun from his hands and throwing away his own precious rifle, had raised his hands in a token of surrender.

The nearest panzer grenadier, a fresh-faced youth, eyes wild under his peaked cap, raised his Schmeisser as if to mow the surrendering Blue Veil down. Then he thought better of it. "All right, keep those paws in the air," he cried in German, "and walk up to the half-tracks – slowly."

The Blue Veil did not understand German, but the iron butt of the Schmeisser slamming into his skinny ribs told him all he wanted to know.

Hands raised high in the air and accompanied by Slaughter, who had understood the German, he walked up the slope towards the waiting half-tracks, their engines still ticking over. "Can you drive?" Youssef asked out of the corner of his mouth, "one of those?"

Slaughter stepped over the body of the old Chief, his face now looking as if someone had thrown a handful of strawberry jam into it. "Yes," he whispered back. "But what are you going to do?"

Before the boy had time to reply, they were level with the first half-track and its driver was indicating that they should come forward slowly and be searched, his pistol held at the ready.

Youssef advanced as ordered, hands held straight in the air. Behind him, Slaughter gasped. The boy had one of the Blue Veils' tiny, yet deadly throwing knives tied to the back of his wrist by a piece of rag, and the soldier could not see it.

"That's enough," the young panzer grenadier ordered and jerked his pistol upwards threateningly.

The boy halted. "NOW!" he yelled at the top of his voice. He flipped the knife out of its hiding place and in one and the same movement threw it at the startled German. He screamed as it struck him directly in the chest. His legs started to crumple beneath him like those of a new-born foal. The boy kicked him in the crotch to hasten his fall and jumped forward. Slaughter dived after him. A wild burst of fire stitched the sand where they had just been standing. Slaughter flung himself into the driving seat and ripped off the brake. Machine-gun fire shattered the windscreen in front of him. Youssef kicked a space clear. Slaughter thrust home first gear and grabbed the wheel. The half-track slithered and then gripped. Zigzagging crazily, followed by angry cries and a wild hail of bullets, the Englishman steered the half-track down the Ascent, trailing a billowing plume of sand behind him. With a bone-jarring jolt they hit the bottom and then they were off at top speed, the armour-plating rattling madly, heading east into the desert. Within minutes they were a tiny dot on the horizon. Then they vanished altogether. Slaughter had got away.

Chapter 16

It was nearly thirty-six hours later. Now they were rolling due east. The going was becoming better by the hour and here and there von Dodenburg, standing next to a swollen-mouthed, puckered-lipped Professor, could see the faded tracks of other vehicles in the sand. He knew that they were slowly approaching the Ain Dalla Oasis where they would meet their unknown Egyptian contact.

That day he allowed the crews to have a two hour midday break, although they had overcome their previous exhaustion. The successful outcome of the battle against the Blue Veils had been the tonic they had needed. All the same von Dodenburg insisted that the cooks should prepare a proper meal for them instead of the usual fried sausages or bully beef, and ordered that an extra ration of water should be handed out too. They had overcome the perils of the desert, but ahead of them there was probably an even more perilous venture.

After the meal, while the men lolled or slept in the shade of their vehicles, he called the two young officers and Reichert and Schulze to his command tank. He offered each of them a half-mug of his precious bottle of cognac, then got down to business. "Now I am sure you have wondered why we have driven so far into this miserable wilderness. Some times I have wondered myself." He grinned ruefully at them. "Well, now I can tell you a little about our mission."

In spite of the terrible heat, the others leaned forward eagerly to listen to their CO's disclosures.

"Within one day's march of here, there is the oasis of Ain Dalla, the furthest British outpost in Egypt. Now, according to my information that outpost is held mainly by men of the Egyptian Army, with only a handful of British present. Am I not right, Prof?"

The academic, embarrassed by his lack of teeth contented himself with a quick nod.

"Now," von Dodenburg continued, "those Egyptian soldiers are loyal to the German cause, they only need the word from us and they will rise against the British. The Oasis will be in our hands."

"Holy straw-sack!" Meier cried with youthful enthusiasm. "Imagine – a

German base right in the rear of the British Army in Egypt!"

"Just imagine!" Major von Dodenburg agreed, concealing his irony and not attempting to enlighten the bright-eyed boy. There would be time enough to tell him Wotan's real mission later. "Now I intend to get word to those Egyptians tonight. Both of you young men have proved that you are capable of looking after yourselves and your men, so tonight I'm going to leave you in charge of the column."

The two officers beamed with pleasure at the CO's praise. Von Dodenburg smiled at them and went on. "Mind you, you must not be careless, because I'm taking Sergeant Doerr's panzer grenadiers with me. You'll have to flesh out an infantry guard from your crews."

"Don't worry, sir," Meier said promptly. "We'll cope all right, though speaking for myself, I'd prefer to be coming with you towards the sound of the guns."

"Sound of my arse!" Schulze snorted in disgust.

"Shut up, you oaf," von Dodenburg eyed the big Hamburger. Then turning to the young officer, "You'll get plenty of action before this business is over, Meier. Never fear. Now I want you to keep radio silence from now onwards. For all I know the Tommies might have a radio detection station at the Oasis and I don't want to give our presence away prematurely. At the same time, I want you to keep a strict radio watch throughout the night. Once we have sorted out the Oasis, I shall signal you. You will come straight away."

"*Natürlich*," the officers agreed in one voice.

"Good, then that's that," von Dodenburg concluded, rising to his feet.

"And what about me?" Schulze asked.

"You?" von Dodenburg beamed at him maliciously. "You, you big rogue, are coming with me."

"Balls of fire!" Schulze cursed. "Here we go again..."

***

They crouched at the edge of the Oasis, shivering in the night cold and nibbling the small dates they had plucked from the trees, watching the flickering fires go out one by one. Next to von Dodenburg, Schulze and Doerr were guzzling the cold Spring water as if it was Wotan's favourite *Holsten Bier* from Hamburg.

Von Dodenburg neither ate nor drank. His whole attention was concentrated on the little camp in the centre of Ain Dalla Oasis. He guessed the white bell tents arranged in two rigidly straight lines beneath the palms housed the Tommies. Unlike the average German soldier, the Tommy was highly disciplined and stuck strictly to Army regulations. On the other hand, the shabby, dirty-white pup tents slung haphazardly to the trees, or in patches of camel-grass would belong to the soldiers of the Egyptian Army. Indeed he had seen a fat soldier in khaki with the red fez of an officer on his head go into one of the pup tents before the camp settled down for the night.

Now he plotted the Egyptian sentries' positions, which was not difficult: the Egyptians were very careless, lighting cigarettes and calling to each other in alarm whenever they were startled by the mysterious night noises of the desert. In all there were six of them: two in the centre of the Oasis and four others patrolling the extremities. It would not be difficult to nobble them, he told himself, before they could raise the alarm.

He rolled over on his stomach and faced Schulze. "Listen, you and I are going down there."

Schulze clenched his ham of a fist. "Gonna get us a couple of those Arabs are we, sir?" he asked in happy anticipation.

"No, we are not, Schulze. We're just going to nobble one of their sentries before he can call out. But I don't want him injured. I want him in good shape so that he can tell us who's in charge down there and how he's going to deal with the Tommies. Clear?"

"Clear, sir."

Von Dodenburg turned to Doerr. "Sergeant, stand by with your panzer grenadiers. If we run into trouble, I'll fire a red and green flare. Then you come running."

"Yes sir," Doerr rapped smartly, and nudged Schulze. "Keep a tight asshole, Schulzi!"

Swiftly they slipped into the trees, heading towards the sentry on the nearside of the oasis. In an instant they had vanished into the pre-dawn gloom.

From their position in the dusty rocks near the bubbling spring the two SS men could see every detail of the sleeping sentry's face, as he dozed at his post, his back against one of the palms. He had a thin, stupid face and von Dodenburg surmised that if he spotted them his first reaction would be one of

fear. He would cry out.

He clapped his hands over Schulze's ear. "Work round the back of him. No noise. I don't want him yelling his head off. I'll come in from the front."

Schulze nodded his understanding. At once he wormed his way into the lush undergrowth around the spring and started to come in from the rear. Von Dodenburg crawled forward on his hands and knees, taking his time, his eyes intent on the sentry.

The sentry stirred. He had heard the faint noise the crawling officer was making. His eyelids flickered. Slowly he began to open his eyes. Von Dodenburg tensed. The sentry saw him. He opened his mouth to scream, just as von Dodenburg had anticipated he would, in the same instant that Schulze's brawny arm reached round the back of the palm tree and hooked around the sentry's skinny neck, smothering the cry.

Hastily von Dodenburg rose to his feet and faced the terrified Egyptian. "Listen," he said in hesitant English. "No one will hurt you. We are friends. Do you understand?" He nodded to Schulze and the NCO relaxed his grip sufficiently so that the man could answer.

Nothing came. The Egyptian's dark eyes rolled in wild fear – that was all. He did not understand English.

Von Dodenburg tried German, knowing as he did so that it was hardly likely that this product of some Cairo slum would be able to understand him. He was right. All that the man's eyes registered was blank, naked fear.

He had not calculated that the only language the man would understand would be his own. "All right, Schulze," he decided swiftly, "let's get him back. The Prof will have to explain everything to him in his own lingo. Come on – quick!"

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"His CO's name is Salah Mustafa – Major Mustafa," the Prof translated the sentry's words, as he squatted there, still a little fearful, in the middle of the crouched panzer grenadiers.

"Ask him if he likes the English," von Dodenburg commanded. The Egyptian's dark eyes blazed fanatically in response to this question and he drew his skinny brown forefinger across his throat as if he were slitting it open with a knife-blade.

"Have they a radio station at the Oasis?" was von Dodenburg's next

question.

The Egyptian answered that the British had one and they kept it exclusively under their control. Major Mustafa's Egyptians were not allowed to use it.

Von Dodenburg checked his watch. In another thirty minutes it would be dawn and the Tommies undoubtedly would get up. Everyone rose early in the desert, even the English. He would have to act – and act quickly.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the sentry's skinny face, he said, "Prof, tell him this – and make it simple and clear. He must wake his Major and tell him the Germans are coming in – in exactly thirty minutes. It will be the Major's task to ensure that the Tommies do not get to that radio set before we move in. All right?"

With much gesticulation, accompanied by excited nodding on the part of the sentry, the Prof translated von Dodenburg's words.

A few moments later he was gone, scuttling through the still palm trees to pass on von Dodenburg's message to his commander.

Hurriedly von Dodenburg made his own preparations for the attack. The panzer grenadiers would go in from both sides. There was to be no firing until they reached the white bell tents. That way there would be no risk of their new allies being hurt. Both groups would rendezvous on the radio tent, easily identifiable by the twin radio masts attached to its exterior.

"Remember no firing at all unless the Tommies put up any sort of resistance," were von Dodenburg's last words and with that the panzer grenadiers dispersed to their start positions, the new recruits among them clutching their weapons nervously in suddenly damp hands.

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But there was to be no combat for Sergeant Doerr's panzer grenadiers that dawn. Five minutes before zero hour, von Dodenburg, crouching in the undergrowth with Schulze and the Prof, was startled by a sudden burst of machine-gun fire followed by a series of screams. He rose to his feet at once and blew his whistle shrilly. "Come in," he called and charged forward at the head of the other section of panzer grenadiers.

Their sudden rush came to a halt among the tents. Tommies, most of them naked or clad only in their underpants were lying slaughtered as they slept. While the SS men stood there shocked and bewildered, a group of

grinning Egyptian soldiers butchered a grievously wounded Tommy, plunging their long bayonets time and time again into his naked back with wolfish pleasure. The tented camp was a bloody hell of murdered men, scuffed sand, gleaming empty cartridge cases, the groans of the dying drowned by the excited cries of the Egyptians who were already looting the possessions of the men whom they had just murdered. It was too much, even for hard-bitten Sergeant Doerr. He kicked the Egyptians plunging their bayonets into the body of the British soldier and shouted, "Stop it, you bunch of treacherous bastards!"

Von Dodenburg pulled him away, just as the Egyptians' commanding officer appeared from behind the radio tent.

"Major Mustafa, at your service!" he announced and raised his flabby hand to his jauntily tilted red fez, flashing von Dodenburg a gold-toothed smile. "We have done our job well – no?"

Von Dodenburg looked at the Major's pale face adorned with an immense pair of dyed black moustaches in a ludicrous imitation of a British Army officer, and took an instant dislike to the man. All the same he saluted and said, "You have done an excellent job, Major. Let me introduce myself. Von Dodenburg, Major, SS Battalion Wotan."

"Charmed," Major Mustafa said and extended his hand.

Von Dodenburg took it. The hand was flabby, damp and disgusting. He swore to himself that he would not touch another person until he had washed his own hand. "Did you get the radio station, Major?" he asked urgently.

Again the Major flashed that brilliant smile and indicated the young Tommy lying naked in the sand, a bayonet protruding from between his shoulder blades and what looked like a carving knife skewered right through his left leg and deep into the sand. "Yes, the pig didn't want to die."

"The radio operator?"

"Exactly." the Major smirked. "We of the Royal Egyptian Army are matched only by your own Army in efficiency." His smile vanished and he looked around the handful of panzer grenadiers grouped among the tents. "But is this all that his Excellency Marshal Rommel has sent us to rouse the Delta?" he asked in sudden alarm.

Von Dodenburg shook his head and fought back his disgust. He had seen the sudden look of abject fear in the Egyptian's black eyes. "No, I have a full company of tanks out there in the desert, waiting for my signal... Mark IVs," he added.

"Mark IVs!" the Major breathed, his fear vanishing immediately. "Excellent, the most powerful tank in the desert. Now we shall show those pigs of Englishmen." He spat viciously into the sand.

"How?" von Dodenburg protested. "I don't even know who my contact is for the next stage of this operation."

The Major smiled. "Be patient, my dear Major. We patriots have to be careful – very careful. The English have their spies everywhere in Egypt. As soon as my chaps have cleared away the mess in the radio tent, I shall personally raise our contact in Alexandria. No doubt, she will be here within twenty-four hours to give you full instructions."

"*She!*" von Dodenburg exclaimed.

"Yes," the Egyptian answered with a fat smile of pleasure. "Madame is the bravest of the brave. Not even Nassar and Sadat surpass her in courage and hatred of the English." He touched his swagger stick to his fez jauntily. "Now you must excuse me, Major, I must see that this rubbish" – he kicked the young radio operator's dead body – "is cleared away." He left von Dodenburg staring at his fat back in disbelief.

Madame! Now he knew why Field-Marshal Rommel had laughed when he had told the Major about his contact. Von Dodenburg shook his head, like a man trying to wake from a heavy sleep. What had he let himself in for with this comic opera mob – what indeed?

Book 4 – A Battle is Proposed

"Now this is the form. There must be no more failures. The men have experienced too many of them – the will tolerate no more."

General Montgomery to his Staff, El Alamein

Chapter 17

"You will please extinguish your cigarettes – and you will have exactly thirty seconds to cough. Thereafter there will be no more noise," the undersized, birdlike Commander announced, having, as always, a little difficulty with the pronunciation of his 'r's.

Dutifully the staff officers assembled outside his caravan stubbed out their cigarettes and cleared their throats. While the new commander of the Eighth Army spoke, they knew it would be fatal to cough. As they knew from the reports coming in from the U.K. about him, he had already pitched a full divisional commander out of a briefing for doing exactly that.

General Montgomery beamed at them intently. "Good," he said and tapped the big map pinned on the blackboard next to him. "Now, chaps, this is the form. The Battle of Alam Halfa last month delayed my own offensive. But if we'd have lost it, we would have lost Egypt to the Hun. Besides it was a boost for the Eighth Army and has given Tommy Atkins new confidence in the Command, which was sadly lacking in the past." He stared around at their faces, which were bronzed unlike his own – still white from an English winter. Some of the staff officers lowered their eyes, as if they were embarrassed by their commanders' past failures.

Montgomery raised his voice. "Well, chaps, Alam Halfa is history. We are concerned with the future, eh? How are we going to knock Jerry for a six – and for good? That's the problem!" He tapped the map. "The basic issue that confronts us is a difficult one. We face Rommel between the sea and the Qattara Depression on a front of forty-five miles. Intelligence tells me that Rommel is strengthening his defensive positions to a depth previously unknown in the desert. In addition there is no open or easy flank for us to go through or turn. In essence, gentlemen, it is going to be a slogging match."

He let the information sink in before continuing. "I'm sure that Rommel is expecting us. It is impossible to conceal the fact that we are going to launch an attack. The best we can do is to achieve tactical surprise. Our deception experts are working on it."

The staff officers looked knowingly at one another. What effective deception could Montgomery's 'experts' carry out in the completely open desert? All the same the cocky General seemed supremely confident, and that

was new in 8th Army commanders.

If the new Commander saw their looks, he did not let himself be affected by them. He continued his exposé in the same self-assured manner as before. "Now, we'll need a full moon to launch this one. The chaps will need to see their way through the Jerry minefields. Can't have a waning moon. Why, you may ask? Because I envisage a real dog-fight for about a week before we can break out and we'll need all the light we can get at night. So, gentlemen, you can guess when we're going to attack." He looked challengingly around his listeners' faces like a keen schoolmaster, expecting the best from his brighter pupils. "Yes, Horrocks?" He had particular difficulty in pronouncing the double 'r' as he turned to the long-faced, silver-haired commander of his XIII Corps.

"About the end of October?" General Horrocks ventured.

Montgomery beamed. "Exactly! According to the Met people, twenty-third of October to be completely precise, with full moon on the twenty-fourth. When do we attack then, chaps? I shall tell you. On the night of the twenty-third, just to keep Rommel on the hop."

Montgomery waited till the excited buzz of chatter had died away before he spoke again. "Now this is the form," he said and this time the thin smile on his lips had vanished and there was iron in his voice. "There must be no more failures. The men have experienced too many of them – they will tolerate no more. The people back home want victory, too. They have suffered nothing but defeats these last three black years. And, gentlemen, *I want victory!* Because my reputation depends upon it."

Montgomery said the words without a trace of embarrassment and his audience was amazed. Didn't he know that Rommel had beaten British commander after commander, smashed attack after attack, destroyed plan after plan? The Desert Fox always had some sort of trick up his sleeve. Would he not be able to turn the tables on this cocky little commander in the Tank Corps beret, who stood before them so bravely this burningly hot morning?

Montgomery seemed to be able to read their thoughts. He chuckled, a strange sound from a man who had so slight a sense of humour. "You think you've heard it all before – from the generals who preceded me, gentlemen, don't you? Perhaps you have. But those gentlemen were not Bernard Montgomery. This time Rommel will not fool me." He turned as if he were about to go into his caravan again. Then he seemed to change his mind.

Facing them once more, he said, "Let me tell you one last thing – in confidence – gentlemen. For the first two days or so of the battle I will not be fighting General Rommel. I shall be fighting his deputy, General Stumme. Rommel is on sick leave in Germany. Naturally he will hurry back once the battle starts, but by that time poor General Stumme will have lost it and I shall be the victor." He touched his hand to his beret very casually, pleased with the impact of this news. "Good morning. Thank you, gentlemen, that is all."

"Christ Almighty," a flabbergasted staff officer whispered to General Horrocks, after Montgomery had disappeared inside, "who the devil does he think he is – God?"

"No," General Horrocks replied urbanely, "Jesus Christ would be my guess..."

Chapter 18

If General Montgomery was confident that he was to be the victor of the impending battle, the few British and the many Egyptians of Delta's second largest city, Alexandria, were definitely not. Their money was on a German breakthrough.

A ragged Slaughter, accompanied by the wide-eyed boy Youssef could see that Alex was in a flap. There were middle-class Egyptians and British Army staff wallahs packing up and leaving the endangered city everywhere, jeered at by the ragged Egyptian poor who lined the streets. Once a portly British colonel, with the red tabs of the staff on his jacket, accompanied by his young blonde mistress, pulled up in front of them, halted by a barefoot policeman on point-duty. The skinny onlookers jeered and spat at the car. Pointing at the city's scavengers, the brown kites sailing lazily above them in the still air, they cried, "They're waiting for you, fat Englishman, when the Germans come!"

Richer Egyptians were flooding westwards in a slow moving mass of traffic, which grew even denser as the day wore on. Their cars were crammed with suitcases and shapeless bundles, and almost invariably topped by a canopy of striped mattresses tied on with scraps of rope as protection against aerial attacks. Over all the sweating, slow-moving column there hung an atmosphere of latent terror.

Youssef looked at the Egyptians in wonder. Slaughter nudged him and said with contempt, "There are two species of men in the Delta, boy. The great mass of the fellaheen, miserable human scavengers – and those men you see in the motor cars: the masters. They smell of perfume and corruption – *and fear!*" He spat in the dust. The two of them came in sight of the great barracks. In the whorehouses ringing the place the half-naked whores hung out of the windows jeering at the glum-faced soldiers and singing mockingly:

"Me no likee English sold-ier
Ger-man soldier come ashore
Ger-man soldier plenty mon-ey
Me no jigajag for you no more."

This time Slaughter did not attempt to steal into Mustafa Barracks. He had no

time. Instead he showed his pass and was allowed through immediately, followed by the boy. They passed a pile of secret documents being burnt on the parade ground under the supervision of grim-faced Redcaps. Obviously Mustafa Barracks was preparing for the worst.

Five minutes in the echoing anteroom opposite Brigadier Young's office told Slaughter that the base wallahs had little confidence in the new Commander's ability to win the impending battle. Immaculate staff officers hurried to and fro with anxious drawn faces, speaking in grave whispers, and from behind one of the closed office doors, he could hear a petulant upper-class voice saying, "But it is as clear as the nose on your face, old chap. The Arabs are ready to rise up at any moment. There'll be blood in the streets before this week is out. Believe you me."

Finally Brigadier Young was ready to receive him. Slaughter strode into the big airless room. Young looked much older than when he had last seen him. There were dark blue circles under his eyes and there was a nervous tic in his left cheek which he seemed unable to control.

"Good to see you again, Slaughter," he said without conviction, his voice slightly unsteady. "And your news?"

"The Jerries have broken through the Great Sand Sea. My boys and I failed to stop them at the Ascent. For all I know they are now heading for the coast."

Brigadier Young looked at the ragged little Intelligence man aghast. "Oh, my God," he groaned. "How many, in heaven's name?"

"Perhaps a couple of hundred of them, at the most, sir. But I counted at least a dozen Mark IVs."

"Christ! Not even the new Sherman can stand up to that monster." Young stopped and thought for a moment. "But I say, Slaughter," he said, a little more cheerfully, "a company or two of Jerry infantry, even if they are supported by tanks, can't do that much, can they?"

"I'm afraid they can!" Slaughter said severely. There were too many officers in the Delta like Brigadier Young, who invariably misread the situation in Egypt. One day, if they weren't careful, they'd lose not only Egypt but the whole of the Middle East because of it.

"As far as the Gypsies are concerned, the Germans are simply cannon-fodder. They are expendable. But let them appear in Cairo or here in Alex and be shot to pieces by our chaps, and they'll be the symbol the plotters need

to rouse the students and fellaheen. Thereafter the Germans can disappear from the scene." He pressed home his point brutally. "Let that armour appear in the centre of Cairo – and it's my guess that is where they are heading – for one single hour, and we'll have a revolution on our hands. The Eighth will be stabbed in the back and, within a week, Rommel will be on the Nile."

Brigadier Young gave a groan and let his greying head sink into his hands in a gesture of utter defeat. "What can we do? My God, what can we do?" he gasped. Suddenly his body was racked by a sob.

Slaughter looked at the Brigadier's heaving shoulders with contempt. He and his boys had more guts than all these big tough he-men, who broke down like women once real trouble started.

"What can we do?" he echoed, iron in his voice. "This is what you can do. You can give me the forty odd SAS men you still have here at Mustafa."

Brigadier Young raised his head slowly. "But what good are a couple of score men, even if they are from the Special Air Service?" he asked in a voice thick with emotion.

Slaughter leaned forward across the big desk and told him in an urgent flow of words. When he was finished, he looked eagerly at the Brigadier. "Well, sir, what do you think?"

"But my God, Slaughter," Young protested. "I'm a British officer, you're a British officer. We can't condone – *murder!*"

Slaughter's eyes blazed. "Listen, Young," he snarled, dropping all pretence of military courtesy. "If we lose the British Empire, it will be because of people like you. Our forefathers – the men who gained the Empire for us – were ruthless, brutal, unscrupulous thieves and murderers, whose sole morality was this: *what is good for England is good*. This time if the Germans break though the Delta, they will undoubtedly capture the Suez Canal. When that goes, there'll be nothing to stop them until they reach India and you know what desperate straits we are in there due to Jap pressure. Failure this time could well mean the end of the British Empire."

"The end of the British Empire," Young breathed.

"Yes." Slaughter pressed home his point, forcing a smile although he had never felt less like smiling in all his life. "Look at it this way, sir. One day we'll order another Scotch in some London pub and paint up this whore of a war in such wondrous colours that she'll look like a latter-day saint. The real, nasty bitch will be forgotten. But first we've got to win it! Then what we have to do this month no-one will want to remember." Slaughter's fake smile

vanished. "Do I get those SAS men, sir?"

Brigadier Young gave in. With a hand that shook, he picked up his bell. "You get them, Slaughter... But for God's sake, *never* let me see your face in this office again."

Chapter 19

The SAS man's big ammo boot smashed against the door. The wood around the lock splintered and gave and they moved in. Two of them, with Slaughter bringing up the rear, crashed into the hall, slithering on the tiled floor. From upstairs there were cries of alarm. A woman shouted something in Arabic. When there was no answer she repeated her demand in atrocious French.

Slaughter nodded. The two big SAS men raced up the marble steps. From above there came the sound of cries, blows, and curses.

"Is this him, sir?" the SAS Corporal demanded, thrusting their prisoner to the edge of the decorative iron-work.

Slaughter stared up at the trembling face of the man in the striped lounging pyjamas, which the richer Egyptians liked to wear in the afternoon. "That's him," he snapped.

The Egyptian politician seemed suddenly to realise what they were going to do. "No, no, please," he cried in English. "I have wife, I have children. His pleas ended in a howl of pain as the other SAS man rammed the butt of his Sten onto his fat brown fingers, clinging desperately to the rail. The next moment the two of them seized him and tossed him down into the hall below. He screamed and hit the marble floor like a sack of wet cement. His spine snapped audibly and his head twisted at an impossible angle. Slaughter knelt down swiftly, while the two SAS men clattered down the stairs.

"Dead," he announced.

"Come on," the big Corporal said. "Let's beat it before the Gypsy rozzers turn up!"

They ran out of the open door, leaving behind the silence of death.

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"*But I am a doctor*," the Egyptian protested across the metal table, littered with gleaming instruments of his calling. "I am not interested in politics. None of us here is interested in politics, simply in medicine."

Hastily Slaughter checked his list. "You are all traitors and terrorists," he announced. "You, Dr Ali Hamshari, Dr Abdel Shibi and Dr Mustafa

Hafez."

The young bespectacled Egyptian doctor knew he was trapped. The clinic was packed with illegal explosives and by now the British rummaging around below must have found them. "We are patriots," he declared proudly, "whose sole aim is to throw you English out of our –"

An SAS man rammed his rifle butt into the doctor's stomach and his words ended in a startled gasp of pain. "Outside with them," Slaughter ordered, putting away his list till the next house. "Shoot 'em!"

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The Egyptian, whose playboy image had concealed his work for the revolution, suddenly jabbed his elbow into the stomach of the SAS man holding him, while Slaughter checked his list. The SAS was caught off guard and the Egyptian dived for the door.

The SAS corporal was quicker. He fired from the hip. The luxurious penthouse apartment stank of cordite and the fugitive screamed and dropped to the thickly carpeted floor. Blood pouring from the gaping hole in his back and dripping onto the white sheepskin carpet, he continued to crawl to the door.

Slaughter nodded to the boy, whose eyes gleamed. He pulled out his knife and crouching over the crawling man, drew the wicked curved blade across his throat, as if he were slaughtering a sheep. The boy looked up and grinned, he wiped his bloody knife on the Egyptian's immaculate Savile Row suit.

"Miserable bastard," Slaughter said and ticked the playboy's name off his list. "Come on, all of you."

***

In just one afternoon, Slaughter and his hardened SAS carried out their bloody task. Blinded by hatred of the Gypsies and the Arabs and brutalized by their years of hard fighting and hard living in the desert, the troopers under Slaughter's command rushed from house to house all that long October afternoon, murdering those suspected by the Major of belonging to the organization which was ready to rise up and throw the British out of Egypt. Twice they bluffed their way into Egyptian Army barracks and before the

eyes of hundreds of Egyptian soldiers, shot down young officers who belonged to the group around Nasser. They told the provost marshal permanently stationed outside Dolly's House, the capital's most expensive brothel, to disappear, and in the heavy luxury of that perfumed place, stabbed the Egyptian General to death, as he lay in the arms of his black girl.

But slowly the plotters in the capital found out what was going on. The telephone lines buzzed with rumours and warnings. Nasser went underground. The King ordered his palace to be locked and shuttered, and called out the Palace Guard. One by one the survivors, so confident that same morning that nothing could go wrong with their plan, fled like rats before a flame, and as that terrible afternoon drew to a close, Major Slaughter began to feel that he had crushed the revolt before it had really started.

But Major Slaughter was wrong for once. For just before the death of the young Egyptian Army Captain, standing ashen-face with fear in his bedroom, he had the presence of mind to call a number in Alexandria and give her the alternative code-word. She gasped an anxious query.

"Pomme," he began, just as the Englishmen broke into his bedroom, Sten guns blazing. He went down, his stomach ripped open in a welter of blood and entrails, with her name on his dying lips. "*Pomme*..."

Chapter 20

The clatter of the tracks alerted the whole oasis. Von Dodenburg, who had been dozing in the shade of a palm tree sprang to his feet in alarm. But Schulze beat him to it. "All right, you crappy wet-tails," he bellowed, fumbling furiously for his machine-pistol. "Get the lead out of your asses! We're getting visitors!"

The tankers ran for their vehicles, carefully camouflaged by palm fronds, while the half-naked panzer grenadiers doubled for the slit trenches they had dug all around the oasis.

Von Dodenburg ran across to Major Mustafa's tent. For once the fat Egyptian Major, who seemingly spent most afternoons dallying with his handsome young batman, was not in his bunk. Von Dodenburg had no time to ponder his disappearance. "Come on, the lot of you," he yelled to the crew of his command tank. "Let's see what's going on!"

With the Prof trailing behind, von Dodenburg, Schulze and Matz doubled through the burning sand to where the command tank was hidden at the edge of the northern side of the oasis. Von Dodenburg focused his binoculars on the lone vehicle ploughing its way through the desert.

He had never seen anything like it before. The top seemed to belong to a large civilian car, vintage 1920, or thereabouts, but instead of the wheels one would expect on such a vehicle, they were replaced by tracks.

Swiftly he handed the glasses to Matz. "What do you make of it, Corporal?" he asked Wotan's vehicle recognition expert.

Matz surveyed the vehicle in silence for a while, as it came ever closer, his leathery face creased in a puzzled frown. "I don't know exactly, sir. But I think it's a twenties Rolls-Royce mounted on probably a Berliet track chassis. The Tommies and the Frogs used them on their trans-Sahara expeditions in the thirties."

Von Dodenburg's face hardened. "Allies, eh?" Blowing three shrill signal blasts on his whistle, he cried, "Stand by everybody! This might be trouble!"

Throughout the oasis, the camouflaged tanks swung their long hooded guns towards the strange vehicle which seemed to be walking straight into their trap. Tensely the half-naked crews waited for the order to fire.

But for once, Wotan's muscle was not needed; for to von Dodenburg's surprise, a familiar figure plodded stolidly into the bright circle of his lenses and approached the slow-moving vehicle. It was the Egyptian Major. As von Dodenburg watched in complete bewilderment, the tracked vehicle stopped. The major clicked to attention and saluted, before crooking his arm around the cab support and waving the unseen driver to proceed. "Now what the devil is that fat fool up to now?" the Major hissed.

"Let's go and see, sir," Schulze suggested, already dropping to the ground and waving his arms back and forth to indicate that the gunners should not shoot in anticipation of von Dodenburg's expected order.

Together, followed by Matz and the Prof, they thrust their way through the palms towards the strange vehicle, watching the Major busily chatting to the car's passenger, who was still obscured by his body.

With a groan and a hiss of escaping steam from the boiling radiator the ancient conveyance came to a halt. The Major dropped into the sand and with a great flourish opened the squeaky rear door, which they could now see was adorned with an elaborate coat-of-arms containing enough heraldic animals to stock a small zoo.

Schulze caught a glimpse of an elegant, silk-clad leg beyond the Egyptian Major's bulk and nudged Matz excitedly in the ribs. "Silk stockinged shit!" he whispered.

"Impossible," Matz breathed. "It's a mirage!"

"Shut up!" von Dodenburg began and then his mouth fell open with surprise when he saw the woman who emerged from the back of the ancient Rolls.

She was a small woman, who stepped out of the car like a jewelled bird, all fluttering hands, her bright eyes darting along the faces of the staring soldiers, her raddled cheeks rouged and her dyed canary-yellow hair aglow. "Hello, boys," she cried in a husky American voice and waved a hand at them, the fingers of which looked as if they had just been dipped in bright-red blood. "I must look a sight. My maid didn't have time to arrange my eyelashes in Alex." She giggled at her own joke, which meant nothing to the gawping German and Egyptian soldiers.

The beaming Egyptian Major turned to von Dodenburg."Major," he said with smirking formality, 'may I present you to your contact from our glorious Movement, Madame –"

"*Pomme.*" The strange woman beat him to it. She extended her skinny

hand to von Dodenburg to be kissed. "They call me Pomme," she breathed, fluttering her false eyelashes madly. "because I've been eaten so much, I guess." And with that she went oft into another peal of shrill laughter.

***

Sue-Ann 'Appleblossom' Keppel had been born in Austin, Texas. Her voice as a long-distance telephone operator had so charmed a Texas cattle baron that he had made a blind date with her and within the month they were married. Six months later, he was dead – "She plum screwed him to death," the neighbours said maliciously – and suddenly she found herself the heiress to a fortune of fifty million dollars.

The widow, clad in black from head to foot, flew immediately to New York, where she dumped the expensive widow's weeds in a hotel room, changed into an outrageous red costume, picked up the first man she found in the hotel bar, went to bed with him for the next forty-eight hours and left for Europe the day afterwards. She bought her way into London society, or that part of it which suited her own tastes – "dope, drink and black boys," she would sing to herself in the mirror while preparing for her many parties. But there were those in London society who felt she was 'common' with her vulgar American accent and her painted face. In 1930 she gave it up and moved to the Riviera, where the local 'set' were more to her own wild taste.

There were naked luncheon parties on board the flat-bottomed boats anchored off their gleaming coastal villas; drunken speed-boat trips; long hours of naked, doped sunbathing; masked balls that invariably ended in an orgy. For half a decade she drifted in drunken, drugged ecstasy through the decadent pleasures of a glamorous society which was doomed to extinction in 1940.

In 1935 she met Ali, an Egyptian who was half her age, a 'simply divine dancer', as she described him to the set. Ali swept her off her feet and when he learned that the middle-aged woman was a multi-millionairess, his ardour increased tenfold. He promised her the Pyramids, the Nile, the Desert. Pomme's romantic imagination, which had been moulded as an adolescent by Ramon Navarro, blossomed. She told the set she was going to Egypt on her 'honeymoon'. When they replied that she was not yet married, she told them that "Pomme never buys a pig in a poke. You know these Eastern guys – very exotic, but no endurance. We'll get hitched later."

But the 'honeymoon' on the Nile had never taken place. At Alex the British security police were waiting for Ali. Not only had he stolen five thousand Egyptian pounds from the Cairo bank where he had worked, he had also used half of it to buy weapons for the illegal Egyptian terrorist movement. Ali disappeared behind bars. She never saw him again.

Pomme stayed in Egypt. She discovered that Cairo and Alex were full of 'Alis'. A succession of them comforted her, and her sexual desires were replaced by political ambition. As she told visiting members of the set who wondered why she had buried herself in Egypt. "Peggy Guggenheim collects paintings. I collect revolutionaries – they're much more stimulating!"

But the slaughter of the Cairo underground movement the previous day had made her realise for the first time in a long life of pleasure that she was in danger – real danger. The game – playing at revolution – was over. Either the Egyptians pulled it off and kicked out the English, or the Limeys would throw her into jail. All her money wouldn't save her, she knew that. The English had shown just how cruel, how ruthless they could really be when the chips were down. On this October afternoon in the desert, Appleblossom Keppel was *scared*.

She rapped her hard bony fingers on the table, as if she was wearing tiny ivory thimbles and announced "Major Ron Duisburg–"

"Von Dodenburg," the Major corrected her, half amused and half alarmed by this flamboyant woman whose orders he was – apparently – to follow.

"Now there has been serious trouble in Cairo, very serious. The Limeys must have tumbled to what was going on there. All day yesterday, they sent out their killers..." In a hectic, breathless flow of words, she explained the events of the past twenty-four hours in the Egyptian capital, and how Slaughter's murderous methods had crushed the planned revolt in that city. "Sadat and Nasser," she said, mentioning names which meant nothing to von Dodenburg, but which earned the fat Egyptian Major's enthusiastic praise, "have gone underground. We can count them out of what is to come. But the Limeys have not reckoned with yours truly. Pomme managed to get out from under and warn our organization in Alexandria. Our group is still pretty well intact there, and Pomme still has a couple of surprises for the Limeys up her knickers. If she wore any, which she don't!

"But before I discuss any plans, young man," Pomme went on, "let's

have a drink. My tonsils are shrivelled."

"Coffee?" von Dodenburg suggested, his curt English accent at odds with Pomme's drawl.

"*Coffee!*" she exclaimed in mock horror. "Coffee is for peasants. I only drink champagne." She looked up at Schulze, his enormous chest gleaming with sweat. "Sonny, you go over to my vehicle and get the key from that black boy at the wheel. You'll find a chest of iced champagne in the boot."

Schulze sprang to attention and bowing stiffly, saluted as if he were a member of the old Prussian *Garde du Corps*. "*Zu Befehl, gnädige Frau,*" he snapped in his best German. Von Dodenburg looked up at him in open disbelief.

"Nice young fellah," Pomme said slowly and thoughtfully, as Schulze moved out of the shade of the palms to fetch the champagne. "From the way his shorts grab his crotch, it looks as if he carries a nice cannon around with him."

Five minutes later, Pomme raised her sparkling glass of pink *chaim-pain*. "Well, gents," she toasted the officers, "here's mud in your eyes. Down the hatch!" She downed the sparkling wine in one gulp, much to the admiration of a watching Schulze. "The Limeys think they've got everything nicely wrapped up in the Delta. Well, they might have in Cairo. All the same, old Pomme thinks she can still catch them out."

"How?" von Dodenburg demanded.

By way of an answer, she thrust her empty glass at Schulze. "Here, handsome, fill 'em up again," she said.

Schulze did not understand English, but he understood that particular gesture well enough. He did what she commanded, while von Dodenburg waited impatiently for the woman to answer his question. "Thanks, handsome," she looked up at the giant ex-docker. "I bet you could bring a sparkle to a girl's eyes," she breathed, fluttering her long false eyelashes in maidenly confusion.

"*Madame Pomme,*" von Dodenburg said firmly.

"Oh, yes, I was saying." She downed the champagne in one quick gulp. "Alex – Alexandria – is the place where we're gonna *screw the Limeys!*"

Chapter 21

Schulze lay exhausted in the palms, next to a disgruntled Matz, watching the departure ceremonies. Idly he soothed the blood-red marks that covered his broad back. "What a woman," he breathed, as he followed Pomme's progress to the waiting Rolls. "What a damn woman!"

"You might have thought of yer old pal, Schulze," Matz said miserably. "I haven't had a bit since the House."

Schulze did not take his admiring gaze off the woman, who was now saying a few last words to von Dodenburg at the door of the Rolls. "You don't share a woman like that, even with your best friend, Matzi," he replied in a hushed voice. "That would be almost... almost..." he fumbled for a word to express the depth of his emotion, "...against religion. *Sacrilege*, they would call it."

"Bollocks," Matz snapped unfeelingly, and stalked off towards their CO.

Schulze ignored his friend's impassioned outburst. He was too busy staring at the Madame's vibrating rear end – out in the desert, the coloured driver had started the engine. Von Dodenburg closed the door behind Pomme. The driver engaged first gear and with a rusty squeak of tracks, the Rolls started to move off. Von Dodenburg and the Egyptian Major stiffened to attention and saluted. A white arm appeared through the window and answered their salute with a flutter of a white lace handkerchief.

Turning, the Major caught sight of Matz. "Corporal, where's the other rogue?" he demanded.

"Sergeant-Major Schulze?"

"Yes."

"He's over there in palms, sir."

"The latrine?" von Dodenburg queried.

"No sir," Matz answered, completely straight-faced, though there was a malicious gleam in his wicked little eyes, "I think he's collecting a few flowers – for Madame."

"You'll have my boot up your flowery arse in a minute, you cheeky rogue," von Dodenburg snorted. "Get him over here. I want to assemble the company. I have something to say to them."

"At the double, sir!" Matz answered smartly. He floundered through the sand to where Schulze still lay dreamily, gazing after the black dot of the Rolls.

With a reluctant sigh, Schulze clambered to his feet and cupping his hands to his mouth, he called with unusual mildness, "All right, you fellows, fall in in the centre of the oasis. The CO wants to have a chat with us."

Matz shook his head in disbelief. "As I live and breathe," he said, "*Schulze's in love.*"

But Major von Dodenburg's voice, when he spoke to the assembled company, was dry, cold and completely unemotional. Pomme was a bold, resourceful woman and the Egyptian Major had been full of enthusiasm for her plan. But to von Dodenburg it seemed not only 'daring' (as the Egyptian had described it the night before), but decidedly dicey. If it went wrong, the company would be isolated in the middle of a British-held town, hundreds of kilometres away from the nearest German troops.

"Soldiers, comrades," he began formally, staring at the honest young faces of the boys seated around him. "At last, I can tell you what the real purpose of our mission here is – why we have had to undertake such a terrible journey through the desert to this Godforsaken place. We are to strike a blow against the enemy in Egypt, which will enable Marshal Rommel to achieve final victory and allow him to throw the Tommies out of Egypt for good. Perhaps, even, out of Africa altogether."

He allowed them a few moments of excited chatter, before holding up his hand for silence. "As you all realise, a handful of men, even from the famed Assault Regiment Wotan, cannot drive the Tommies from Egypt. We need the aid of the native population to do that, and we must realise that the local people need proof that the Germans will come to their assistance and support them when they rise against the English tyrants.

"What then is our task, comrades?" Von Dodenburg answered his own question. "It is going to be a bold and dangerous one. To the north of this oasis lies Egypt's second largest city. At present, according to the information I have received from our Egyptian allies, it is thinly defended by British troops. They have all been sent to the desert. What is left of them is concentrated in one large military installation – Mustafa Barracks." He licked his lips, suddenly dry, when he thought of what he was going to have to say next in order to persuade these innocents that what they were intending to do

was feasible, when it was the most harebrained, crazy plan of operation he had ever been party to.

"It will be our task to knock out that base so that the Egyptian people can rise against the English oppressors without fear of military intervention. Once Alexandria revolts, so I have been assured by our Egyptian friends, all of Egypt will be up in arms. The Eighth Army's supply lines will be cut to the desert. They will be forced to move large numbers of troops from the front to deal with the revolt. In that moment, Field-Marshal Rommel will launch an all-out attack on the 8th Army's positions and sweep all before him." He pressed the fingers of his right hand to emphasise his point, as if he were crushing a fly in them. "The British will be finished. They won't be able to stop running till they reach the Suez Canal – and Egypt will be ours."

He paused for breath and stared at his men's faces. They were glowing with excitement and he knew what thoughts were flashing through their heads: youthful dreams of glory, leading a popular revolt against the British oppressor to return home to the Reich, laden with medals, with flowers cast at them as they marched through the streets by pretty young girls in Hitler Maiden uniforms. Perhaps even a reception by the Führer himself. It would be the summer of 1940 all over again: that heady June of victory when it had seemed Germany had won the war and was well on the way to creating a new and better Europe, freed of the decadence, injustice and inequality of the past.

He forced his own gloomy thoughts to the back of his mind. "Comrades, I shall be working out the details of our attack on Mustafa Barracks with your officers and NCOs later, but before I dismiss you, I should like to enquire if you have any questions."

"Yes sir," the cry went up from a score of enthusiastic throats: "WHEN DO WE ATTACK?"

Von Dodenburg looked at their excited faces, eager for some desperate glory, and felt sadness welling up inside him. He swallowed hard.

"On the morning of 24 October, 1942," he answered, then he could no longer bear to look at them. Almost brutally, he cried, "Dismiss!"

The die had been cast.

Book 5 – Stab In the Back

"Listen Schulze, I can't risk those boys back there on a half-assed job like this. I need more gen before I attack that barracks."

Major von Dodenburg to Sergeant-Major Schulze, Alexandria

Chapter 22

Standing with his staff next to his caravan, Montgomery felt the sudden shock of silence. For the first time since he had arrived in the desert, there was absolute silence. Not a gun, not a rifle fired.

It was a beautiful night. The desert was bathed in white moonlight, outlining the hundreds of tanks and trucks waiting for the battle to begin. Here and there a soldier stood next to his vehicle, cigarette cupped carefully in his hand, staring to the front, where the Germans lay waiting for them.

For once in his life Montgomery was nervous. It had taken him nearly twenty-five years of service to get this far in the Army. Now all that effort, all that preparation, all that heartache and self-sacrifice could be destroyed in a flash if this battle went wrong. He had enemies enough in London. And they wouldn't give him a second chance. He must win at El Alamein!

The minutes ticked by. Nine o'clock passed. Across the way Horrocks came out of his caravan. He seemed his usual happy self. Nine-thirty! There was not much time left. Montgomery said a quick prayer. Ahead of him the men at the vehicles were tossing away their cigarette ends – they glowed like fire-flies in the sand – and were clambering into their cabs.

Suddenly the whole sky to his front blazed with light. For what seemed a long time, there was no sound. From left to right, as far as he could see, the dead-white lights flickered and danced soundlessly. Then the sound of 1,000 guns firing hit him an almost physical blow in the face, so much so that he reeled back, repelled by that tremendous overwhelming noise.

His mood of reverie vanished in a flash. He tried to picture what Stumme at the receiving end of that murderous barrage must be thinking at this moment. He must know now what was coming. How ready was the German commander to tackle him when the barrage ceased and the troops began to move forward into the battle? *Could he pull it off?*

He turned and walked back to his caravan. His staff followed automatically. Behind him the enemy line began to glow here and there, indicating that a German gun position had been hit and was burning. Montgomery did not look back, although Brigadier Dennis, the commander of 30th Corps' artillery, was crying out loud with passionate enthusiasm, "Oh, I say – good shooting! Bang on, chaps, really bang on!"

Instead he stopped at the door of his caravan and said to his Chief-of-Staff, General Francis de Guigand, "Freddie, I think I'll turn in now."

"And the battle?" the burly staff officer asked, a little surprised at his Chief's intention, although he knew Monty of old.

Montgomery's eyes twinkled in the ruddy glare of the barrage. "The battle, Freddie?" he asked. "That thing – that thing will take care of itself. Good night." With that, the General mounted the stairs to his bunk and waiting glass of hot milk, as if he had not a care in the world.

The Battle of El Alamein had begun!

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Waiting tensely in the doorway of the street in which she had her apartment, Slaughter saw the faint-pink fluttering on the horizon. Jerry must be getting a bashing on the front, he told himself, but he had more important things to concentrate on. Up the street, a flash of blue light broke the blackout. It flicked on and off three times. It was the signal he was waiting for. The SAS troop was in position.

"Come on," he whispered urgently to the boy Youssef.

The boy stuck the goad sharply into the donkey's backside and with a grunt, the awkward brute moved into the alley. The two of them, dressed in the rags of the fellaheen, started to wander down, knocking at each door in turn and bawling out the wares the had to sell.

As Slaughter had anticipated, more curses were directed at them than doors opened. It was the reception he wanted. Up the road the woman's butler would hear the racket and not attempt to activate the alarm system when they came level with her door.

They reached the American woman's house. He nudged the boy. "Ready?" he whispered urgently out of the side of his mouth.

The boy who had taken to the swift, ruthless murdering of the last few days as if he had been born to it, nodded.

Slaughter stopped in front of the back door and raising his head, bellowed at the top of his voice in best pedlar style.

"Go away!" an irritated voice exclaimed from the kitchen. "Go away, you black pig!"

Slaughter howled again, praising the cheapness of his wares, which it broke his heart to give away at such prices when he already was a poor man

with an ailing wife and six starving children to support. Suddenly his heart leapt. The trick was working. Through the poorly blacked-out door, he could see a chink of light. Then came the sound of heavy boots approaching the door. Slaughter looked at the boy. He was already in position, knife held close to his chest.

There was the rattle of a chain being released. Slaughter increased his wailing. The boy tensed. A bolt was drawn back. The door opened slightly. A yellow light sliced into the blue gloom of the blackout.

"Son of a poxed-up whore, why are you disturbing the peace of honest men –"

The butler's words ended in a thick grunt of pain, as the boy's knife struck him in the chest. The bowl of steaming white beans which he had been eating dropped from his lifeless fingers and shattered on the tiled floor. "Quick!" Slaughter urged.

The boy jammed his heel into the dying man's guts and the butler dropped with a gasp like the air hissing out of a punctured tyre.

Slaughter whistled shrilly. The SAS men, thick woollen stockings over their boots, ran noiselessly down the street. Within seconds, they were in the back of the house, which was heavy with the smell of spiced cooking.

Hastily the men, strung out in single file, weapons at the ready, moved down the long dark passage which linked the servants' quarters. They emerged into a large round hall, decorated with modernistic paintings and Arab wall rugs. From above there came the sound of several voices.

Slaughter jerked his revolver upwards. "Remember I want the woman alive," he ordered.

Pressing themselves into the shadows close to the wall, the SAS men started to mount the winding stairs. Slaughter, bringing, up the rear, licked suddenly dry lips. He must get that woman! There could be no slip up now. She was the last link in the chain. Once he found out what the damned American woman knew, he would have the whole rotten bunch of them by the short and curlies. The damned great revolution would he over before it had ever begun.

Slaughter started. A door had opened above them. The buzz of voices grew louder. The SAS men halted as one. They pressed themselves deeper into the shadows. Slaughter felt his heart racing madly. If they were spotted now, the woman would have a chance of escape. But luck was on their side. Whoever had opened the door, closed it again without seeing the dozen men

hiding in the shadows only a handful of yards away.

They made the top of the stairs without any further difficulty. Slaughter nodded to the boy again. Youssef knew perfectly what he was to do. While the SAS men grouped themselves on either side of the door under Slaughter's direction, he posted himself directly in front of it.

"Now," Slaughter whispered.

The boy knocked three times on the door in the Egyptian servant fashion and without waiting for a call to come in, he opened it and stood there, as if surprised, pushing the door even wider open with the side of his right foot.

"Who the Sam Hill are –" a woman's voice cried in English.

Slaughter did not give her time to finish. "GO!" he commanded. The desert veterans tumbled through the door, pushing the boy to one side. Inside, the little group of young men, some in the uniform of the Egyptian Army, sipping green tea scented with mint, scattered in alarm.

A very dark Captain, who might have been Sudanese, grabbed his .38. The SAS corporal was quicker. His Sten chattered, its racket deadened by the silencer. The Captain's shirt flushed with blood and he slammed against the wall, leaving splatters of red on the luxurious wallpaper.

The sight was enough for the rest of the plotters.

Faces contorted with horror, they raised their hands, while the woman was sick into the brass spittoon.

Slaughter had no mercy. Shoving through the ashen-faced Egyptians, stepping over the Sudanese slumped on the floor, he grabbed hold of her fluffy yellow thatch and dragged her face up from the spittoon. "Look at me, you bitch!" he commanded hoarsely.

Pomme stared up at the Major, her face deathly pale under the mask of rouge, the vomit wet on her lips. "Why... why are you so cruel?" she asked thickly.

He slapped her across the face with his free hand. "I'm asking the questions here, you whore," he roared with simulated rage, knowing that the raddled woman would only respond to brutality.

Pomme stared from Slaughter's face to that of the boy who was watching the Englishman's treatment of the woman with undisguised admiration and she realised instinctively what the relationship between the two of them was. "Does it give him a charge too if you belt him before you f–" she began with a trace of her old spirit.

Viciously Slaughter struck her again. Her head slammed to one side. When she turned her head to him once more, there was a thin trickle of blood curling down from her right nostril and her eyes were full of fear.

Slaughter knew she was ready to talk.

Chapter 23

"There she is. Alexandria!"

Schulze grunted in answer to von Dodenburg's announcement.

Behind them in the cover of the wadi, the tired Wotan troops ate their midday meal, their vehicles concealed from any prying British aircraft by the Egyptian Army three-tonners. To their front the green of the Delta was laid out like a carpet. Beyond this was Egypt's second largest city. After two weeks of burning desert, it looked very alluring, with its gleaming white buildings, faintly moving palms and eucalyptus trees, and orderly gardens.

It also looked, to von Dodenburg at least, very frightening. Lying there in the hot sand staring at Alexandria through his glasses, he felt himself overcome by a sense of pessimistic foreboding. In spite of the heat of the day, he shivered involuntarily.

"Anything wrong, sir?" Schulze asked.

"Must have been a louse running across my liver," von Dodenburg answered. He put his binoculars back in their case and rolling over on his back, stared at the men. Soon they would begin painting out the iron crosses on their vehicles for the journey through the city towards the barracks. Mingled as they would be with the Egyptian vehicles, with their crews in the same sort of khaki and stripped of German insignia, they would pass as Egyptian Army troops. Once they reached the objective, they would break out their swastika recognition panels to let the civilians know who was really attacking the British barracks. According to the American woman, the revolutionaries would have a camera man hidden in one of the brothels nearby to make a photographic record of the attack. The photos would appear in every paper in Egypt the next day.

Schulze looked at von Dodenburg uneasily. "If you'll forgive me saying so, sir, you've got a face like forty days' rain. Problems?"

Von Dodenburg nodded glumly. "Yes, Schulze there are. All I know of the set-up down there in the city is what I have heard from the woman and the Egyptians, and I am not happy with an op based on second-hand info. I can't risk those boys back there on a half-assed job like this. I need more gen before I attack that barracks."

"You mean you would like me and that other dum-dum Matz, to have a

look for you, sir," Schulze said, a grin on his features.

Von Dodenburg's face remained grim. "You understand the risks you'll be taking, Schulze," he said.

"I've been in more dangerous whorehouses, sir," Schulze said easily. "Those buck-teethed Tommies'll have to get up early to nab Mrs Schulze's little boy."

Von Dodenburg laughed with relief. "All right, you big rogue – and thanks. Good, this is the way I suggest you do it. Get rid of the Wotan armband and your badges of rank. In that khaki you won't look any different from the Tommies themselves. You can use one of the Egyptian trucks to get you into the town without attracting any attention.

"My plan is to move in as soon as it's dark. The blackout should keep most of the civvies off the streets. If we are stopped, the Egyptians can – I hope – talk us out. I intend to attack at midnight."

Schulze nodded his understanding. "And where do we fit in, sir?"

"You'll go in an hour before I do. You will recce the area of the barracks. You know what to look for. If you have the least suspicion that things are not what they should be, you will warn me."

"How, sir?"

Von Dodenburg's eyes twinkled momentarily. He had a shrewd suspicion that it was Schulze who had shared Pomme's bed during her night at the oasis. "Like this. The American woman has a radio hidden in her apartment – the Egyptian Major will give you a street map and how to get to the place: Fourteen Rue de Gaza. If you see anything you don't like, signal me immediately. But remember Schulze, don't take any risks. If the Tommies capture you, they might well take it into their heads to shoot you as a spy."

Schulze hardly heard the warning. His mind was full of the woman. "Don't worry about me, sir, he said gleefully, his eyes gleaming. "Let me just find that ape-shit Matz and get on my way!"

***

The two Wotan men in the shabby Egyptian Army three-ton truck reached Alexandria just after dark. It was full moon, and the city was lit by a smooth white light that lay on the buildings like a powdering of frost. The suburban streets were very quiet, as von Dodenburg had predicted they would be, and the few civilians about took no notice of the truck: they had seen enough of

them in these last three years of war.

Using the map, Schulze directed Matz at the wheel round the town centre and into the quieter streets of the suburbs where the barracks were.

It was very cold and the sky was rich with the silver glare of the stars. The narrow alleys, no wider than corridors, were completely empty, so utterly so that they had the spookiness of a long abandoned house. Here and there too, he noted that doors had swung open to reveal no light from within the dark wells of houses, as if the population had hurriedly packed a handful of belongings and fled. Even the odd hairless pi-dog, shivering in the gutter, was silent.

Awed by the quietness, Schulze lowered his voice almost to a whisper when he had to give directions. Now he knew that they were only a couple of streets away from Mustafa Barracks. Suddenly he made a decision. "Matzi, pull up over there – next to that wall."

Grumbling a little, Matz brought the three-tonner to a halt. "Now what?" he demanded.

By way of an answer, Schulze dropped from the cab and then as an afterthought, reached in to pull out his machine pistol. "Grab hold of yer pea-shooter," he commanded, and let's get on with it. This place puts years on me."

In heavy silence they plodded through the deserted streets, keeping to the shadows cast by the high walls, doubling rapidly across the open spots drenched in brilliant moonlight. Schulze felt his hands begin to sweat. Twice he tried to fight off the desire to check whether any one was following them and twice he failed. There was no one. He shuddered violently and told himself not to be a fool.

They passed down another street. Beyond it, Schulze knew from the map, the barracks were situated. Schulze gripped his machine pistol in his sweating hand. "Matz," he whispered, "watch it. The barracks are round the next bend."

They moved towards the end of the street, noises from the direction of the barracks becoming apparent. At the corner the two of them halted. Cautiously Schulze poked his head round. He gasped with shock.

"What is it, Schulzi?" Matz asked in alarm.

For a moment, Schulze was unable to answer. "Take a look at that, Matzi," he whispered.

Matz peered round Schulze's bulk and he too gasped at what he saw

there.

Along the walls of the barracks, hastily slung arc lamps glared down, careless of the stringent blackout regulations. In their bright white light, scores of red-faced Tommies – many of them elderly and obviously second-line troops, some of them bandaged as if they had just been called hastily from the local military hospital – laboured at their tasks: filling sandbags and erecting walls around the long barrelled guns that were being wheeled into position everywhere in the alley ways and courtyards around the barracks.
"Anti-tank guns," Schulze groaned hoarsely, "and you know what that means, Matzi?"

"Ay," Matz said quietly, "the bastards know Wotan is coming!"

Chapter 24

"Stop here, Matzi!" Schulze hissed.

The truck, its engine already switched off, came to a halt with only the slightest of noises. For a moment the two Wotan men sat there in the blacked-out cab staring down the long street.

To their right was the bulk of a hotel, but no light came from within. Beyond, the left side of the street was as black as hell. A whole battalion of Tommies could have been hiding there and they would not have been able to see them.

They clambered out and began to walk down to number 14. The sound of their footsteps echoed and re echoed from the high walls on both sides. Schulze and Matz hauled off their desert boots and thrust them into their pockets hastily. They went on, almost having to feel their way through the inky darkness of the shadow. The house they sought was perhaps a matter of fifty metres away now.

Suddenly Matz grabbed Schulze." There's somebody up there," he hissed urgently. "Look."

Schulze screwed up his eyes and could just make out the faint glow of a cigarette, and whoever was smoking it was standing outside Number Fourteen.

Schulze's mind raced. *Who would be hanging around on a cold city street at this time of night?* he asked himself. He edged his way from the street into a sort of a courtyard. It was too dark to really make out, but Schulze sensed that it was rectangular, hemmed in by a compact mass of silent buildings. From somewhere came the hollow boom of a clock sounding the hour. His lips moving silently, Schulze counted the strokes. Eleven o'clock. The CO would now have begun his move into Alexandria.

"Matzi, I've got a nasty feeling that they've stuck a guard on Madame Pomme's front door. God knows what's going on at her place, but we've got to get in there and warn the CO. Otherwise it'll be murder for the Company. Those poor turds will walk right into the shit."

"The back way?" Matz suggested hastily.

"Right. Come on, let's see if we can find it in this mess."

They skirted the buildings of the courtyard. For a few moments they

felt their way along a high wall, but it ended in a windowless building, which might have been some sort of storage shed. "No good," Schulze cried in exasperation. "Back!"

They retraced their steps. Schulze tripped and floundered full-length over some stairs. Underneath him he felt something squirming and alive. He got up with a frightened yell. A cat shot over his stockinged feet. Schulze held his breath, but the sound died away without any reaction. The buildings all around remained silent.

Cautiously they started to mount the stairs, feeling the cold stone through their foot-rags. Reaching upwards Schulze felt what he took to be some sort of wrought iron grille. "Looks like a balcony, Matzi," he whispered. "Let's have a look."

They'd just vaulted over the balcony's grille when a thin blue knife of light had slid into the courtyard below. The two NCOs froze. There was a faint hiss of tyres on the cold surface of the yard. It was a man on a bicycle. There was a grunt, which they took to be the man getting off his mount. For a moment there was total silence, then knuckles rapped on glass. A window opened and light flooded the courtyard momentarily and illuminated the man.

There was a brief interchange of words between the cyclist and someone inside, which the two men pressed tight against the balcony wall could not understand. But they did not need to. The cyclist was in British uniform and he had a rifle slung over his shoulder!

The light went out, but the cyclist did not move away immediately. From above they could hear the rasp of a match. Red flame spurted up and the watchers could see the man puff at the cold pipe gripped between his teeth until apparently satisfied he dropped the match and went on his way.

"Christ!" Schulze whispered, "Madame Pomme has been forced to tell the Tommies what's going on. That's why they're digging in those anti-tank guns at the Barracks. These are guards, waiting for dummies like you to walk right into a nice little trap." He licked his parched lips and for the first time was fully aware of the magnitude of the problem. "*Shit*, the Tommies have really got us by our big hairy ballsacks this time!"

Schulze bit his bottom lip desperately, his mind racing crazily. By now the Wotan would be well within the city. Should he attempt to break into Pomme's house, even if it was occupied by the Tommies, and fight his way to that radio so that he could warn the CO? Or should he bolt for it and try to stop the CO before he ran into the trap? But which way would they take into

the city? He cursed. Naturally he did not know. The only place in which he might be able to warn von Dodenburg was in the street that led to Mustafa Barracks. He made his decision."Come on, Matzi, let's get out of here and back to the Barracks."

"Let's get back to the barr–" Matz's mind was a few seconds behind that of the ex-docker. "Oh, yeah. Fine," he managed, lamely.

"Come on, get yer finger out!"

In his haste to get over the rail of the balcony, Matz forgot the flowerpots. His right foot unhooked one. Before he could grab it, it sailed over the balcony and exploded below, with what seemed to the horrified SS men the noise of an 88mm going off.

There was a shout of alarm. And another. Blackout regulations flung to the winds, lights began to click on everywhere. Up above them a window was thrown open. A voice shouted something in Arabic, and then, surprisingly, in German. Instinctively Schulze looked up. He caught a glimpse of Pomme, her bruised, bloody figure contorted with horror. Next to her a little man in British uniform – obviously the one who had shouted – was leaning out of the window, his revolver raised.

The Tommy aimed. Next to him, Pomme darted forward, a sudden fury in her eyes. With all her strength, she ripped her nails down the side of the Tommy's face. He screamed with startled pain and staggered back. In his agony he pressed the trigger. Pomme threw up her arms. No sound came from her throat. Schulze caught one last glimpse of her fluffy yellow wig slipping down over the face in absurd pathos and then she disappeared from sight.

Scarlet spurts of flame were beginning to stab the darkness. Whip-sharp snaps of pistol fire cracked through the night. Schulze ran down the stairs with all the speed he could muster.

"Into the shadows," he gasped. Now there were excited angry voices crying all around them in the mess of houses. Wildly the two men looked for some means of escape. The exit to the courtyard was already blocked. "The hatch!" Matz cried urgently. "At your feet!"

Schulze saw what he took to be the cover for the chute into which went the carbon for the houses' winter heating system. He grabbed it with both hands and heaved with all his strength.

Nothing happened. The damn thing was jammed!

"Over here," someone shouted. There was a clatter of heavy boots

across the cobbles.

Schulze swore and heaved again. He exerted all his strength. The noise of the running feet was getting ever closer. There was a sucking sound and the hatch gave. Matz swung himself feet first into the chute. The next instant he had disappeared with a slight yelp of surprise. Schulze worked himself into the hole, his bulk slowing him down. *That scrawny little Matzi*, he cursed inwardly. Somehow he managed to replace the cover above his head. All light vanished. He let go and started to whiz downwards into the unknown murk.

Chapter 25

At 2345 hours on the night of 24 October 1942, 1st Company, SS Assault Regiment Wotan started to rattle into the sleeping suburbs of Alexandria. The little streets did not remain silent for long. Windows were flung open everywhere and the Egyptians, startled from their sleep by the rusty squeak and clatter of tank tracks, stared out in disbelief at the long column of Mark IVs and half-tracks, laden with panzer grenadiers, below.

"German... German... German..." the exciting discovery fled from mouth to mouth. "The German Liberators Have Arrived!" Suddenly the streets were swamped in Egyptians, wild with delight. Men, women and children rushed directly at the vehicles, flinging themselves on the running boards. A girl in a European dress flung her arms round Sergeant Doerr and kissed him madly. The one-eyed lecherer was so surprised that he did not even have time to run his hand up her short floral dress as he would have done under normal circumstances. An old man dug a packet of Egyptian cigarettes out of his pocket and tossed them into von Dodenburg's turret. Wine and Egyptian brandy appeared from nowhere. Standing next to a perplexed von Dodenburg, the Prof was hit full in the face by a bunch of roses. Flowers scattered everywhere, leaving the Prof in a fit of sneezing. In an instant the streets were blocked and von Dodenburg raged as he saw his young troopers submerged by cheering, crying civilians, swept by a torrent of emotional relief and wild joy.

For once in his life, von Dodenburg did not know how to cope with the situation. Assault Regiment Wotan had never been welcomed like this before. Even back in the Reich the Armed SS were never really popular. He knew he must not let himself be stalled like this. Hastily he picked up the radio mic.

"Sunray to Sunray One," he barked above the noise to Seitz who, with the Egyptian Major, was leading the column. "Do you read me, over."

"I read you Sunray," Seitz cried and von Dodenburg could tell from the high-pitched enthusiasm of the young second-lieutenant's voice that he had been infected too by the crowd's wild joy.

"Now simmer down, Sunray One," von Dodenburg said sharply. "Break loose from that mob and get on with it. Time is precious. Over and out!"

Von Dodenburg stood in the turret, fuming with impatience. Then he heaved a sight of relief for up ahead in the jammed street, Seitz's troop were gunning their engines with a tremendous roar, sending the crazy civilians scattering out of the way in alarm. Next moment, the lead tank, with Seitz and the Egyptian Major in the turret, pulled away, followed by the rest of the troop.

The Prof balanced himself on the edge of the turret and started to harangue the civilians in their own language, broken now and then with a tremendous sneeze. But his efforts were without success. The fact that he spoke Arabic encouraged them to flock around and bombard him with excited questions. As Seitz's group rounded the next corner and out of sight, he turned to von Dodenburg and raised his hands helplessly. "They simply wont go away, Ma-, Ma-, Ma-*CHOO!*," he exploded. "I'm afraid I'm not very good with –"

The rest of his words were drowned in a blast of gunfire. Von Dodenburg swung round to the flashes reflected off the buildings ahead. The white moonlit sky had flushed an angry red. Next instant, there came the frightening chatter of many machine-guns. Screaming hysterically, their brown faces suddenly blanched with fear, the civilians scattered and headed for cover. In a flash they had disappeared back into their houses.

Von Dodenburg grabbed the mic. "Here Sunray... here Sunray," he called urgently. "Sunray One, do you read me?"

"They've," Seitz threw all radio procedure to the winds in his horror at whatever was confronting him, "they've got the whole place –"

The rest of his sentence was drowned by the high-pitched wailing note of another set jamming Seitz's radio. Furiously von Dodenburg twirled his own dials, trying to eradicate the thrumming wail. Suddenly with startling clarity, Seitz's voice came through, high and hysterical with pain. "My arm... oh God in Heaven... my arm... I can't bear it... They're all dead in here... I can't get out... Please, sir, get me out!"

The frantic plea for help ended in the sharp clear crack of a revolver fired close by. There was the same eerie thrumming of the set for a moment. Then it, too, stopped as the mic fell out of the dead Seitz's fingers.

Von Dodenburg made a quick decision. "Driver, advance," he yelled over the throat mic. As the driver thrust home his gear, he called over the radio, "Sunray here – to all commanders, prepare for action!"

"Halt, driver!" von Dodenburg cried frantically, as they swung round the corner into the square in front of Mustafa Barracks. Through the swirling mass of black oily smoke, he could see two of his men. One was advancing with hesitant steps, clutching his ruined stomach with both hands. Through his outspread fingers, a horrified von Dodenburg could see a gory red mess of straggling entrails. Just behind him a man lay in the dust looking stupidly at his legs. Where his boots had been there was pink flesh, thrown into relief by the startling whiteness of the stumps. Next instant their stricken tank exploded, its tracer ammunition zig-zagging wildly into the sky.

Von Dodenburg ducked and felt the Mark IV rock like a ship at sea struck by a tremendous wind. Metal pattered heavily against the turret and the force of the explosion dragged the very air out of his lungs. The men had vanished, as had the thick smoke. He gasped with horror. Ahead of him, concealed a moment ago by the murk, there were the deadly British six-pounder anti-tank guns waiting for fresh victims after the slaughter of Seitz's troop. They had walked into a trap.

Schulze and Matz, wherever they might be at that moment, had failed in their mission after all!

Already the Tommy gunners had spotted him. White tracer started to stitch the air as the Bren-gunners ranged in. In a moment the first armour-piercing shell would come winging his way and at that range the tanks would not have a chance.

"Driver – reverse!" von Dodenburg shouted in a sudden paroxysm of fear. He pushed the Prof to one side and flung himself behind the 75mm. It was loaded with solid shot, instead of high explosive which would have been more effective against the Tommy gunners. But he had not the time to re-load. He must put the Tommies off their aim by getting in the first shot.

He jerked back the firing lever just as the flustered young driver stalled the engines. The solid shot whizzed through the air and missing the nearest anti tank gun position, blasted a great hole in the masonry of the barracks.

"Great balls of crap!" von Dodenburg yelled in fear and frustration. "Sort those bloody gears out, man! Quick!"

His words were cut short by a fearsome bang. Von Dodenburg gasped as he was drenched with cold water. For a moment he was physically and mentally paralysed. Where had the water come from? A shell must have hit the water jerricans at the back of the tank. The terrible realization almost made his sick with fear. The Tommies had infiltrated men behind him and the

rest of the column. He was cut off.

Just as the driver started the engine again, and the Mark IV trembled with life, von Dodenburg pressed the trigger of the machine-gun. Tommy gunners were bowled over in a mess of flailing arms in the nearest gun-pit, sprawling over the sandbags suddenly like broken puppets. But their mates in the next gun pit were still alive and kicking. Von Dodenburg could see them ramming home the deadly shell into the breech of their six-pounder.

Again he pressed the trigger. It chattered frenetically. Like angry red hornets the slugs stitched a glowing pattern through the dust in front of the gun pit. He had missed. The Tommy gunners did not. Like a bat out of hell, the AP shell hissed through the air. It slammed into the turret with an awesome crack. The Prof screamed. Von Dodenburg swung round. Reichert was grovelling on the floor, twisting with pain, a dark red stain spreading rapidly across the back of his khaki shirt. "I have been hit," he said, pulling himself together, in spite of the tears of pain streaming down his face. "Not... not too seriously, I trust."

Von Dodenburg ducked again, as the tank was struck once more. It shuddered violently as if it might overturn. Von Dodenburg jerked furiously at the intercom leads so that the driver was almost strangled, and screamed, "REVERSE... FOR GOD'S SAKE – *REVERSE!*"

The driver thrust home reverse. For a split second the world stood still. Across the blazing square the Tommy gunners were reloading furiously. Then the engines revved and the Mark IV, its metal sides gleaming silver with shell scores, heaved backwards.

Engines revving full out, they swung round the corner into the burning column, right into the path of the two SAS troopers waiting with the PIAT. At that range, the two troopers crouched over their anti-tank weapon could not miss. Their bomb whammed right into the engine cowling. The driver's head flew off like an abandoned football, and von Dodenburg's tank came to an abrupt halt. An instant later there was a whoosh of exploding fuel and it began to burn.

Chapter 26

"*Hellfire,*" Matz cursed, as the basement rocked and trembled with the thud of the gunfire, "Somebody's taking a packet."

"And you can guess who it is, can't you?" Schulze replied gloomily, as he surveyed the heating system, which seemed to have enough cocks, taps, levers and dials for the control room of a U-boat.

"But what can we do about it, Schulzi?" Matz asked, slumping down wearily on a pile of carbon. "We'll be lucky if we get out of this in one piece ourselves."

"You are right there," Schulze agreed. What could they do to help Wotan, hidden as they were in the middle of an enemy city, hundreds of kilometres away from their own lines? Most if not all of the soldiers above their hiding place had scampered towards the fighting by now. *Damn them for killing my beauty*, he thought. But this wasn't the time to dwell on foiled romance.

Even if they could get to the CO who was probably fighting for his life in the middle of the square outside the Barracks, what help could they give him? By now the Tommy anti-tank guns must have destroyed all the Company's vehicles. And they did not stand a chance in hell of getting away through the desert the way they had come, on foot and without water. Frustrated and angry, he slammed his foot against the boiler-room controls. There was an asthmatic gurgling, as if liquid had suddenly shot through the convoluted mass of pipes.

"Not only looks like a sub's controls," Matz commented idly, "but sounds like one too."

"That's it," Schulze roared, slapping his hand on his knee.

"That's what?"

"Listen, cloth-ears, isn't Alexandria a port?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But –"

"But nothing," Schulze interrupted him. "Listen, this is what I want you to do. Haul your skinny little ass out of here and contact the CO. Now you tell him to break off the action the best he can and make for the port."

"And then?"

"And then," Schulze announced, drawing himself up to his full height,

"the CO must ask for Skipper Schulze. I wasn't born on the waterfront for nothing. I'm going to get us a boat!"

***

Outside the port's boom, a British merchantman lay at anchor, lights blazing, while half-naked Egyptian stevedores unloaded the ship's cargo into lighters. Schulze, crouching in the shadows, his ears full of the fight going on behind him still, breathed a sigh of relief. That meant the boom was open. There would be nothing to stop them getting out of the harbour... *Save for half the Tommy Mediterranean Fleet at anchor!* the Hamburger thought.

Schulze surveyed the port. It was very crowded. He assumed that the merchantmen were there to unload supplies to support the Allied Army in the desert. But they did not interest him. He was looking for something small and fast, very fast – and he must find it soon. Behind him in the city, the snap and crackle of the battle was beginning to swell to a terrifying crescendo. He did not have much time.

He strained his eyes. In the darkness he could make out the outlines of several navy vessels, looming up faintly through the gloom, with smaller craft flitting about among them. Now and again signal lights winked on and off between the vessels.

Then in a sudden flash of light from an opened hatch he spotted what he sought: a long, rakish-looking boat, armed with a single light gun. It had been a long time since he had last seen a boat like that back in his native Hamburg – when a whole flotilla of them had come sweeping proudly down the Elbe to escort a seasick Führer out to inspect the Battleship *Deutschland*. But he recognized it immediately. It was a motor torpedo boat: the fastest craft in any Navy. It would have to be the one.

***

Von Dodenburg crouched with the bleeding Prof behind the smouldering half-track, dead panzer grenadiers sprawled everywhere in the dust. An instant before the SAS PIAT men had blown up the last of the tanks. Now the handful of bleeding survivors forced into the narrow side-street had nothing to defend themselves with save their own personal weapons – and the British fire was getting heavier by the minute. Soon they would drag up their

powerful Vickers machine-guns and slaughter the SS men.

Another shell hit the front wheel of the half-track. The tyre went up in flames. Next to it, two boxes of ammunition strapped to the side burst into flame too.

"Oh, dear God," the Prof moaned, holding his wound, "can we not do anything, Major?"

Von Dodenburg shook his head, his face set in a look of despair. "Afraid not, Prof. They're going to drown us in a sea of lead."

"*Sir!*" A familiar voice broke in.

He swung round. It was Matz, his face blackened with smoke, a thin trickle of blood curling its way down his temple. "Matz, where in the name of hell –" von Dodenburg began, but Matz interrupted him urgently.

"No time to explain, sir. Schulze told me to tell you that you've got to get to the harbour immediately."

It would be a hell of a job to try to disengage his force with the Tommies so close. Besides both ends of the street were blocked. "It's going to be a bitch to get out of this, Matz," he expressed his fears openly. "They've got us in a tight hole here, and they're not going to stop until they Jolly Roger us."

"There's always a way out, sir," Matz answered cheerfully, wiping away the blood, before thrusting his hand inside his torn shirt to bring out what looked like a mess of putty. "This'll do the job, sir."

"Plastic explosive," von Dodenburg whispered while the NCO busied himself tearing off a chunk and fashioning it into a small ball.

"Where did you get it?"

"A Tommy who suffered a sudden heart attack," Matz grinned maliciously. "At the end of my knife." He clamped the ball of explosive to the wall behind them and held up the time pencil. "How long shall we give it, sir?"

Von Dodenburg's eyes lit up. Matz was adopting the old house-to-house fighting technique to their own situation: he would blast a way through one wall and another until they were clear of the trap they found themselves in. "Give it thirty seconds, you cunning little shit."

Ignoring the slugs that started to smack into the wall around him, von Dodenburg rose to his feet and shouted urgently. "Listen everybody. As soon as you hear my whistle, break off the action and rally to me!" Von Dodenburg gave a shrill blast on his whistle. Firing as they came, the tankers

and the panzer grenadiers broke from their cover and began to fall back on the wrecked half-track. Here and there a man was hit and crumpled to the ground. But their manoeuvre had caught their attackers by surprise and it took them a couple of moments to react. By then the first of the Wotan men were already stumbling through the gap in the wall. Wotan – or what was left of it – had an escape plan.

Chapter 27

Naked save for his boots, Schulze slipped into the lukewarm water, machine pistol slung round his neck. Before him the motor torpedo boat seemed as big as a battleship in the moonlight, but he had to take it!

Hardly making a sound, he swam slowly round the bow to the rope ladder, which led to the dinghy. As he swam he could hear above the rattle of fire-fight in the town the soft throb of the torpedo boat's engines. The sound pleased him. The boat was preparing to go to sea. With the beam still open, they might just make it yet.

One by one he mounted the rungs, alert for the slightest sound out of the ordinary. But although he could hear voices and movement on the deck above him, everything remained normal. Cautiously he raised his head above deck level. The rating on sentry duty was facing the quay, with his back turned to the sea. To his right, there was a faint chink of light coming from behind the blackout curtain of the bridge. He hoped the occupant would be the man he was looking for.

Gingerly he heaved himself over the side and started to cross the dark expanse of deck. He had almost reached the bridge when a gruff voice rapped, "Here, what's this – you the ruddy fairy queen or something?"

Schulze spun round. A big sailor stood there, hands on hips, looking at the naked man in bewilderment.

"Well, cocker," the sailor demanded. "Lost your ruddy tongue? What ship are you from, chum? And why you run –"

Schulze dived forward. His heavy shoulder caught the sailor in the chest and his words ended in a surprised gasp as the air was knocked out of him. But to Schulze's surprise, the man did not go down. Instead he recovered and jabbed the outstretched fingers of his right hand into Schulze's face, trying to blind him. Schulze dodged them at the last moment. He grabbed hold of the man, burying his own face in the sailor's chest so that he could not try the blinding trick again and sought the Tommy's brawny neck.

The sailor grunted and brought up his knee. Schulze blocked it with his own knee and winced with pain. *This mackerel eater*, he told himself grimly, *must have learned his dirty tricks in the same waterfront dives as me*. Thrusting up his powerful arms, the sailor tried to break Schulze's hold. It

was a wrong move. Schulze let go suddenly. The sailor stumbled. Next instant Schulze's tremendous hands wrapped themselves around his neck. Feet astride, eyes bulging with effort, veins standing out on his forehead, Schulze exerted all his strength. The sailor thrashed and gasped, wriggling frantically to break that murderous hold. To no avail. The sailor's struggles grew weaker and weaker, then suddenly his body went limp and he hung there lifeless, held upright only by Schulze's grip. Schulze held on to him for a few moments longer before lowering the dead sailor gently to the deck.

"Poor, brave bastard," he whispered and then after taking a deep breath, he continued towards the bridge.

***

The British armoured car skidded to a crazy stop in front of the escaping SS soldiers. Three men jumped out and set up the Bren gun in a flash. Von Dodenburg ducked. A line of slugs slapped along the wall above his head, spurting yellow flame and sprays of plaster every time they struck. "Back," he yelled and retreated the way he had come.

Directly behind them two British snipers were firing out of an upstairs window. Von Dodenburg could see the muzzles of their rifles projecting into the street. "Come on," he commanded, knowing they would have to brave the snipers' fire now. Pressed tight against the wall, the escapers edged from doorway to doorway. Slugs bounced off the bricks. Here and there a man yelled with pain as he was struck. Matz was wounded again. He cried out in rage and pain and overcome by a sudden madness, he dashed out into the middle of the street and raising his Schmeisser, completely ignoring the bullets slapping the cobbles all around him, he fired an angry burst upwards.

The glass shattered like a spider's web. There was a shrill scream and one man came sailing out of the window to smash onto the cartridge-littered cobbles, while the other muzzle left the window and Wotan heard mad shouts from within. They ran on.

***

Before he could realise what was happening, Schulze's machine pistol butt slammed into his face and sent the jaunty young skipper sailing against the wall of the bridge.

The officer's face blanched. "What...what..." he attempted to stutter, staring in astonishment at the naked giant who had appeared from nowhere on his bridge.

"*Schnauze!*" Schulze rapped, kicking the door closed behind him and flashing a quick look around the tiny bridge. He had been right. The charts and instruments were scattered across the small conning table, as if the scared young officer who faced him had been just planning a course.

"You are German?" the skipper, who did not look a day over twenty, said, dabbing his bleeding face with the end of his silk muffler.

"No, Father Christmas," Schulze sneered, relieved all the same that the young skipper seemed to understand his language: it would make his task easier. "Now listen, no harm will come to you, if you do exactly as I say. If everything works out right, Tommy, you'll be spending a nice holiday in Germany, out of the nasty war for good. So listen."

Carefully he explained what he intended to do, while listening all the time for any unusual movement from outside. But everything seemed to be normal. As yet no one had discovered the dead seaman's body and raised the alarm. But it would not be long before they did. He knew that.

The young skipper looked at him, his gaze a mixture of fear and complete disbelief. "You can't... get away with that," he exclaimed. "It is impossible."

"Then you'd better make it possible," Schulze snarled and raised his Schmeisser. "Or you'll be a dead duck. Now come on, let's get on with it."

***

"How far now, Prof?" von Dodenburg gasped and halted for a moment in the cover of a buttress. Behind him the panting survivors, most of them wounded, clattered to a stop, grateful for the rest even though the Tommies were still firing at them.

"Quarter... quarter of a kilometre," the Prof gasped, looking for road signs. "I think this is the *Kasr El Nil*."

"Thanks," von Dodenburg swung round to Matz. "Now, Corporal, what do you think? Where are we going to find Schulze? With this ship of his."

Matz shrugged. "All he said was to tell you to come to the docks. He was going to get Wotan a ship."

Von Dodenburg breathed out hard. "Alexandria is a damn big port.

That rogue could be in any one of a dozen places." A slug whined off the bricks just in front of the buttress and reminded him again of the danger they were in. "All right, come on," he cried. "We can't just stand here!"

***

"My God, man, don't you realise we've got to kill every last one of them?" Slaughter, his face blackened with gun-smoke and his uniform ripped by bullets, cried angrily.

The harassed infantry lieutenant pointed to the cook and the regimental postman dying in the corner of the shattered wall. "But my lads have had it, can't you see," he protested. "They're base wallahs, not fighting men."

"The Bren carrier," Slaughter snapped, pointing to the little carrier.

"But my driver has been hit," the Lieutenant objected.

"Drive it yourself then."

"I can't," the lieutenant answered.

"No, because you're yellow – you've got a yellow streak a mile wide down your back," Slaughter cried in rage and snapped at Youssef in Arabic, "Get in."

He slid into the driver's compartment. Next to him the boy fondled the mounted Bren gun lovingly, his dark eyes shining: he had never seen so much killing as he had this night.

Angrily Slaughter clashed home the gear and let out the clutch. The Bren carrier jolted forward. At 30mph it rattled along the *Kasr El Nil* towards the port. "Get ready with that gun," he ordered, as the snap-and-crackle of small-arms fire indicated that they were coming closer to the spot where the Germans were trying to break out of the trap.

The boy beamed at him. "Never fear *effendi*," he replied, "I will do you honour with it."

They clattered over the debris of war to where a couple of wounded SAS men lay in the gutter next to a smashed train car, still firing their weapons at a group of houses, walls bullet-pocked as if with the symptoms of some loathsome disease. Slaughter braked.

"Are they in there?" he asked.

One of the SAS men, a bloody gash down the right of his face in which his one eye lay like a pearl, croaked in a hoarse Yorkshire accent, "Ay, that the boogers are."

Slaughter let out the clutch. The carrier shot forward. The fire from the houses where the Germans were holed up intensified. The boy pressed the butt of the Bren into his right shoulder as he had seen the British do. He pressed the trigger. Tracer began to zip towards the houses. Bullets pattered against the carrier's armoured sides. Neither the Major nor the boy flinched. Both were possessed by an all-consuming rage and desire to kill the men who had plagued them for so long. This time they would not escape again.

As the little armoured carrier rattled past three new snipers who were holding up all further progress to the port nearby, von Dodenburg saw his chance. "Matz, Meier after me!" he barked.

He vaulted out of the window and doubled forward towards the advancing carrier. The boy saw them at once. He swung the machine-gun round. A flood of tracer headed towards them. The young Meier skidded to a stop and sank to the cobbles, staring at the bloody hole ripped in his thigh, his liquid eyes full of disbelief.

Von Dodenburg and Matz, the veterans, kept going. Instinctively Matz knew what his CO was going, to do. When the two groups of desperate men were separated by a matter of metres, Matz cried, "Now, sir," and fired a burst right at the driver's slit. The bullets whined off the metal crazily. Matz knew that they could not hurt the driver, but they could put him off. just as von Dodenburg ran up the Bren carrier's glacis plate, Slaughter, confused by both the tactics and the bullets, braked hastily, throwing the boy face forward against the metal front. Next moment, von Dodenburg was inside the stalled carrier. Youssef, his face covered with blood, squirmed round in the tight compartment to face this unexpected enemy. Von Dodenburg did not give him a chance. Balancing on the side of the carrier, he aimed a tremendous kick at the boy's head. The Blue Veil howled with pain, and red and blue lights exploded in front of his eyes and he slumped in his seat stunned.

"You bastard – you German bastard!" Slaughter screamed as he saw his beloved boy fall back. With surprising speed he sprang from his seat and rose to grapple with the man towering above him.

Matz squeezed the trigger of his Schmeisser. Slaughter howled with unbearable anger as the burst ripped his back wide open. Grabbing the air, trying to keep his balance as if he were climbing the rungs of an invisible ladder, he crashed over the side.

Von Dodenburg grabbed the dazed boy by the scruff of his neck and

flung him out after his lover. Sobbing blindly, the boy cradled the dead man's head in his lap, stroking the suddenly still face with his brown hand. Major von Dodenburg slipped into the driver's seat and re-started the engine. Matz sprang over the side next to him. Now the survivors began to stream out of the houses behind the cover of the barn.

Over the roar of the engine, von Dodenburg yelled, "Follow me!"

In typical panzer grenadier form, the troopers covered by the firing carrier, advanced and swept by the dead bodies of the two SAS men, leaving behind the sobbing boy and the dead Major who had saved the day for the man who was soon to be called the 'Victor of El Alamein'.

***

Doubling all-out with the last of their strength, the Wotan troopers ran onto the quay behind the carrier. Tracer was still coming at them from the confused mass of sheds. But most of it was wild and the troopers were too eager to get away from the Alexandria deathtrap to worry about it.

Von Dodenburg halted. There were ships everywhere, many of them with their lights blazing. Some of them were merchantmen, but most grey warships. Even if Schulze had pulled off the impossible task of seizing a ship single-handed, how could he hope to get it out of Britain's chief naval base in the Mediterranean, with so many enemy ships present?

"Which way, sir?" Matz yelled.

"If I only knew," von Dodenburg groaned. Behind them there came the sound of machine-gun fire from one of the sheds. Sergeant Doerr cursed and flung his last stick grenade. There was a thick crump and the firing died away. But it was followed by the sound of running feet.

"This way," von Dodenburg ordered. Obviously the whole harbour was beginning to wake up to their presence. In minutes the naval base would be roused. He swung the carrier's wheel and clattered down the quay to the right, with the men doubling desperately after it, slugs hitting the concrete or whining off the corrugated iron sheds.

Von Dodenburg felt himself overcome by despair.

Ship after ship flashed by, with their alarmed crews turning on the lights and yelling in anger and surprise at the sight of Germans in their midst. "Come on, Schulze for Chrissake, come on," he called to himself frantically like a frightened child after a nightmare, wishing morning and the light to

come again.

The howl of a ship's siren drowned even the growing volume of small-arms fire. "Oh, shit. What now?" Matz cried above the racket.

"Where's it coming from," von Dodenburg demanded.

"Over there," Matz answered, pointing hastily at a Royal Navy torpedo boat.

Von Dodenburg cocked his head to one side, while the panting exhausted troopers clustered behind the carrier for protection... "Can you make it out, Matz?"

Matz's face set in a look of absolute astonishment. "It's Morse... somebody's using the hooter for Morse code!"

"Yes." Von Dodenburg's eyes glowed with sudden hope. "Listen to it! W...O...T... Come on!"

The ship was signalling WOTAN.

They raced towards it, its mighty engines already throbbing, its deck shuddering, like a lean whippet anxious to be let off the leash.

Schulze watched them come. He pressed his Schmeisser into the pale, but defiant captain's back. "All right, skipper, get your beautiful sailor boys ready to cast off," he ordered.

"You swine, you can't –" His protest ended with a yelp of pain, as Schulze poked the muzzle hard into his back.

"I can do anything, Captain," Schulze said cheerfully, as the Wotan men started to spring across the gap between the trembling boat and the quay. "I'm the admiral of this particular fleet."

The young officer spoke into the mic. "Cast off," he said, forcing out each word through gritted teeth.

Just as the deck-men flung off the last hawser and the boat began to move out at an ever increasing speed, von Dodenburg took a mighty leap forward and landed on the deck in a heap.

"Good for you, sir!" Schulze exclaimed in delight and shoved the captain's tense back. "All right, Nelson, full speed ahead!"

They had almost reached the boom when an echoing voice drifted over the water. "What the devil do you think you are playing at, sir?"

"This is it!" Von Dodenburg tensed, standing at Schulze's side in the heaving bridge.

"I said, sir, what are you doing?" the impersonal voice over the loud-hailer repeated. "Heave to – or we will fire."

"All right, Nelson," Schulze said with more cheerfulness than he felt, as the great shore batteries of 12-inch guns started to swing round in their direction. "Here's where you win the Iron Cross – Third Class. Hit the gas!"

This time the young skipper needed no urging. He and his crew would go down with the Jerries too if they were hit now. All their lives were in his hands. He opened the throttle full blast. The two Germans caught themselves just in time. The long sharp prow rose right out of the water.

At thirty knots, with the boat hitting each wave as if it were a solid brick wall, it shot out into the sea just as the inferno broke loose. Balls of fire were flung across the chasm of water. Tracer shells spat and ricocheted, dragging a blazing white light behind them over the sea. It was a vast, impressive picture of frustrated fury, immense, volcanic and spectacular, like the anger of the gods.

But it was too late. They had gone.

ENVOI

"*Oh bloody, bloody, bloody!*
All bloody fleas! No bloody beer!
No bloody booze since we've been here!
Oh bloody, bloody, bloody..."

The English captain prisoner, tied to one of the escape transports stanchions and by now driven crazy by the relentless African sun, was singing with a mad grin on his brown face.

Von Dodenburg, standing next to a bandaged Prof at the railing, tried to ignore the dreadful noise and focused his binoculars on the far end of the beach, which was swamped with troops. The Afrikakorps was fleeing Africa, or at least some of it was: the generals, Rommel in the lead, specialists and the survivors of Assault Battalion Wotan. Von Dodenburg swept his glasses around the beach and thought he would never forget this tragedy. The sight would be etched on his memory forever.

Everywhere lines of weary men were staggering to the boats, ignoring the shell bursts of the Allied armies which were in the hills beyond, with the foremost ranks shoulder-deep in the water, pleading piteously to be taken aboard.

British planes came zooming in at mast-height, machine-guns chattering. Men sank beneath the waves everywhere and the transports' anti-aircraft guns thudded in a vain attempt to fight the Spitfires off. At the stanchion the English captain began his crazy dirge once more:

"*Oh bloody, bloody, bloody!*
Air raids all day and bloody night!
They give us a bloody fright!
Oh bloody, bloody, bloody..."

The squadron of Spitfires roared in for one more sortie and then they were off to refuel before coming back to wreak more havoc, soaring high into the brilliant sky. The Prof replaced his new stainless steel false teeth which he kept in his helmet in moments of danger. "It's about time we went, Major, don't you think?" he said.

"Time indeed," von Dodenburg agreed, focusing his glasses on the cautious figures who were coming down from the hills now. He was right.

They were Tommies. Against the yellow clouds of dust, they were sharply silhouetted in their pudding-basin helmets as they advanced on the Germans. Von Dodenburg's heart ached as he saw the men in the familiar peaked-caps of the Afrikakorps being shepherded into disconsolate groups to be led off to the Tommies' prison cages. The Desert Fox's great dream of the conquest of Africa was over. He took the Prof's arm. He wanted to see no more. "Come on, Prof, let's get below. We'll be sailing in a minute. I've had enough of North Africa."

At the stanchion, the tied prisoner sang:

"Best bloody place is a bloody bed,
With blanket over bloody head,
And then they think you're bloody dead.
Oh bloody! Bloody! Bloody!..."

At the gangplank, Schulze, again elevated to the temporary rank of full colonel with the aid of the epaulettes hastily fixed to his shoulders, looked down at the lighter full of Afrikakorps staff officers, rummaging around in their kit wondering what they should take with them for the trip to Italy. Once the great men had been accustomed to settling the lives and fates of thousands of men with a snap decision. Now they could not make their minds up which one of their bulging cases to take with them on board.

'Colonel' Schulze gazed down at them in contempt, while Matz stared at the rich pickings with rapacious, greedy little eyes.

"*Meine Herren!*" Schulze drawled at last in his best Prussian *Garde du Corps* voice, "would you please get your digits out! We sail in exactly five minutes – or we get sunk one minute later. One case per officer, *please*. Now make it snappy!"

The threat worked. In one minute flat the staff officers were clambering up the rope ladder and hurrying below with their single cases, leaving an evilly grinning Matz to collect their leavings.

"Well?" Schulze demanded when Matz had swung himself up on board again, the loot clutched to his skinny chest.

"Four chests of cigars, two bottles of wine and a bottle of Algerian brandy – *and two dirty books*."

"Excellent, excellent, my boy," Schulze boomed in his officer's voice. "I'm beginning to like retreats – you eat and drink better and meet a more interesting type of individual, what."

"Up yours!" Matz said by way of an answer.

Five minutes later as they lounged in one of the lifeboats, rented from an obliging deck officer for one case of cigars, the transport finally started to pull out from the Algerian bay, its siren shrieking.

Schulze looked reflectively at the African coast. A gleam came and went in his bright-blue eyes. It might have been one of rage, or of relief. It would have been hard for the observer to discover.

Schulze raised one large buttock and gave one of his lazy, musical farts, celebrated in sergeants' messes throughout Occupied Europe. He lifted his mug of cognac in toast as the coast faded into the smoke of battle, and called with heart-felt relief:

"AUF WIEDERSEHEN AFRIKA!"

– THE END –

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SOME DESPERATE GLORY – CHAPTER 1

"Current crappers!" Sgt Schulze yelled his faced brick red with anger. "Perverted banana suckers." His coarse voice roughened by years of cheap booze echoed and re-echoed across the German valley. "You dogs, do you want to live forever?"

"Piss panzers," Cpl Matz added his voice to that of his old comrade. "My friend Schulze knows what's best for you creeps. Come back and fight!" But the fleeing soldiers weren't coming back. His shouts went unanswered.

Schulze's men were in no mood to fight any longer. American soldiers were flooding both sides of the frontier surging forward from Belgium into Germany, ignoring the concrete fortifications of the Siegfried line. The triumphant Yanks were so happy that some of then were bellowing out the popular song of the limeys: "We're gonna hang out our washing on the Siegfried line."

"Yes and all yer shitty underpants as well," Schulze bellowed cynically. But one thing was clear to the big red-faced NCO. The men of the Wehrmacht, survivors of the broken 15th German Army in France were not prepared to stand and defend the Siegfried line. They were running, and it looked as if they would keep on running to the last major defensive barrier – the River Rhine. With a curse, Sgt Schulze took off his battered helmet and threw it at the earth.

"Heaven, earth and cloud burst. What a bunch of cardboard soldiers," he cried at Wotan's CO, Kuno von Dodenburg. "What has become of the German army?"

It was a question that von Dodenburg had asked himself many times recently. That elite formation Wotan had been wrecked during the allied invasion. Allied tanks and planes had not given them a moment of peace. Daily, the young SS volunteers from the Hitler youth had been wiped out by the hundreds, and later their thousands. Now some of its regiments were commanded by mere privates. Within this last month the 12th SS Hitler Youth division had been reduced in strength from a formation of 22,000 men to nothing more than a regiment.

Over that terrible summer of 1944 the German army in France had been virtually wiped out. Now the battered survivors were expected to defend the

Reich against the enemies' overwhelming formations. As Sgt Schulze had said, slumped in a foxhole cleaning his blackened toenails with his bayonet, “Buy combs lads, there’s lousy times ahead.”

***

That same afternoon as Obersturmbannführer von Dodenburg reported to Germany’s most senior soldier in the west, Feldmarschall von Rundstedt, he experienced the same feelings as the veteran SS officer. Von Dodenburg's granite hard face revealed nothing, but like Sgt Schulze he was deadly worried by the situation on the German frontier.

Standing stiff to attention he reported to the aged field marshal, “Excellenz, the situation is terrible. The Americans are advancing all along the Belgium/German frontier. It is obvious what there objective is.”

Feldmarschall von Rundstedt beat him to it, he took the sip of the mature cognac to which he was particular, and said, “The Rhine river, von Dodenburg. It is Germany’s last natural barrier.”

Von Dodenburg nodded. “Exactly, sir. Once the Americans reach the Rhine we are finished. We no longer have the men or the ability.” He let his shoulders slump in despair like a man at the end of his tether.

Von Rundstedt took another drink. “Something must be done, von Dodenburg. We must stop the Americans reaching the Rhine.” His voice hardened. “Every man, woman, even child must work to stop the enemy reaching the river”.

The young SS officer did not respond. He wondered where these new resources were to come from. So he remained silent and let the Field Marshal do the talking.

Von Rundstedt needed no urging, although he felt no hope. He was a loyal German and he had a solution ready – a means to save Germany. He stared at his map. “Bitburg.” He pointed his finger at the major city of the area. “Bitburg is the centre of the road and rail network locally. If you stop the Americans at Bitburg, von Dodenburg, we block all exits and entrances to the Reich. What we need is a strong point – a major fortress or fortification that will dominate the road and rail system. With that in our possession we can stop the Americans moving”. For a moment or two von Dodenburg considered the Field Marshal’s plan. It might work. He broke the heavy silence. “But where, Sir? Where do we find the strong point that can

dominate the area?”

Von Rundstedt considered for a moment and said, “I’ll leave that to Capt. Kunz.” He turned to his senior staff officer and said, “Kunz, what’s it going to be?”

Kunz, smart, clean-shaven, elegantly uniformed, had an answer at the ready. “Schloss Hartmanstein,” he said. “It dominates the road from Bitburg to Wittlich, an ideal defensive position. It is flanked to the left by the Westerbach and to the right by the river Mins with high ground to left and right.”

Von Dodenburg nodded his understanding. He remembered the old position from his young days when he had been an officer full of dreams and glory and belief in the national socialist cause. “It sounds exactly the right place to me Capt. Kunz,” he said. “Give me whatever you have and we will tackle it.”

“Be careful, though,” said Kunz. “Last reports have suggested the castle has been taken by rogue elements of our own SS. We cannot be sure, as you know how damaging Allied air superiority has been to our comms network. However, I advise you to approach with caution.”

Von Dodenburg nodded his head. Allied bombers had targeted strategic locations ahead of their advance, bringing disorganisation and chaos to German communications in the region.

Feldmarschall Von Rundstedt took another sip at his cognac. “I shall give you what bodies I can find, young man. You can have the lot: deserters, murderers, and traitors. Anyone who can hold a rifle and fire it.” Von Dodenburg absorbed the facts. He would have the remnants of his old battered SS Wotan and a punishment battalion of unlikely candidates for a hero’s death. But he would have to fight. Not only for the fate of Germany, but maybe even for control of this castle. He wished he had more answers...

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