

# Red Fury!

## The Race to Berlin

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## Prologue

It is January, 1945, and the Soviet Red Army, which only two years ago had been on the edge of defeat, now stands poised and ready, stretching their six million man strong army across eight countries surrounding the German Reich. Their ultimate target: Berlin, home of Hitler's government and military headquarters, and the final major stronghold to be breached.

For three years, starting in 1941, Germany had swept through Russia, burning and looting and pillaging as they went. Suffering on an unimaginable scale had been endured by the Soviet people, until a combination of bad weather and poor strategic decisions made by Hitler and the German High Command had begun to turn the tables in favour of the Russians. Slowly but surely, and with mounting confidence, they had driven the Wehrmacht back all the way to Poland.

Three men, each Marshals (the highest rank in the Soviet military) commanded three separate fronts, made up of whole army groups. This was the greatest assembly of men and equipment ever seen in the annals of military history. They were: Marshal Koniev, the political commissar turned commander, and now head of the First Ukrainian Front; Marshal Rokossovsky, the half-polish aristocrat, head of the Second Belorussian Front; and Marshal Zhukov, Premier Stalin's deputy and personal favourite, who headed the First Belorussian Front.

Each man was different, and had a diametrically opposed style of leadership to the others. Koniev hated Zhukov, and was jealous of him, while Zhukov and Rokossovsky were old friends but unfriendly rivals; still, despite these differences, they all had in common the goal of destroying Nazi Germany, and paying it back for all the destruction it had wreaked upon their Motherland. Rokossovsky stood poised in the north of Poland, ready to strike down into Germany, Zhukov stood to the east, while Koniev was to the south.

Comrade Stalin, as shrewd and cunning a man as ever there was, surmised that the best way to ensure ultimate victory was to play his commanders off one another, to encourage their rivalry, so that they would be spurred on to greater heights. Time was everything, and he knew that the Red Army had to reach Berlin before the British and Americans did, not only so that his own army would get the glory of having conquered Hitler, but so that he, and not Roosevelt or Churchill, would control the fate of eastern Europe after the war.

The stakes were high; the war could still be lost, and all the sacrifices that had been made could still turn out to have been for nothing. But in this game, Stalin found willing participants in his Marshals, each who had his own reasons for wanting to be the first to reach Berlin, and to plant the red Soviet flag upon enemy soil!

## **Chapter 1**

### **Stalin's Marshals.**

#### **I**

It was a cold night, and snow filtered down lightly. The stars were out, and seemed brighter than usual to Marshal Koniev, who had decided to come out of his headquarters for a breath of fresh air. A cup of hot tea in hand, he lit up a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and then let the smoke rise up and evaporate into the crisp air.

Within hours, the assault he had been planning would begin, and a hellfire of destruction and chaos would be unleashed at his orders. It was strange to imagine such a thing, because right now everything along the Front was so impossibly quiet. He had instructed that his men lie low tonight, to save their energy for the fight tomorrow, as they would need all their strength for what was to come.

Usually, the men would be deep into a card game, with their daily ration of vodka in their bellies, and even some balalaika music perhaps, to lift the spirits. Men who knew that there was a good chance they were going to die liked to live it up a little on the eve of a great battle, but not this night. Koniev was a pragmatist by nature, and he reasoned that it would be better for them if they had all their senses in the morning, and were not hung over.

This is where he and his old foe Marshal Zhukov differed: Zhukov didn't care about his men at all, but just saw them as fodder for his own glory (or at least this is what Koniev thought). It bothered him that somehow such a man outranked him, and had been given command of the armies that were in the nearest striking position to Germany. That was why he was so anxious that the coming assault go off perfectly: he was determined to catch up to his hated rival, and then surpass him when the time was right, though as of yet, neither man was near to Berlin. Still, with every battle, they both drew closer and closer.

A short, stocky, bald man, Koniev had not started out in the military at all, but as a Commisar, who was responsible for political conformity, both amongst army personel and the civilian population. But he had been transferred to the military wing and had risen quickly (too quickly some thought) which stirred up much jealousy amongst his peers, especially with Zhukov, who always took every chance he got to deride Koniev's comparative lack of formal military training.

Koniev had always been ambitious, but had never before dreamed of reaching the heights that he had. This rapid ascent through the ranks was due both to the favour that Comrade Stalin himself had shown to him (because of his unflinching Communist ideals) but also due to the fact that he wanted not so much to succeed for his own sake, but to prevent Zhukov from succeeding. This spurred him on day and night. There was no way that he would ever serve under a commander like Zhukov, and if Zhukov reached Berlin first, the threat was, he would become practically invinsible within the Army High Command.

His hatred of his fellow commander went deep; he disliked Zhukov's arrogance, his rudeness, belligerence, but most of all resented the fact that Zhukov only seemed to care about Communism (which for Koniev was as sacred as a religion) in order to advance his own career and ambitions. Such a man had to be stopped, or at least to have his wings clipped, and if fate had chosen him as the man to do it, he would dedicate himself to the task wholeheartedly.

But now he was getting tired, despite the strong tea he was drinking. It had been a long day, spent mostly being jostled along bad roads in the back of an American lend-lease jeep, as he inspected the troops, tanks and artillery positions. The artillery was stretched out over a mile of front, and when their firepower was unleashed, just hours from now, it would be the greatest concentration of firepower ever seen in the world up until that point. He almost pitied the Germans who would be on the receiving end of such a barrage... almost.

The Marshal took one last drag from his cigarette, and then stubbed it out with his foot, then made his way for the entrance to the farmhouse where he had quartered, and to his bunk for a few hours of sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

At five o'clock in the morning, on Friday the 12th of January, 450 medium and heavy guns opened up a deadly barrage on the German positions stretched out along the Vistula River. Marshal Koniev, accompanied by his senior commanders, watched the proceedings from the dugout of a well camouflaged observation post. Their goal was to break the enemy lines, and rush men and machines deeper into the heart of Poland, bringing them one giant step closer to Germany itself.

It was only now beginning to get light, and in the semi-darkness, the flashes of the Howitzer cannons and Katyusha rockets were nearly blinding. The fire from the ends of the largest and longest of the Howitzers reached up nearly fifty feet into the air. The noise was deafening, and Koniev fought to retain his composure under the stress of the situation. He had always been bothered by loud noises, and the shrieks and cries of the rockets, and the thwaks of the cannons, were of a level and magnitude that almost defied the imagination. And yet, he forced himself to think about something else, and so bent down to look through the binoculars that had been set up on a tripod for him.

Across the horizon, he saw the front lines of the German positions that had been pinpointed by scouts previously being decimated by the sheer magnitude of the hail of firepower coming down on them. Mushroom clouds of smoke and fire rose up from the distant trees, and though the Germans were returning fire, it was sporadic and inaccurate.

'Ha!' he said, 'We have caught them by surprise!'

He looked for as long as he could, before the dust and the smoke from his own guns began to obscure his vision and choke his throat with acrid, burning fumes, and then turned over the binoculars to one of his junior officers, and retreated down into his command bunker. He would get onto the phone to General Lelyushenko, his trusted commander of the Fourth Tank Army, to receive an update on the readiness to attack.

Both men had to yell into their receivers in order to make themselves heard, because even though they were far underground, the noise from the attack was so great that its rolling thunder reached even here. Lelyushenko was ready, he said, more than ready—champing at the bit in fact—to get going. It was a pity, they both conceded, that they didn't have more airpower, but the cloud cover and snow prevented that, so they would have to rely on the Fourth Army to punch a hole in the enemy lines with its 122 mm cannon Stalin heavy tanks. But they would not be unleashed until most of the enemy artillery and the German command bunker had been destroyed. That could take hours.

By 1:50 pm the initial stages of the attack had been completed, and he gave the order to an eager Lelyushenko to advance. The General gave the command at once, and the tanks rumbled past Koniev's outpost, though he could barely see them because of the swirling snow, and the combined noise of their screeching treads was almost more unbearable than the sound of the guns had been. There were hundreds of them, and infantrymen rode on the backs and sides of the hulking machines as protective covering as they headed to the front lines.

All reports thus far had been very good, and the Germans had not been able to recover sufficiently from the artillery barrage to mount an effective counter-punch. The rampaging tanks now threw them into even greater confusion, as the steel machines swept aside everything in their paths. Their task was to clear the trenches of any remaining infantry, and then proceed onward, deep into enemy territory. Everything was going according to plan, and this pleased Koniev greatly, as every step that his army took, brought him closer to Berlin, and closer to his goal of beating Marshal Zhukov!

## II

'What do you mean the men are tired?!!'

'Comrade Marshal, I mean that the men are tired... We have not been adequately supplied. They are tired and hungry.'

The men on the phone were Marshal Zhukov, and General Chuikov, commander of the Eighth Guards Army, which was the spearhead of Zhukov's forces on the First Belorussian Front.

'I'm suprised at you, Comrade General, you, the hero of Stalingrad. I did not know that you like to pamper your men. I need them ready within twenty-four hours to strike a blow. Time waits for no man, and neither do I. Have them ready—that's an order!'

Angrily, Zhukov slammed down the phone and began to pace the room in his bunker. This was his third temper tantrum of the day, his ire being directed at his senior commanders, and though such displays were not at all unusual, this time he was feeling especially agitated. Only two days before, Marshal Koniev had launched an extremely successful attack, and this made Zhukov impatient. On paper at least, he had been given the better army, and the better location relative to Berlin, but he was also facing the toughest opposition, and had the most land obstacles to cross before a path in front could be cleared.

His strategy was simple; he had never been much of a tactician, but had preferred the method that Stalin himself seemed to prefer: to bash one's head against the brick wall of the enemy's defences until it eventually gave way to the brute force. He certainly had enough men and tanks for the task -almost a million more or less able bodies- but the Germans were excellent defenders, and a very determined foe, and one man would be able to hold out against every ten that Zhukov managed to throw into the fray of battle.

The trick was to berate his senior field officers, until they were more afraid of him than they were of Hitler, which acted to motivate them to be more aggressive. The truth was, though, that he himself acted at least partially out of fear. He knew that Stalin would not accept anything but complete victory, and that even that sometimes wasn't enough. The Siberian Gulags were full of civilians and officers who had displeased the Premier, and Zhukov was in an especially tight spot. If he failed, he would be imprisoned, or worse, but also knew that if he were too successful, or too dashing on the field of war, Stalin would have him removed for being a potential threat to his own power.

So he had to play the game, and though he was no political intriguer, he had managed to stay in favour by being successful in the field, all while managing to make it seem as though his own ideas had actually been Stalin's, and also by keeping the other Marshals and Generals in line, mostly through instilling fear. The one man he could never stand though, was Marshal Koniev, and he was determined, even if it cost him his life, to see to it that the Marshal never got anywhere near Berlin, at least not until he had gotten there first himself.

Zhukov was a short, extremely stocky man, powerfully built, and with a dough-like face that habitually wore a look of scorn, or disapproval. He loved to lead, to be the man in charge, and could be ruthless, not just as a last resort, but at any time that he felt his men were not obedient enough. Countless senior Lieutenants had been shot out-of-hand at his orders, and the others had quickly learned to toe the line, and not question orders.

'Maps, I want my maps!' he yelled at his aide, and the man immediately rushed to begin unrolling them and spreading the ones he wanted out onto the full length of the large table in the Planning and Operations room. Zhukov hunched over, his glasses hastily put on, and now dangling from the tip of his nose.

'We must strike in a giant pincer movement, much as the Fascists did in '41,' he said aloud to himself. 'We can afford the men and the machines now. Russia may

be poor, and not have enough food, or shelter, but we have plenty of men, and plenty of tanks, and we will punch a fist into the Nazi lines, here, in two places.' He pointed out the spot on the map to his aide, who nodded gravely.

\* \* \* \* \*

By 8:00 am on Sunday, January 14th, everything was ready. The men had been fed one last hot meal. Zhukov had placed those in the punishment battalions (men who were criminals) in the front lines. They would be used to clear out minefields, and for other nearly suicidal jobs, so that the most able troops would be saved for the really important fighting still ahead, and yet even these poor wretches were also given something hot to eat.

The guns stood ready and loaded.

At 8:30 am, the order came, and a deafening bombardment began. It did not last long, only 25 minutes, but it was devastating! Even before the guns had stopped, the tanks and the infantry were unleashed, and they charged forward, across a frontline only 20 km wide. Over half a million men and one thousand tanks poured forth, like a compressed spring being released, not stopping until they had pushed on, 20 km behind enemy lines, and taken the important Polish industrial town of Radom.

Zhukov slept well that night, knowing he had established an excellent foothold on territory that had before seemed unbreakable. Now, Soviet might and weight of numbers was beginning to tell, and as he went to sleep, he dreamed of a German Reich that had once seemed so mighty, but that crumbled like salt in his hands.

The next day, he ordered another large barrage, and then sent in the rest of his tanks. He marvelled at the toughness and versatility of the T-34, and at how nothing seemed to hold it back; not mud, not water, nothing. Without it, he didn't know how they could have come this far. Unlike Koniev, Zhukov was not bothered by the noise of the machines, nor by the cannonades. He revelled in the sheer firepower at his command, and in the damage they were doing to the forward German positions.

His goal now was to surround and completely strangle Warsaw, which was still heavily occupied by Nazi forces. Still, he would not allow another Stalingrad-like situation, where the fighting was done street by street, and did not have the time to level the city, so he decided to leave an opening just large enough for the Germans to slip out as he closed in. At all costs, lengthy drawn-out engagements were to be avoided; such things would not only serve to buy Hitler time, but would allow his fellow Marshals to catch up to him. He now had the momentum he had so long sought, and was not about to give it up for anything.

Within days, he would be able to call Stalin to let him know the happy news, and it delighted him to think of the expression on Koniev's face when he heard that the major city had now been taken. Rokossovsky would also be worried by Zhukov's masterstroke, and would feel the need to do something himself, so that he wouldn't fall behind too much. At least with Roko though, it was just a manly competition, a somewhat friendly rivalry, not like with Koniev.

He and Roko had been cadets together, and had been competing with one another ever since, and he wondered how his old friend was doing up north? Back in the old days, Rokossovsky had commanded the 7th Samara Cavalry, while

Zhukov had been a brigade commander under him, and though he had, in the meantime, surpassed his old friend, it was not by much. If Roko got to Berlin first, all Zhukov's accomplishments would be forgotten, and Marshal Rokossovsky would be the great hero.

That he could not, would not, allow.

### III

'Insanity! It's just pure insanity!'

Marshal Rokossovsky stood surveying the landscape which he had been tasked with occupying. His anger, and frustration, had grown with the passing days since he had received his order from the Stavka High Command, but he kept his feelings to himself as much as he could. The tall handsome man always tried to be polite and proper, especially in front of his junior officers, and did not wish to be critical of his superiors in front of them.

And yet inwardly, he raged at the stupidity and incompetence of those who handed down his orders. Before him lay stretched out a wild and almost impenetrable maze of forests, nearly impassible streams and rivers, not least of which was the River Narew, at 250 metres wide and 4 metres deep. Staff officers never seemed to understand the logistical concerns which a field officer had to deal with; never understood that the battle plan should be decided by the man in the fray, who understood the needs of his men, and the possible obstacles and routes, better than anyone.

And of course he had not been given enough men. Because of the terrain, it was difficult to utilize his tanks; because of the weather, his air force was almost always useless, and the enemy was spread out too far and wide to make his artillery as effective as it could be. The only thing he could really use was his infantry, but most of them were practically unfit for service, having been dragged from their hospital beds or desk jobs in order to make up numbers.

It would be a long slog to Berlin, and he envied both Koniev and Zhukov, whom it seemed were having an easier time of it. Still, it could be worse, and he remembered back to the meeting he had had with Stalin and Koniev at the Kremlin in Moscow. They had been studying a map of Poland and Germany, and Stalin had taken out one of his colored crayons, and leaning far over the map, he had drawn the lines of advance through which each Marshal could make his way to Berlin.

A flash of excitement had gone through Rokossovsky, as he realized that he now had a chance to compete with both Koniev and Zhukov to see who could get to the Nazi capital first. This had not been clear before; he had performed miracles up until this point in the war, but Stalin was notoriously fickle, and they had had their disagreements in the past. He had always, and not unrealistically, feared that he would be sidelined by Stalin once the final outcome of the war was clear, and he was no longer needed.

The reason for this was that he had black mark against him with the Premier. Until 1941, he had been in prison for crimes against the state, for conspiring with Germany, or at least that is what he was told. He could barely bring himself to



think of it now, but he had been arrested by the NKVD secret police in 1938, imprisoned, tortured, his fingernails ripped out, and he was savagely beaten, almost to death many times. He had not committed any crime of course, but in those days, in the times of the purges, Stalin had been suspicious of any talented officer, and that had been reason enough.

To this day, he still bore the mark of shame of his criminal record, and though he was necessary to the state now at time of war, because of his skills (which was the only reason he had been released) after the war would be another matter. Now, he always carried a pistol with him everywhere he went, in case they ever came for him again. He would know what to do, and the easiest thing would be to shoot himself, rather than to have to go through that torture again. For this reason, he had long believed that although he was the most skilled of the Soviet commanders, he would probably be relegated to a minor command, or worse.

But fate had turned out otherwise, and though Stalin had not said so, it was implied to both himself and Koniev that although Zhukov was the man slated to enter Berlin first, each of them now had a shot, if they were more daring and ruthless than Zhukov, and gained more ground and more victories. Stalin was cunning, and was saying that he wanted them to compete with each other. They were to work in unison, backing one another up and cooperating, but also trying to get a little further ahead of the each other.

It was a plan of genius, and though he feared Stalin, and the power he had over him and his career, he also admired the man on some level. Stalin had an almost animal instinct for being able to understand a man's strengths and weaknesses, to know what drove him, and what kept him awake at night, and did not hesitate to use this knowledge against anyone he came into contact with. And it seemed as though this instinct worked to the benefit of Russia, to strengthen it, and he had the power to bestow prime jobs to his Generals, jobs that would ensure their own victory, prestige, and safety.

But now he could see this chance slipping away. He would be held up, fighting pitched battles with every German unit that stood between him and the capital, and any chance at one large definitive fight seemed nil at this point. The enemy divisions were not nearly as concentrated here up north as they were in the east and south, but were more spread out.

Nevertheless, on the morning of 14 January (the same day as Zhukov's major offensive) Rokossovsky ordered an intense artillery barrage that lasted most of the day. When his infantry did attack, progress was slow. The Germans were fighting especially fiercely because this was the ground of Tannenberg, the site of one of their greatest victories against Russia during the First World War, and they were not about to give up this land without some real bloodletting.

Rokossovsky's mood did lighten a little though, when General Gorbатов, a fellow victim of the NKVD, managed to hold off several attacks against his Third Tank Army. This had emboldened the Marshal to unleash his tanks, which until now he'd been holding back out of caution. The enemy had exposed its weakness, and had bled itself dry trying to attack.

By the 17th of January, the skies had cleared somewhat, and the Red Air Force was able to render some much needed assistance to his forward units. They bombed and strafed the enemy emplacements at will, and his men began to break

through on a 60 mile front. By 19th January, they were pushing the retreating Germans back up to the Baltic, and were also advancing along the Vistula River towards Danzing, which effectively cut off whole enemy divisions from any chance of escape.

This was all positive news, and cheered him up somewhat. The quicker they could take care off all these mopping-up operations, he thought, the more quickly he could regroup and prepare for the final assault on Berlin. Once he could get onto more open ground, he could allow his tanks to race for the city.

And yet, on the 20th of January, he received the worst news he had ever had in his life. He was now told, under orders from Stalin himself no less, that he was to divide his forces in two. One army was to push up north-eastwards into East Prussia in order to continue mopping-up operations, while the rest of the army, now seriously weakened, was to act in a supporting role by covering Zhukov's right flank. This was meant to prevent any surprise attacks by rogue German divisions who would try to harry Zhukov.

On the one hand, he saw that there was sense in what Stalin was thinking, but suspected that really he just didn't want Rokossosvsky, a former prisoner, to get too much of the glory. In reality, he was sure that Stalin and the Stavka knew full well that rear units could easily have been assigned to the clearing-up of East Prussia, and that by attacking in full force in a large sythe-like motion down onto Berlin from the north, as had originally been planned, he would effectively not only be also protecting Zhukov's right flank, but would also be a deadly force himself, in the attack on the city.

It was a devastating blow to his ego to know that he could very well have just lost his place in history. He had been weakened, and was now forced to focus his attention on Prussia as well as greater Germany. And yet not all hope was lost! If he was lucky, and if for some reason Zhukov was held up, then with a quick dash with his tanks, he just might be able to enter the city after-all! That was possible. It was still possible to save the situation. He would keep a fine division of troops, and one of tanks, in reserve, for just such an occasion.

But now it was necessary to focus on getting the job he had been assigned done as quickly as possible. To his way of thinking, the more useful he was to his country, and the more victories he stacked up, the harder it would be for Stalin and the NKVD's secret police to arrest him again after the war. He would become a hero of the people, and this would make him and his family safer. But it was only by getting to Berlin first that he would become virtually untouchable!

## **Chapter 2**

### **Reaching the River Odor.**

#### **I**

It was the morning of 6 January, and Zhukov was riding with his driver in his truck, on his way to a meeting with his top commanders at the headquarters of the Sixty-Ninth Army. In attendance, would be Generals Kolpakchi, Belov, Katukov, Bogdanov, and Chuikov. The subject of their discussion: The final assault on Berlin.

Zhukov had now reached the River Oder, which was the last major land obstacle that stood in his way, and yet his position there had yet to be consolidated. This was worrisome. Much was expected of him from above, and yet the greatest pressure of all came from himself. He would not allow any delays, not only because he was eager to deliver the last crushing blow to the enemy, but also because he knew that if he didn't deliver results, Stalin would simply give the go-ahead to one of his rivals, either Rokossovsky or Koniev.

But the logistical problems just kept mounting up. It had not yet been possible to clear out all the pockets of resistance to his rear, and almost half of the army was still engaged in fighting at Posen. Everything would have to be built up along the Oder, including airfields, fuel depots, tank repair units, as well as ammunition dumps. And to top it all off, the previous fighting had taken its toll, and only one-third of the men he had started out with, one month before, had survived.

Some days he wished he were a mere divisional commander, so that he wouldn't be solely responsible for all these seemingly insurmountable problems. The schedule said that in just over a week he was to have already reached Berlin, and he knew that that was just not possible. And yet, as with anything, he was conflicted, and was more eager than ever to launch the invasion—it was a lot like waiting for your final exams at the military academy; you wanted it to come but also you didn't. And the stakes were so much higher now than they'd ever been before!

Of course he couldn't share his concerns or worries with his underlings, as he was expected to be the picture of resolution and confidence in these historic days, and certainly could not confide in Stalin, who would reproach him for his timidity. He was expected to be as ruthless and as hard as necessary, and to get the job done.

To top it all off, it was raining again, and it had snowed just the night before. This made everything slippery, and turned the airfields into a quagmire of mud. No doubt the Germans were thankful for this, as the Red Air Force had been effectively grounded for the last week. The roads were hazardous as well, which made the resupply of his armies difficult. That was why his own driver was now going so slowly, to prevent slipping their truck off the road. Naturally, it was an unheated vehicle, and Zhukov was freezing cold, and though he urged the driver on, he knew it would do no good.

Eventually they reached Kolpakchi's bunker, and he made his way down to the Planning and Operations room where his men were already waiting for him. Tough luck, but it was cold and clammy there as well, far below the frozen earth. He waved away the offer of some vodka, meant to warm him up, and demanded strong tea instead. He left his greatcoat on as he studied the maps spread out on the table.

'I am concerned,' he said, without preamble, to the other five men who waited in silence, 'about this powerful threat to our right flank from the German Second and

Eleventh Armies. When we strike for Berlin, we could easily be hit with a counterstrike from the north. Rokossovsky is supposed to be protecting us against such a thing, but he has become bogged down.'

Zhukov said this with a look of contempt and impatience.

'I have thought of contacting Marshal Stalin, and requesting a delay to our operations—just enough to allow us to regroup and refit. Are there any objections?'

Chuikov didn't hesitate to speak at once:

'Marshal Zhukov,' he said in his low, growly voice, 'I believe that to wait would be a mistake, for just as we would gain something by delaying, Hitler's armies would gain more. It would give them time to dig-in even farther, and move their main forces closer to the capital, where they are no doubt now sure the main attack is headed. The enemy is reeling, confused, and hungry. One last knock-out punch will be all that it takes to lay him out flat. To stop now would only cost us more lives in the long run.'

This is exactly what Zhukov had expected Chuikov to say, and he was pleased, though he didn't show it. His own instincts were similar to his top commanders, though he had promised himself that he would give all of his men a hearing. Chuikov was, in many ways, a man after his own heart, and yet was a little on the impulsive side, like a cock-sure boxer. He even looked like a boxer, with his hatchet face, and smushed-in nose.

'And what about you, General?' he turned to Kolpakchi, 'What do you think?'

'I think, Comrade Marshal, that we ought to try to get Comrade Stalin and the Stavka to see reason, and that it wouldn't hurt to wait another few weeks. The stronger we are, and the more prepared, the better. Let the Americans and the British do some of the heavy lifting for a change, let them weaken the Hitlerites - it's about time they did something useful in this war.'

'And yet,' said Zhukov brusquely, 'that would mean that we would have to share some of the glory with them, and they do not deserve it. After all, it is we who suffered most from this war, and we who should be able to mete-out the punishment. We have received our orders, and now it is up to us to carry them out as best we can...' Suddenly, he was full of resolve, and wondered why he had ever begun to lose his confidence. Only two years before, Russia had been on the brink of defeat, and yet it had bounced back. One could be too cautious...

Chuikov, meanwhile, was beaming, a happy man. His whole strategy was to attack, attack, and then attack again. He had always found that this worked best, as it gave the Germans no respite, and wore them down. He had no time for holding back, and did not allow it from his men. He loathed commanders that were too cautious, like Kolpakchi, who, having been rebuffed by Zhukov, wilted like a flower.

Just then, the red telephone on the desk rang, which meant the call came from Moscow, from the Kremlin, or from Stalin himself. The Premier was currently in Yalta, conferring with Roosevelt and Churchill, trying to negotiate the overall strategy of the last days of the war. An aide answered the phone, and then, trembling with fear, handed the receiver to Zhukov, saying in a breathy whisper, 'Co-Comrade Stalin on the line for you Comrade Marshal.'

Zhukov felt a stab of anxiety as he put the phone to his ear, as he always did when talking to the boss.

'Where are you? What are you doing?' Stalin asked abruptly.

Zhukov was unconsciously standing at attention, as were the other men in the room.

'I am at Kolpakchi's, and the other commanders of the front are here, too. We are planning the Berlin operation.'

'You are wasting your time. Consolidate your forces on the Oder, and then send all the men you can to Pomerania. Rokossovsky has gotten himself into a fix. Smash the enemy's Army Group Vistula.'

'Yes, Comrade Stalin. It will be do...' but the phone on the other line had gone dead before he'd had time to reply. Stalin was never one for formality.

The other men in the room had all clearly heard what had been said. Chuikov looked downcast, while Kolpakchi beamed. The diversion to Pomerania wasn't exactly what he had wanted, but it was nice for him to see Chuikov shot down by Stalin that way.

Zhukov, meanwhile, was both disappointed and relieved. This delay would give him a bit of a reprieve, time enough hopefully for the weather to improve and the supply trucks to be able to get in, but it also meant that he would have to use up valuable troops to help Rokossovsky out of a jam. Fate had both given him something, and taken something else away. How ironic, and cruel even, that it was necessary to have to stop and help one apponent, Rokossovsky, get back into the race to the north, while the other, Koniev, moved on unhindered by any major obstacles to the south...

## II

Marshal Koniev gazed out over the miles and miles of T-34 and Stalin tanks that lay in various states of repair upon the field. This was the tank repair depot where the crews and mechanics worked day and night to bring these machines back up to full working order. Koniev had come to do an inspection of the proceedings -the first time in months when he had had an hour to spare to take care of some of these lesser tasks. With him, were his aide, and two of his tank Generals, Lelyshenko and Gordov.

He could see that the crews and mechanics who toiled away on the hulls of the giant steel beasts were exhausted, dirty and emaciated. It was a full time job keeping these tanks running, and they needed every one that they could get. Koniev stopped in front of a T-34, and watched as the men tinkered with the engine.

'How do things go, comrades?' Koniev asked, as he inspected the well-worn armour of the machine.

Immediately, the tank's commander sprang up and saluted the Marshal and Generals. He wore a dirty old pair of overalls, and was covered in grease. He had a hawk-like face, and was missing many of his teeth. This was no doubt a man who enjoyed his vodka, and by the look of it, may already have had his daily share. But Koniev didn't mind, just as long as he got the job done.

'Comrade Captain Alexander Dimitrivich Alexandranov reporting... Things go well, Comrade Marshal. Just working on the gearbox. Shouldn't take long.'

'I am not here to rush you, Comrade Captain,' Koniev said softly, 'Take as long as you need to get it right. We will be here for awhile yet. We are to halt indefinitely... And what of you and your men? How is the food? Do you have enough tools? Is there anything you need? As you know, we are short of many things, but the captured German supplies have made things a little easier. Let me know if there is anything I can get for you.'

'Yes, Comrade Marshal. We have no complaints. We just want to get to Berlin is all.'

'I know how you feel. But all in good time. You will get your chance. In the meantime, keep up the good work.'

Koniev then turned to General Gordov, who was holding a small box. Koniev opened it, took out a red star medal, and pinned it on the chest of the Captain, who remained at attention.

'Captain Alexy Dimitrivich Alexandranov,' he intoned solemnly, 'I hereby award you the Order of Lenin, for your contributions to our victory in this great patriotic struggle.'

He then patted the man on the shoulder, and looked deeply into his eyes. The man could not restrain a tear from forming, and also a look of beaming pride, which shone through his grease-smeared face. His companions had stopped their work to watch the proceedings, and were also delighted, as this award reflected well on all of them.

Koniev liked these sorts of impromptu displays, as they encouraged the men. Most Lenin and Stalin medals were given out to carefully pre-selected soldiers, based on long experience and merit, but some of the awards were left to the discretion of the Marshals to hand out to whomever they pleased, if they felt the man deserving. And if Captain Alexy had not exactly been the model soldier before, Koniev thought to himself, he was willing to bet that he would be now. A little encouragement now could work wonders later on the field of battle.

Soon these men would have to face a fanatical army, in a desperate struggle that was no longer about winning, but simply about holding onto their lives, or their honor. Such a fight would be more terrible than anything that had happened as yet, excepting perhaps at Stalingrad, two years before. Koniev had not been stationed there, but of course he had heard the tales of the heroic resistance put up by the Soviet Army against the invaders, and of how the fighting had been street by street, and house by house. He now anticipated that the Germans would attempt something similiar in Berlin, and this would mean hard fighting and heavy casualties on both sides.

As usual, the Russians would suffer most, as they had throughout the war. This was because the Nazis were so much better trained, and had better equipment and supplies in general. But slowly and surely the scales had been tipping, and the Russians were now well-trained veterans of many battles, and could hold their own with anyone. Still, the defenders would have the advantage, and he wondered if this good Captain and his men would get through alive, and return home to their families.

He then saluted the men, and turned to inspect the other tanks. He commented to Lelyshenko and Gordov on the plucky attitude displayed by the crews, and this made him feel optimistic. He admitted privately to himself that over the past week he had begun to get a little discouraged. Just when things had been going so well, when it seemed as though his army was invinsibly heading on through all obstacles, and straight for Berlin, the call had come in to halt his forces.

It had felt like a crushing blow at the time. Up until now the troops had been performing wonderfully, and by Feb 11 he had smashed a hole in the German defences that ran 50 km deep, and 120 km wide. They crossed the River Oder, surrounded numerous German-held fortresses, and though these refused to give in, they had simply been bypassed, with Soviet forces in the rear left to deal with them.

It was when he reached the River Neisse that the call had come, and this had halted him in his tracks. His frustration had been great, for just as Rokossovsky and Zhukov were getting bogged down in the north, he was now held up, not by any inability on the part of himself or his men, but simply on the whim of Stalin. Of course he knew that it was no whim, not really, and that Stalin had his reasons.

As with everything Stalin did, he suspected that the purpose of his caution was multifaceted. For one, he did not want Koniev to get too much of a lead on the other Marshals, as he obviously favoured Zhukov, who had always been his favourite soldier. Also, Stalin was no doubt remembering the nearly disasterous assault on Budapest last fall. Their lines had almost been breached then, and the boss obviously didn't want a repeat of that situation. Also, the Red Army could now afford to wait. The outcome of the war was all but certain, and there was no point in rushing things. Koniev's left flank was still vulnerable to attack, and so he must consolidate his position, both here and in Lower Silesia to the rear.

He did not know the details of course, but had heard rumours that the Americans and British had agreed that they would not try to capture Berlin themselves, and that took some of the stress off of the Red Army. Now they could afford to build up their forces till they were completely ready, and then launch an attack in more favourable weather. As usual, Stalin saw more and knew more than anyone else in the Soviet Union, and had a clearer grasp of strategy than even his trained Generals.

Koniev had absolute faith in the Premier, as he had rarely been wrong before. Throughout the war, his intuitions had always seemed to have been right. Besides, as a loyal communist and former Commissar, it was his duty to obey his leader without question; it was just that his own ambition and impatience often got the better of him. Countless times in the past he had ignored orders from the Stavka High Command in Moscow, and had done things his own way. The only reason he had not been reprimanded so far was because he had always delivered victories, but knew that if he failed it would mean certain punishment.

No, Stalin was right to wait after all. His men were still in relatively high spirits, but they were also tired, he could tell. They needed time to eat, and sleep, and to get the tanks and planes and trucks that they would use for the final push straightened out and ready. It was also a chance for him to take care of some of these tasks that he had neglected for a long time, or had delegated to his junior

officers. It was good to get out amongst the men, to see things from their perspective, and to know where their strengths and weaknesses lay.

And yet for all this he still longed to get back on the road, back into the fray, for time was slipping away, time that could never be replaced. He wanted to push on, to cross the Neisse River, and surge ahead over the last 150 km to Berlin. It was so tantalizingly close that he could almost taste it, almost touch it! His victory would mean his supremacy over all other Soviet soldiers, and only the highest postings after the war. That is what he, a humble lumberjack's son, would achieve, no matter the cost.

### III

It had been coming down for three solid days, a cold, freezing rain, and when it wasn't raining, it was snowing. It was never very heavy, but just enough to keep everything wet and soggy. All of Pomerania was like this, the landscape a twisted mess. The mud had long ago turned into a morass of knee-deep sludge that went on for hundreds and hundreds of miles, and when the mud froze solid, it created twisted patterns that zigzagged across the road and made it nearly impassable. Then it would rain again, and the mud would melt, and the cycle would begin again.

Either way, it was nearly impossible to get anywhere, and Rokossovsky watched with mounting frustration from the passenger seat of his truck as his men and vehicles struggled in the quagmire. On the right side of the road, many tanks, trucks and jeeps had had to pull over to make way for others to pass, as their wheels or treads had finally given in in the struggle with the mud. He expected at any minute that his own truck would do likewise, as the tires were caked with layers and layers of the stuff.

On the left side of the road trudged his men, ever loyal, ever dutiful, up to their knees in the brown liquid, and going at a snail's pace. He had tried to think of something, anything, to help alleviate the situation, but there really was nothing to be done, and they had to just keep going. A while back, on the road, he had suggested that the supply trucks be chained together, so that one could drag the other, the idea being that not only would they save fuel this way, but they could take turns carrying the burden. Any extra fuel saved could be given to the tanks, which were the most capable vehicles, and they could then get to the front lines where they were badly needed.

It was uncomfortable and freezing cold in the truck, but he did not complain, as he knew that he was in a very luxurious position compared to his men. They were out in the weather, soaking up the rain and the snow like sponges, and many of them without adequate clothing. In a way, he would like to be down there with them, if only to show some solidarity, but simply did not have the time to deal with such things right now. Every moment of the day was spoken for, as he rushed from division to division, trying to spur on the Generals, and sort out logistical problems.

Never in all the years of his command had he ever had a worse turn of luck, where it seemed that everything was set against him. The weather had been



abominable, he had lost more men than he could count in skirmishes with the enemy, and getting the supplies they needed had been a nightmare. The traintracks in Russia were a different gauge than the ones in central Europe, and so everything, all the food, ammunition, and medical supplies had to first be unloaded, and then reloaded back onto captured German or Polish trains. It didn't help that the Germans had destroyed many of the railways and rail junctions before they had retreated, and that all these had to be repaired.

On top of all that, his teeth hurt like hell. Actually, he didn't even have any real teeth, his having been knocked out when being tortured by the NKVD six years before. What he did have, was a set of stainless steel replacements, and though they did the job they were meant for well enough, they ached, and became like ice in cold temperatures. These days he smiled less often, which was unnatural for a man with such an easy-going temperment as his, but he knew that his smile appeared sinister, especially to little children.

In spite of everything that had happened to him, he was still a patriot, and wanted nothing more than to see the fall of Nazi Germany. The fascists had practically destroyed his country, and had killed millions of his fellow countrymen. He knew that his own system was not perfect, but would far rather be ruled by a despot of his own kind than a foreigner. Besides, the present might be hard, but he believed that once full communism was implemented, the old world would fall away, and a new, better type of being would emerge; one free of greed and corruption, and totally dedicated to the betterment of life.

It was beliefs like this that kept him going, and made him so intent upon helping to win a glorious victory for his country. And yet, on another level, he knew that deep down, his less noble motivations also had a say in his actions. He just really wanted to beat Zhukov and Koniev (especially Zhukov) to Berlin. Nothing would give him a greater satisfaction than to see the great man humbled, and though he knew that this was unworthy of a communist, it couldn't be helped.

For the last five nights in a row, Zhukov had sent him goading telegrams, saying things like, 'Greetings comrade! Have been ordered to help you mop-up stubborn enemy forces' and, 'Difficult to see why you are still so far behind -more aggressive action needed.' Even Stalin himself had begun to breath down his neck, calling several times to check on the progress, and to remind Rokossovsky that he would still be vulnerable to a counter attack until he closed up the gap between himself and Zhukov's armies.

As if he had needed any prodding. He was only too aware of his slow progress, but there was literally nothing he would do about it. He, as much as anyone, wanted to proceed, wanted to end this war, but the slow progress was not due to a lack of trying. He had been on the attack for more than a month solid, and had been as aggressive as any other commander in history, but circumstances that were beyond anyone's control just kept interfering. The worst had been when he had launched a major attack on Feb 10, and though the fighting had been fierce, and there had been many casualties on both sides, his two main armies had advanced only 15 km.

And yet more diversions: his armies had had to destroy German groupings in East Pomerania, to capture Danzig, and gain the Baltic sea coast. When he had

reported to Moscow that his objectives had been completed, Stalin, ever mistrustful, had demanded that no less than five different bottles of sea water should be sent to him immediately, so that their contents could be examined by scientists in order to make sure that the army really had reached the coast. Further delays as the bottles were flown to Moscow, and then finally, the word had come back to proceed. He had passed the test, but had been unnecessarily delayed by this venture.

Part of Zhukov's nagging was, he knew, based on the fact that he could hardly be in a position to launch his own major assault until his right flank was fully covered by Rokossovsky. The irony of this made Roko laugh to himself; his old friend, and former underling, wanted nothing more than to leave him in the dust, but also needed him not to fall too far behind. If he did, then Zhukov's own plans would have to wait indefinitely, and he knew that he really wanted most of all to beat Koniev. Zhukov merely disliked Roko, but Koniev he hated.

The reasons for this had never been entirely clear to him, though he guessed it had something to do with the fact that Koniev had started out as a Political Commissar. Commissars were almost universally disliked by field officers, who saw them as interfering know-nothings. At the start of the war, the influence of Commissars had been great -Stalin had believed that he needed trusted communists in the midst of the action in order to ensure that none of his Generals strayed too far from Moscow's, meaning Stalin's, orders, and that they were sufficiently politically motivated to put up a good fight. However, as the war had worn on, and it became clear that professional soldiers don't often need much motivating, the role of the Commissars had diminished, while the role of the Generals soared to new heights.

And yet, Koniev too had risen, now as a military man, despite many failures, fighting against the Japanese in 1939-40. Zhukov himself had had to clean up the many messes Koniev had left behind him, and this had created a burning loathing between the two men that had only grown with time, as neither could bear the thought of having to serve under the other. Rokossovsky suspected that Koniev's hatred of Zhukov had more to do with jealousy than anything else, as it was clear that although Koniev was a very aggressive fighter, he had not the skill of Zhukov.

When it came to earning one's place in history, and besting not only the enemy, but also one's own friends and allies, Rokossovsky knew that men would fight each other like dogs for a scrap of meat. And yet knowing this did nothing to diminish his own appetite.

## **Chapter 3**

### **War Plans.**

#### **I**

On Easter Sunday, 1 April, Zhukov and Koniev were both called to Moscow to meet with Stalin. They made the long, uncomfortable trip by air, and arrived by midnight at the Kremlin. Rokossovsky hadn't been called, as he was still engaged in heavy fighting, and was needed at the front. As usual, they were asked to wait in the outer office until the Premier was ready to see them. The silence between the two Marshals while they sat waiting was palpably awkward, as neither had one word to say to the other, and in other situations, when they did have to communicate, they usually did so through an intermediary.

The Premier liked to keep even his senior men waiting, as this reminded them who the real boss was. It gave them a chance to think about all the things that they had done that might have displeased him, or what they might possibly say that would annoy him, or give him reason to be suspicious of their motives. In other words, it was a time for them to become more and more nervous, more and more fidgety, so when they were finally called in, they would be flushed and sweating.

One man had actually had a heart attack while waiting for an audience, and had later died, and the threat was not all in their imaginations. Stalin was unpredictable, and vindictive, and one was never really sure where they stood with him. Men who annoyed him regularly ended up in the Gulag in Siberia, or worse. Even having a high position in the government or military was no guarantee of anything, as many before had found out the hard way.

A full twenty minutes like this passed before they were finally ushered into the main office. Stalin, as usual, sat at his large desk, puffing on his pipe, while seated on either side of him were three of the most powerful men in Russia: Lavrenti Beria, head of the NKVD, a man to be feared, (as Rokossovsky had learned to his detriment, as it had been he who had overseen the Marshal's arrest) Molotov, the foreign minister, useful only as a puppet to Stalin, and General Shtemenko, a competent administrator.

The two men sat down side-by-side in the two empty chairs before the desk.

Stalin greeted his Marshals, and after taking another draw on his pipe, began speaking to them as though he were continuing an interrupted conversation. 'The German front in the west has collapsed for good,' he told them, 'and probably the Hitlerites have decided that it would be better for them to be conquered by the Americans and British than by us, since they know how ruthless we will be. That is why they have reinforced their divisions facing us, while leaving the door almost wide-open for our so-called allies.'

He then reached into his desk drawer and took out a piece of paper. 'This is a report from a foreign well-wisher' he told them, 'It talks of secret dealings between the Germans and the Americans, concerning a peace deal, the idea being that the Germans would step aside and let the Americans enter Berlin first, thus blocking us. So far, Eisenhower, the Commander of the allied forces, has rejected these appeals, but for how long?.. This leaves us with a timeline, comrades, one that we cannot ignore. Are we to sacrifice Berlin to the Americans and the British?

Stalin then looked directly at Zhukov, who began to wilt under that steely gaze. 'And what are your plans for the final offensive of the war? When will you be ready to take Berlin?'

'Not later than two weeks time, Comrade Stalin. Marshal Koniev might also be ready by then, but we shall see' (he loved to speak for his fellow Marshal, even when he was there, to remind him that he was his superior officer). Zhukov then saw Beria smile -the man loved rivalry, and had a real sadistic streak, which Stalin did everything to encourage.

'But,' he continued, 'Marshal Rokossovsky will not be in position on the lower Oder until mid-April.'

'Well then,' Stalin nodded. 'We will just have to begin the operation without him. If he has to play catch-up later, then that is fine.'

What Stalin did not tell any of them was that he was playing a little game with them all, his own men AND the allies. Earlier in the day he had telegraphed Eisenhower in secret, telling him that Berlin was no longer of any strategic significance, and that as far as he was concerned, the allies were welcome to it. In truth though, it was this master of deceit's intention to get his own Generals all riled up, both against the allies, and each other.

'It turns out,' he said, 'that some of our allies are not behaving like true friends. They intend to get to Berlin ahead of us. As I mentioned, Eisenhower has rejected the Nazi's appeals for peace, but can he hold back the ambitions of his own Generals?'

Now he nodded to Shtemenko, and ordered: 'Read the telegram.'

It turned out to be a report by British Field Marshal Montgomery, forwarded to American headquarters, (and thus to Eisenhower) which detailed his plans to drive north of the Ruhr, through the shortest route to Berlin. It stated that the plan was fully feasible, and that the British could easily beat the Russians if they were given the go-ahead very soon.'

'It seems,' Stalin continued, as he lit a fresh pipe, and leaned back in his chair, 'as though we are being double-crossed, at least by Montgomery. Sooner or later, Eisenhower might very well give in to this pressure, if he hasn't already. So the question is, who is going to take Berlin? We, or the Americans and Brits?'

It was Koniev who answered first, before Zhukov had had a chance to say anything:

'It will be the First Ukrainian Front who will be taking Berlin!' he almost shouted.

There was a stony silence around the room, as the men waited to see how Stalin would react to this bit of insubordination on the part of Koniev, who in the meantime had begun to sweat as he realized that he should have waited before speaking. His rivalry with Zhukov had gotten the better of him, and he had spoken out of turn. Technically, it was Zhukov's right, as Deputy Commander, to win the ultimate prize.

Far from being annoyed though, Stalin was very pleased, though he was sure not to show it, and let the Marshal sweat a bit. This was just the kind of infighting he had hoped to stir up with his machinations. Finally he looked at Koniev, and gave a mocking smile as he spoke.

'So, that is the kind of man you are.' (meaning, one who would jump the queue in front of his senior commander).

Beria was by this point delighted, and his devious eyes darted from one man to the other, studying their expressions, and hoping that something big would

happen, while Molotov and Shtemenko simply looked nervous, hoping that some of the flack would not come back on them later.

But Stalin had no intention of crushing any egos today, and so he became more serious, and asked in more detail about how Koniev would achieve his military objective, how he would organize a proper strike group in time.

'You needn't worry, Comrade Stalin,' Koniev replied. 'We will take all of the necessary measures, and will work day and night to prepare.'

Stalin nodded, as though satisfied, and then turned to Zhukov, who with the greatest effort, spoke with quiet confidence. 'With respect,' he said sarcastically, as he nodded towards Koniev, 'the men of the First Belorussian Front do not need to reorganize themselves. We are already aimed at Berlin, and are the nearest. We shall take it!'

Stalin smiled to himself. He had both men right where he wanted them. They were now more competitive with each other than ever before, which would ultimately benefit his plan as a whole.

'Very well,' he told them. 'You will both stay in Moscow and prepare your plans in detail with the General staff. You will report back here within forty-eight hours. Then you can go back to your fronts with fully approved plans.'

Both Marshals couldn't believe the short amount of time they would have to finalize their operations for this, their greatest battle yet, as they both knew that there were still huge logistical and supply problems to overcome. But Stalin had not given them all of the surprises for the night, and as the meeting broke up, he told them, 'I must tell you, that we will pay special attention to the start dates for your operations, meaning that whoever can come up with the earliest projection, will be the one most likely to be chosen to lead the campaign.'

As both men exited the Kremlin that night, and got into their waiting cars, they felt the heavy burden of responsibility upon their shoulders. What they did over the next couple of days would define not only their own place in history forever, but also the place of their nation.

## II

It was freezing cold in Moscow, as it always was, and the snow squeaked under Zhukov's boots as he walked from his car to the entrance of the Kremlin. Right behind him was Marshal Koniev, who's car had pulled up just behind his. It was the morning of April 3, and both of them were carrying bulging map cases under an arm, which contained their final plans for the march to Berlin.

It was amazing, Zhukov thought, that these two bundles of paper, if approved by Stalin, could add up with their combined weight to the destruction of the Third Reich, and the changing of history forever. Just pieces of paper, and yet so charged with potency and power, but also potentially useless, if Stalin did not agree to the ideas contained within.

Once they were seated in the office with Stalin, Molotov, Beria, and Shtemenko, it felt as if they had never left, as though the last forty-eight hours of exhausting labor, wherein they had each scrambled to bring together all the threads of their plan in order to make it work as a unified whole, had never taken place. They were

both exhausted, and stressed, though the strong hot cups of tea that were brought began to revive them a little.

Now they were expected to summarize their battle plans as succinctly as they could, so that Stalin could weigh the pros and cons. Zhukov was blunt, and to the point, as he laid out the main battle lines he would follow, and the armies he would use for each point on the map. In total, he had eight armies stretched along the border. His idea of strategy was to throw everything he had straight at the Germans, and Stalin liked his ruthlessness. He would bet everything on one roll of the dice.

Koniev had five armies along the Neisse River, and he too was bold, and perhaps even more ruthless. He was known as the General who never retreated, and could be counted on to push ahead, regardless of what difficulties he ran into.

They agreed to attack simultaneously, which was a rare thing to witness—both of them working in concert with one another.

Stalin had listened to Zhukov quietly—he was always a man of few words—and then told the two that he thought that because of the superiority of land and air forces they had at their disposal, he expected the city to fall within twelve to fifteen days.

Zhukov thought to himself that this was a wildly optimistic estimate, but wisely chose not to voice this opinion.

'Now, Comrade Marshal,' Stalin said to Koniev. 'We would like to hear in more detail about your plans, you who thirst so badly for glory.' Then he gave a little chuckle, and Molotov, Beria and Shtemenko joined in nervously.

Koniev ignored their mirth, and launched right away into an impassioned plea for greater freedom of action. He knew strategically that it only made sense for him to encircle Berlin, and that officially he was to act in a supporting role to Zhukov, but if it were possible, he argued, in the eventuality that Zhukov got hung up, then his boundry of attack should include the city.

'Comrades,' he said, 'I will of course aim my main forces towards linking up with the Americans, while blocking any escape for the Germans. By taking the west of Potsdam, this will also have the effect of barring the Americans from entering, should they be so bold. But surely it is necessary to have an effective force, in strength, just to the south of Berlin. That would allow Marshal Zhukov more power, and a greater concentration of forces for his main thrust into the city-centre from the east.'

Of course, it was transparent to all there that Koniev was simply trying to argue his way into being given a chance to be able to beat Zhukov, but Stalin enjoyed such games, and pretended not to notice.

'But Comrade Marshal,' Stalin said incredulously, 'what about the German Ninth and Fourth Armies which will by then be to your rear? What if they should decide to attack your flanks?'

Koniev cringed to himself. It was always the mark of an amateur tactician to be endlessly worried about one's flanks; but then Stalin did have a point.

'Comrade Stalin, my Third Guards Tank Army will be more than enough to both blockade the city, and handle any attacks from the rear.'

Stalin did not really agree with this logic, but at this point in the war, strategy was no longer of central importance to him. He knew that the outcome was a

foregone conclusion, and if Koniev's strategy cost the Red Army a few extra thousand dead what did that matter to him. It was much more important to him to see to it that Zhukov did not take his own personal glory for granted. Stalin was smart enough to know that the real battle was no longer with the Germans, but had already progressed to the stage where it was really more about dividing up the spoils of battle—to see who got what. The trick was to divide the booty (in this case, glory) into more or less equal portions, so that no one General would attain too much, and thus be able to challenge his own position as supreme leader after the war.

Still, instead of just agreeing to the idea outright, Stalin liked to indulge his sense for the dramatic every now and then, and this seemed a perfect opportunity. Slowly, he reached into his desk drawer, and taking out a small metal case, opened it, and brought out a single red crayon. Then he got up, walked leisurely over to the map table, and began to stare at it.

All the other men did likewise, curious to see what he would do. Zhukov had a sinking feeling in his stomach, as he did every time Stalin took up his chalk. At a single stroke, the Premier could wipe out weeks or even months of careful planning that he and his officers had gone through, simply by laying a line upon the paper.

Koniev too was nervous, for with one stroke of cheap children's chalk, all of his dreams of glory could either be fulfilled, or dashed. It all depended on where Stalin decided to draw the boundary between his own, and Zhukov's Armies. If it cut across to Potsdam, then he knew that his dream was dead, unless a miracle happened. He feared that Stalin would use this as an opportunity to clip his wings, or would simply not understand enough about the military situation, and therefore do something impulsive.

But Stalin was not stupid, and he knew exactly what he was doing. He spent a moment studying the map, then reached down with his crayon and paused, then very clearly drew a dark red line that stretched from the River Spree all the way to Lubben, which was only 50 or so km south-east of the Berlin city boundary.

He then surveyed his work in silence, took a puff from his pipe and said, 'If Marshal Zhukov is held up for whatever reason, then you, Marshal Koniev, will be waiting to strike from the south... In other words, whoever is fastest will get to Berlin first.'

This was exactly the news that Koniev had wanted to hear, and though he tried not to show his happiness too much, inwardly he revelled at this new development. This meant that anything south of the city within those 50 km was his for the taking, and that gave him at least a pretty good chance of beating Zhukov, who faced the heaviest build-up of German defences of any of them.

Needless to say, Zhukov was furious, and felt that what was rightfully his had practically been snatched from him at the last moment. Now he would have to work twice as hard, and whip his men on at an even more unrelenting pace than was already the case. Was it possible that he would have his victory taken away from him at the last moment?

'Let us say, comrades,' Stalin continued, 'that the attack will commence on 16 April.'

What he didn't tell them was that this was one full month earlier than he had told Eisenhower he would launch his offensive. Stalin was well pleased with himself. Now he had hoodwinked the Americans, and had succeeded in whipping up his Marshals into a frenzy. Amazing how the war had begun so badly for Russia, but was now going so very well. There would be much work to do after, damages to be repaired, but he was sure it would be a stronger country in the long run, than it ever would have had there been no war.

As both men exited the Kremlin, this time there was no doubt in their minds about what they had to do, and even the way they walked reflected this. Unconsciously, they were both striding very quickly, and both leaped into their cars and demanded to be taken to the airfield. They had to get back to the front at once in order to consolidate their plans.

Having boarded their planes within moments of one another, and in a heavy swirling fog, their aircraft taxied down the runway. To a casual observer, watching from afar through the heavy mists, it would have been impossible to see which of their planes left the runway first.

### III

Although Rokossovsky had not been present at the Kremlin meetings, the Stavka had not forgotten about him. He was ordered to regroup, and to send an army to take over Zhukov's right flank on the Oder by 15-18 April. This would reduce Zhukov's front by about 130 km, and allow him to concentrate all of his forces on Berlin. This meant a huge redeployment for Rokossovsky, a complete turn-about, and a 200 km hike across wasted countryside.

The only way to transport the tanks was by rail, but many of the lines had been destroyed, and the trains could only travel slowly, as workers repaired the tracks ahead. The rest of the men were forced to march, or to hitch a ride on a horse or a truck, but most travelled on their feet, through the mud.

One such man was Pavel Ulyanov, a private in the 19th Army. He had been slogging towards Berlin for thousands of miles now, and for what felt like a hundred years. The great German city shone out like a beacon, and lured him on, more out of curiosity than anything else now. He desperately wanted to see what the nest of the fascists looked like.

But now, inexplicably, he was being ordered to turn and march in a different direction. One year ago, he would have been happy for such an order, as it would have seemed as though he would not be involved in the heaviest fighting, but in the meantime he had grown accustomed to battle, and to its hardships, and did not mind the danger anymore so much. What difference did it make to him what muddy, overcrowded road he had to take to get where they were going?

For four years he had fought with the Red Army, ever since he had been enlisted when the fascists were approaching his village of Danko, near the Don River. He had never thought of being a soldier, and frankly, neither had many of the men around him, and yet circumstances had made this his life. In many ways, the war made him sad, because he hated to see his country go through such hard times, hated to see so many beautiful and lush orchards and fields being burned to the



ground, their crops wasted. He had worked the fields himself back home, and knew a thing or two about these matters.

And yet he was happy too, because he had made new friends—men much like himself—though many of them had been killed over time. He had seen things he never would have otherwise seen, houses and cities and pastures. And had been inside the homes of the enemy, and found himself amazed at the wealth and abundance he found there. Women had jewelery, and farmers had many sheep, and goats, and oxen, and everyone had closets full of fine clothing, and shiney shoes, all of it good enough for a wedding.

These were unheard of luxuries back home, and he remained confused. From the time he could remember, he had been told that life in Soviet Russia was wonderful, and the envy of the rest of the world, and yet now he wondered how that could be? Still, he had filled bags and bags full of exotic treasures, looted from drawers and kitchens, while frightened German women and children looked on. And he had slaughtered the livestock in their barns, while he and his fellow troops had had a roast, and eaten their fill, without a second thought. And after all, why shouldn't he? The Nazis had invaded his homeland with no provocation from him, and had killed, and raped, and burned. So now they were reaping the full fury of the glorious Red Army.

But he knew that all this had been just a taste. Rumour had it that Berlin was richer than any other place in Germany, and was filled to the rafters with untold wealth. He would stuff even more sacks full of jewelery, and pots, and even books which he could not read. Why not? At home his mother and sisters would be amazed at this sudden windfall, and he would be a great hero when he returned.

Private Pavel knew full well that he was just a pawn though, a mere grain of sand in the army structure, and he had to follow orders or risk being shot. However much he wanted to see Berlin, and however much he wanted to get there, he had to move with the rest to where the Generals told him. It just made him angry to think that the men who fought under Zhukov's command would probably reach Berlin first, and would get their pick of the best booty, while he would only get what was left over.

Still, he was happy that Rokossovsky was his Marshal, was happy because he trusted his military judgement and knew him to be softer on his men than either Marshals' Zhukov or Koniev were. He had once seen Rokossovsky, just a glance, as Pavel had been walking though the mud on the road. A truck had passed, and he had looked up to see the Marshal staring out the window at the men below. His jaw had been clenched, as though he were thinking of something that did not make him very happy... and then he was gone. Pavel wondered if he too felt like a pawn in this big game of chess?

Now all that he could think about were day-to-day practical things, like how to keep his feet dry in all this mud, and how to barter for food, and how to keep his gun greased so that it didn't fail in a firefight. It was not his place to think about grand strategy. Early on in the war he had spent most of his time daydreaming about the farm he had left, about being out in the hot fields with his sythe when it was time to cut the hay; about eating lunch in the tall grass and laying down to drink some tea and listen to the crickets in the nearby trees. He had loved that, and could have lain there for hours listening to them singing to each other. He

knew their different droning sounds, and tried to imagine what they were saying to one another; their impossibly high tone would reach a crescendo, as all of them joined in the orchestra together... and then suddenly, they would stop, as though a door of silence had just shut, and the quiet would be deep and deafening almost.

He had experienced a similiar sensation many times over the last few years, when the machine-guns or the cannons of either side would blast away at each other, and the whole air would be thick with noise and dust and smoke... and then suddenly it too would stop, and his numbed eardrums would not have registered much sound even if it had been there, though there was none anyway, not even the crickets. They were all silent, or gone, or dead, and when the sounds did return, they always seemed unreal, as though in a dream, or from another world, and it struck Pavel that humans talk to one another too, just like the crickets do, only with fire, and death-dealing cannon and mortar shells.

Now his farm, his chores, and the faces of his sisters and mother were all just distant memories, as were his dreams of running the family farm one day, but he knew that if he was to be able to fight for them effectively, he would have to keep these things out of his mind, at least until the war was over. He had to stay sharp, and wary, and alive. That would be the hardest part, to just stay live, and not give in to hunger or to sickness, or to weakness, or to a bullet, or any other thing that marked the life of a soldier.

Now he would just march, as he had been ordered to, would loot where he could, and kill. And then Germany would itself become nothing but a distant memory, later, a place which could no longer do harm to his country, to his farm, to his family, and he would participate fully in the vanquishing of it, and get out of it what he could, and keep what he could—his life if possible.

But just then he stopped dreaming and looked up from the muddy footprints of the man who was marching on the road in front of him, and saw a train trundling along that had a dozen or so T-34 tanks loaded onto its carts, and moving at a snail's pace. Still, it was moving faster than he was walking, and he wondered if there was a way that he could cut out from his ranks and get a ride. It would not be easy, but he could pretend to be one of the men assigned to guard the tanks, and that way he wouldn't have to walk anymore, wouldn't have to worry about wet feet, and about carrying the heavy load of machine pistol, ammo, pistol, grenades and food.

But no, as usual, he was still daydreaming. He had always done that, only these days his dreams had changed somewhat...

## **Chapter 4**

### **War Games.**

#### **I**

**April 5:**

General Katukov finished his cigarette, dropped it on the ground and stubbed it out with the toe of his cavalry boot. He then turned and entered through the door of the three-storey, grey stucco house that had been taken over as Zhukov's headquarters. Gone were the days of the bunker, and he was glad enough of it. Now the Red Airforce had almost complete control of the skies, and the worry about being bombed by the Luftwaffe was a thing of the past.

When he reached the basement map room, he saw that his fellow senior army commanders were already gathered around a large map table that was covered with a sheet. Zhukov had not yet arrived, and the men were talking in hushed tones. They had been called for a Planning and Operations meeting—the last major meeting before the final attack on the Third Reich.

What they agreed in this room in the coming days would make history.

Katukov was glad to see his fellow officers in person, as he usually only got to talk to them on the phone. Some of them were old comrades from his Military Academy days, and yet the mood in the room was not one of conviviality, but of tension. Each man here knew their Marshal well, and knew that it was they, senior men, who Zhukov liked best to take his frustrations out on.

Also present were two female secretaries, who's task was to take shorthand dictation of everything said so that important things wouldn't be forgotten, as well as two Colonels, who were there to help organize the war games. A large matronly woman, meanwhile, an officer, would serve them tea or fetch them cigarettes.

Just then Katukov heard a flurry from up the hall, and saw the secretaries stand up to attention. He and the other officers immediately stiffened, as the burly figure of Zhukov appeared in the doorway. He strode into the room in that bear-like way he had, and without a word of greeting said gruffly, 'Let us begin.'

The two Colonels at once began to fold back the large cloth that was covering the table, and Katukov saw that underneath was the most amazing three-dimensional map he had ever beheld. It was a scale map of the city of Berlin, and the immediate outlying areas. Such detail was truly unbelievable, as every single street, flak tower, government building and bunker was not only perfectly modeled in wood, but was also numbered as well.

The map was about six metres long, and four wide, and had obviously been assembled using aerial reconnaissance flight photographs as reference, as well as the latest intelligence reports on where the enemy was establishing its defences. The realism of it was stunning, and the amount of hours it must have taken to build staggered the mind.

Katukov also noticed that his own army, as well as those of the other commanders, had been placed on the table already, and were represented by finely carved small wooden tanks and numbered wooden blocks that depicted their various tank and infantry armies. For an enthusiastic war-gamer like Katukov, this set-up defied his imagination, and he was impatient to begin. The Colonels were now passing out long sticks that resembled pool-cues, and these would be used to move and arrange the pieces on the far sides of the table that couldn't reach by hand.

'Comrades,' said Zhukov. "Take your places next to your respective armies, and we will start with a play-through of what we ideally hope to achieve with our

attack, according to the plan which I have worked out with the Stavka. We will then explore various other scenarios, just in case anything should go awry, as it invariably does during the heat of a battle. And then, after we have covered every conceivable angle, we will refresh our memories as to what is expected of you in the days to come.

'Our main objective,' he continued, 'Will be the Reichstag, an important symbolic building to the Nazis. When we have taken it, and when our glorious red flag is raised upon its roof, then we will know that Berlin has fallen, and that we have been completely victorious. Other important targets are the Chancellery, the Interior Ministry, the Foreign Office, and so on.

'But who is to take the Reichstag? Who will be my greatest General? Will it be General Chuikov of the Eighth Guards? Will it be Berzerin and his Fifth Shock Army? Bogdanov with his Second Guards Tanks? Or...' and now he looked directly at Katukov, 'will it be you, Katukov, and your First Guards Tanks?

Like Stalin, he was trying to wind them up, make them feel competitive toward each other, and to inspire them on to greater heights. Unlike Koniev though, none of them took up the challenge, knowing that if he failed he would never be able to live it down later. There were far too many things that could go wrong, things that had nothing to do with either courage or determination. Besides, Katukov thought to himself, they were all Communists, and had been taught to work together on things; only Zhukov was determined to stand out.

It struck Katukov as strange that the Reichstag should have been chosen as the ultimate prize to be won, as it held no official place in the government of Nazi Germany, having been burnt badly in a fire in 1933, and never having been fully repaired. A more likely goal was the Chancellery, which was still the seat of Nazi government and power.

But if Zhukov said that the main target was to be the Reichstag, then that was it, and he would have to do everything he could to get his forces through the city and towards that distant goal.

Luckily, it seemed as though he would have better than an outside chance at this, as his own army had been set up closest to the actual target. He was nearest, but would also face the stiffest resistance... Still, his was a powerful army, and it might just be possible...

Over the next two days Zhukov was true to his word, and covered every battle scenario that could possibly confront their armies. It was truly exhausting, and by the second day the room was full of smoke and the smell of sweat. The Generals had all loosened their collars long ago, and were calling for water now rather than tea, as it was so warm in the room.

No one liked war games more than Zhukov, and he was as brutal and ruthless with his commanders during the games as he was during a real battle, believing that he had to prepare his men adequately. First, he would ask one of the men to simulate an attack on a particular sector, and as he did so he would immediately launch a German counter-attack using the Nazi play-pieces.

'Now the German Ninth Army launches an attack against you as you cross the Spree, General Chuikov! What do you do?'

Zhukov yelled these questions, and if the commander was not quick enough in his responses, he was berated and cursed.

When Bogdanov complained that he needed more room for his outflanking movement in the north of the city, Zhukov mocked him, and asked sarcastically if he really wanted to take part in the assault of Berlin, or if he would rather go flower-picking to the north of the city? But he really blew his top though, when Katukov suggested that the artillery barrage they were planning for the ring of defensive trenches the Germans had dug near the Seelow Heights on the opposite bank of the Oder should actually be aimed at the second line of trenches, rather than the first.

This was not a frivolous suggestion, as it had been proved many times that the Germans had, indeed, pulled back to their second line of trenches in the past when under intense fire. Several of his co-commanders dared to nod in agreement when Katukov brought this point up, but Zhukov dismissed this idea with a wave of his hand. Katukov thought that this was unwise, but was in no position to argue with the Marshal, and didn't feel like having his head bitten-off anyway. Still, he thought sadly to himself, such pig-headedness on the part of Zhukov would cost a lot of his men's lives later on, and would only help the enemy.

Ultimately, Katukov had a great deal of respect for Zhukov, as well as a great deal of fear, as did the rest of the men in the room. He knew that he was a brilliant man, but also knew that he was both impulsive and stubborn—a dangerous combination. Zhukov had always won because he was relentless and because he drove his men so hard, all the while relying on the tactical finesse of his junior and senior Generals. He only hoped that such thinking did not lead them all into a complete disaster.

When the training finally came to an end, an exhausted Katukov left the grey stucco house with his fellow officers, and made his way by truck back to his own headquarters. There, after only a few hours sleep, he would start the whole thing over again, only this time with his corp and divisional commanders. He would show them what he had learned, and would conduct endless exercises with them, trying to work out any possible kinks, while they in turn would then do the same with their own battalion and company commanders.

The day of the big final push was fast approaching, less than two weeks away, and they must be ready...

## II

To the south, Koniev was also engaged in near frantic preparations of his own, as well as elaborate war games. He had met with his top men in order to work out a solution to a serious snag that had caught them up: they had not yet crossed the Neisse River, and had no bridgeheads established yet. The only way he could see forward was to attempt a river crossing in boats, knowing that his men would come under heavy fire all the while.

All through the war games Koniev had insisted that the first wave of infantry must attempt the crossing by boat, and there establish a toehold that would be exploited by successive waves of troops. It had worked for Germany during the invasion of France, and he saw no reason why it would not work again.

General Gordov, commander of the 3rd Guards Tank Army, tried to reason with Koniev.

'Comrade Marshal,' he said, 'we must use our bridging equipment. Once we have established it, we can flood the opposite embankment with men and machines in overwhelming force.'

Koniev knew that Gordov was right from a tactical point of view, but he also knew that if he used up his bridging equipment now, he would not be able to use it later when he most needed it. They would still have to swing northwards to Berlin, and if he did not have it then they would be as good as stuck.

'No, Comrade General,' he said with grim determination, 'We must not use up our equipment only to cover the expanse of land between the Neisse and the Spree. We will suffer casualties, yes, but speed will be all that counts in the battles to come, and we must be ready.'

Both Generals Gordov, and General Lelyshenko of the 4th Guards Tank Army disagreed, but they could see that their boss's mind was made up. Both men believed that it was better to take their time in establishing strong bridges across this river, and also on the Spree. It would take longer, true, but would ultimately be more militarily sound.

'Comrades,' Koniev said, seeming eager to placate them, 'the sacrifices we make now will more than pay dividends later on, this I promise you. Once we have crossed the River Spree, there will be few major land obstacles to stand in our way, and no more major rivers; then I will be able to unleash you, and you will have a free run all the way to Berlin.'

Inwardly, Koniev knew that he was gambling away other men's lives in order to reach Berlin more quickly, and that if he were to slow down now, he could have bridging equipment for both rivers. Subsequently his army would suffer fewer casualties, but he justified his decision to himself by arguing that now he would be able to shorten the war by a couple of weeks, which in the long run would save even more men.

### III

To the north, meanwhile, Rokossovsky had by April 10th finally reached the banks of the Lower Oder. After one look through his binoculars though, he sighed deeply to himself. The terrain ahead was even worse than he had thought it would be, worse than intelligence had reported to him, and he wondered what kind of miracle Moscow was expecting now.

From where he was standing, the crossing of the river looked nearly impossible, as it was 4 km wide if it was a foot; and instead of being too deep, which would have been bad enough, this water was simply too shallow even for boats or pontoon bridges. Even after one got to the banks, they were nothing more than marshland that stretched over 1 km on his side of the river.

As if that were not enough, on the other side of the wide eastern and western banks there was a landmass that rose high up, and he knew it was well fortified by Manteuffel's Third Panzer Army. And what fortifications! Intelligence reported

an intricate system of trenches and strong points stretching back from the river for 8 or 9 km.

Such a battle that was to come would not be easy. Lesser commanders would not even try, but he knew that they would make it eventually. Still, he sometimes wondered if he was cursed by the fates. If only he were allowed to do things his way he would have reached Berlin long ago, but Stalin insisted on tying him up with endless errands, while both Koniev and Zhukov seemed prepared to spring forward with relentless momentum any moment now.

His own attack would have to be postponed, as he was nowhere near ready yet, and had to wait for straggling divisions behind him. It would be a full four days after Zhukov's attack that he would be ready to begin, and even then his main task was simply to protect his old friend and rival's right flank.

Still, he thought to himself, it could have been worse, and he could still be in prison. At least now he had a chance to prove his innocence, and to gain some glory for himself and his country along the way. But he was not out of hot water yet, for if he failed to fulfill his mission, he knew what awaited him back in Moscow. The thought made him shiver, as though a gust of chilly air had just blown in off the water.

He had not received a letter from his wife and daughter in months, and he wondered about them every minute of the day. They were still in Siberia, doing hard labour, and were being treated something like hostages. If he did well, they might be released after the war, and if he did badly, they would most likely stay there for some years yet. While he had been in prison, the guards had stood him up against a post and put a cloth over his eyes as though he were to be executed, and when they fired they had shot past him. They had done this twice, in the hopes that he would break, but he never had. He couldn't afford to break now, either, especially with so much at stake...

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Battle for the Seelow Heights.**

#### **I**

The River Oder runs quietly for almost a thousand km on the border between Germany and Poland. Deep green shrubs line its banks, while trees emerge from the little brown grass islets that pepper the entire river. For the most part, it is not very deep, nor very wide, and yet it would no doubt going to prove to be a formidable obstacle to get both men and machines across, especially under heavy fire.

The opposite side of the bank was stiffly defended, and well dug in. There was no question that the Germans were expecting the Russians to try to cross the water at exactly this spot, for this was where it is narrowest and shallowest, and they had reserved their best divisions for its defence.

To Arkady Renko, Gunnery Sergeant, the expected attack could not come soon enough. Through most of the war so far, he had either been conducting drills, firing on the enemy from afar, or sitting in the Studabaker truck as it towed a 152 mm cannon to new positions. Now that he was being asked to wait, his nerves were on edge, and were becoming more so every day, in a stinking dugout that the infantry had made.

It's not that he wasn't used to hardship, or danger, many times he and his unit had been confronted with the deadliest site of all: that of a German Tiger tank, as it singled out their cannon for destruction. Only narrowly had he missed being killed a dozen times or more, and he had certainly suffered deprivations of food, and water, and had had several trips to the field hospitals.

But the thing that really bothered him was that the higher-ups never let the troops know from one minute to the next what to expect, which left them in a suspended state of animation. It made sense of course, as all too easily such valuable information could fall into the hands of the enemy, but it always left him feeling terribly uneasy nevertheless.

Still, he had a feeling that something was brewing, because recently the political officers had been giving more and more patriotic speeches, which was a sign that something big was on the way. Such motivational talks usually centered around reminding him and his comrades just how important it was that they be ready to lay down their lives for the Motherland, and that soon Germany would feel the righteous rage of the Red Army, and they must fight for their families, and for Comrade Stalin, above all.

It was after one such speech that Arkady decided to take the plunge, and to do what he had for so long put off doing, and that was to officially join the Communist Party. He did not do so out of any political zeal, however, but only because for the first time in the war he was not really sure whether he would live through it or not. In the past he had brushed such thinking aside, but he knew that the fighting to come would be the worst yet, and he no longer felt very confident. The benefit to him of joining the Party was that non members weren't treated well after they died, in that no one bothered to inform their next-of-kin, whereas members' families were informed right away if a man died or was wounded.

Such a thing was small, no doubt, but it did put his mind at ease at least a little. Now he knew that his family would not have to spend the rest of their lives wondering what had happened to him if he didn't show up.

Amazing to think that this is what his life had been reduced to. Only four years before he had been studying aeronautical engineering at Moscow State University (one of the reasons he had been assigned to artillery duties, which demanded logic and arithmetic) and had a small apartment in the city that he shared with his parents, who had come from their village to live with him. Stretched out before himself he had seen a good life: one in which he would work at a factory, get married, and have children. And yet, now here he was, shivering because of the cool night air in a trench that smelled of mold and worms.

It was on the night of the 15th of April that he and the other men were handed pamphlets from their Commissars, which told them that within hours the attack on the Oder would begin. They would cross the river the very next day, and were



to prepare themselves accordingly. Soon men came around carrying sacks of extra rations of food and drink. The army always made sure to feed them well on the night before a major battle, so that they would fight with strength the next day, and that is when Arkady realized that it really was finally going to happen.

Two hours later they were ordered to assemble at their trucks, and be ready to go, while the infantry took up their red banners and made their way to the front-line trenches. Tomorrow, at the order to charge, these brave men, who would be singled out as easy targets, would unwind the flags, and would rush headlong into the fray, the red cloth snapping in the breeze as they shouted to their comrades, inspiring and leading them through the haze and confusion of battle.

Such a thing as this, to Arkady, was difficult to imagine, for he felt that he valued his own skin more than others must. And yet in contemplating the fervour of these heroic standard-bearers, who were willing to risk all in order to inspire their fellow men on to glory, momentarily softened Arkady's natural cynicism, and gave him such a boost that he almost wished the battle could begin right away, even in the pitch darkness.

But then he snapped back to reality, as he looked down and saw that his hands were shaking horribly, and felt his throat, which was as dry as sandpaper.

## II

From where Zhukov and Chuikov were standing, within their command post on a sandy hill overlooking the Oder, they could see, even in the moonlight, the vast expanse of rolling hills and lush green forests that stretched out before them. The Seelow Heights, that great line of green hills on the opposite bank, was their ultimate objective, and though it appeared peaceful enough, they knew it was bristling with enemy artillery and tanks. The conditions for battle were hardly ideal, the ground to their left was still soggy, and the river was at the highest point it would be in the year, but there was no turning back now.

Zhukov had decided to surprise the Germans by planning to launch the attack at 3 am in the morning. He and Chuikov stood in their concrete emplacement, drinking the hot tea that had been brought to them by a female assistant. Both men were nervous, but didn't want to show it to each other, and so said nothing.

In their trenches, the frontline troops stood at the ready. Since hours past they had been soaked by the rain that had been lightly but persistently coming down. None of them was equipped with waterproof clothing, and so they were all drenched to the skin. Many smoked, or stamped their feet to keep warm, while further down the line the tank crews waited atop their tanks, and the artillerymen sat out in the open as well.

At exactly 3:00 am, three red flares shot into the sky, momentarily casting an unearthly bloody glow over the whole assembled force, and it was then that Zhukov uttered the most important order of his life:

'Now, comrades, now!'

Immediately the darkness of the sky was lit up into brightest daylight, and the silence was shattered as thousands of guns opened up.

There were 305 mm Howitzer cannons, which split the air with their slow bang, while the 152 mm cannons let out large ripping cracks, followed by short echoing thunder rolls. They sounded much like a rifle, only a thousand times louder. The Katyusha multiple rocket launchers were the most impressive weapon of all, though, and they let out a metallic whine, as their tail-flames arched across the sky—*Whaoooooh*—followed by a swishing or ripping sound. The rockets traversed the sky, found their targets like flaming arrows, and then reduced everything in their paths to rubble.

There were 400 guns for every km of Front, and the concentration of firepower they brought was simply stupefying. The whole Oder valley seemed to rock as the rolling barrage crept slowly but surely towards the German front lines. Suddenly the air turned hot, and dust and debris were funneled up into the sky. Trees bent, bushes lit on fire, and the eruptions went on and on, never relenting.

This bombardment went on for a full thirty minutes, as half a million shells were poured onto the Germans to a depth of 7 km. The Enemy was so shocked that they were not even able to return one single shot from their own cannons.

Then suddenly, as abruptly as it had begun, the firing stopped, and all was silence again. A single beam of light lit up the sky, a single searchlight, followed by thousands of multi-colored flares. These reminded Zhukov of a fireworks display, such as he had always wanted to see as a boy, but could not, as the village he came from did not have such luxuries. Now he was seeing them, only under far different circumstances than he could have imagined as a child. This was the signal for all of the other searchlights to spring into life, all 143 of them.

Zhukov was delighted that everything was going according to plan so far. The searchlights had been his own idea. He had heard that the British used them to shine off of the clouds at night, in order to create artificial moonlight so that their troops could see where they were going. But he thought he could do one better, and so decided to angle them down towards the enemy.

His reasoning was that if they lit things when shining upwards, then they would work even better when shining directly across the fields of battle. Not only would they dazzle the eyes of their opponents, but they would also illuminate the ground as though it were the middle of the afternoon for his own men, thus making their progress so much easier than it would have been in the dark.

The first wave of assault infantry were sent out, but little did Zhukov know that what the lights did in fact accomplish was to simply blind his own men, so intense was the glare, and also acted to silhouette them against the horizon, making them easy targets for German sharpshooters. The plan might have worked, only the fog lay heavy, and the lights had trouble breaking through the dense moisture, and so their intended effect was severely hampered.

But he was far too caught up in the moment, and didn't notice this, and so gave the order to send out the second wave. Chuikov's men unfurled their red banners and charged out of their trenches, making their way for the Kustrin bridgehead straight ahead. This was the shallowest place to get across the water, and they ran for it as fast as they could, some men carrying pontoons, while other men brought up the prefabricated bridge sections. Everything had been planned down to the smallest detail, but in the heat of the moment, the infantry seemed to forget everything and chaos broke out.

Men had begun to plunge into the river with their assault boats, even though they were supposed to have waited longer until the artillery and tanks could cover their crossing. They were in no mood to hang about though, and many began to swim across, despite being weighed-down with the guns and ammunition, and to grab onto anything that floated (empty gas cans or tree trunks) and paddled themselves desperately across.

Medium and heavy Soviet bombers flew overhead. They strafed enemy strongholds, and large white plumes of smoke rose up from the marshes. T-34 tanks meanwhile, fought their way through the soggy grounds, many getting bogged down and having to stop.

The sky above, which was still dark, was full of haze and the smell of battle. The distant line of the enemy ridge was barely visible anymore. Men made their way through the mud, then hid behind broken bits of timber that had fallen when they came under fire. Others crowded onto the backs of tanks, hoping to save their boots, and their lives. The tankers had to guess where they were going in all of this confusion. All around, dry grass was on fire, and black smoke rose high into the air.

From their command post, Zhukov and Chuikov could barely see what was going on, and the longer the fighting continued, the more smoke that got churned up into big clouds. Soon they were relying on telephone messages and messengers, and with each passing moment, Zhukov's temper began to flare more and more. He paced and stomped as he yelled into the receiver, shouting orders at everyone. The coordination of his attack plan was coming apart at the seams; his tanks and guns were lagging far behind where they should be, and many important bridges had been blown by the Germans, which created terrible obstacles.

Not only that, but now the roads that were functional were getting horribly jammed, the tanks and guns could not leave the main roads, for if they did, they would become instantly bogged down in mud, or be blown up by mines. Even their air support had been rendered all but useless, as the dust clouds churned up by men and tanks prevented the pilots from being able to locate and destroy their targets.

Both Zhukov and Chuikov were feeling desperate, were feeling as though they had lost all control of the situation. It was true of course that all battle-plans never went just the way one wanted them to, but this situation was very quickly threatening to become a real fiasco. Zhukov just hoped that Stalin would hold off on calling him until he had been able to clear the situation up a little bit. He did not want to have to admit what was going on...

### III

There were many brave Soviet infantrymen that day, and these stout soldiers managed, despite all the confusion, to make their way toward their intended destination-point at the river's edge. Once they got to the water though, it was impossible to proceed any farther, as all of the bridges across that remained intact had come under withering enemy fire.

The only thing they could do in this situation was to find somewhere to shelter themselves from the worst of the shooting, and wait. Shells fell all around, causing showers of mud to cascade into the air, where it hung for a moment, and then came down like dirty rain. They were soaked to the skin but did not feel it; night had turned to day, and they did not know that either, their veins were filled with adreneline and they did not even see or hear the flashing flares that kept going up into the grey morning sky on their curved trajectories.

Then at last they heard the cry that they had been waiting for, come from some of their comrades: 'A bridge! We have taken a bridge!' at which every one of the soldiers rose immediately from the ground and began to run at a break-neck pace towards the sound of the yelling. When they got to the other side of the bridge, there was no mud anymore, strangely, but only green fields of wheat. Through this, they just kept on running towards the Seelow Heights.

When they got to the base of the Heights they stopped again, and began to dig holes in the ground into which they could burrow down. They could not fire back, as the enemy was well entrenched, and camouflaged, and was also out of range. The men saw large, steep hills before them, and church spires, and above them a clear blue sky just beginning to emerge, and they knew, even if their generals didn't, that they had been led into a trap. The Germans had obviously let them cross the bridge in numbers so that it could get them in range and then cut them down with heavy machine-gun and mortar fire.

Within their command bunker, on the Reitwein Spur, both Chuikov and Zhukov were at their wit's end. They had received the reports about their tanks being set ablaze by the German's deadly-accurate 88.mm cannon fire, and of their many divisions of infantry being held up at the base of the Seelow Heights hills. Chuikov was screaming into his phone for air support, but the commander of the 18th Air Army protested, saying that the Nazis were so well hidden that he simply could not deliver accurate bombings, clear skies or not.

Chuikov had another solution to the problem though, and decided that there was only one thing for it, and that was to hold back the attack for another 20 minutes while the artillery blasted the hills with everything they had. They would not aim, but would simply carpet-bomb the entire Heights, and only then would they proceed with the infantry advance. This would cause a minor delay, but it was a necessary tactical decision considering the circumstances.

Zhukov was having none of this though, and he swore long and loud, the veins nearly popping out on his neck as he berated Chuikov for being an incompetent fool! Chuikov remained silent through this, and thought to himself that Zhukov reminded him of a spoilt child who does not get his own way, and so throws a temper tantrum. He had been witness to many such rages before, and so always tried to calm himself down and talk reasonably to his senior commander.

But Zhukov was far beyond calming, and he began throwing Chuikov's carefully arranged battle-plan papers all over the communications room. 'Berlin is rightfully mine!' he shouted. 'And I will not allow a few over-promoted shitheads to ruin my assault! You are just a bunch of weak-willed turds, and I want results, and fast!'

With every hour that passed, Zhukov could see his place in history slipping out of his grasp, and worst of all, being taken by that non-entity Koniev.

\* \* \* \* \*

By 10 AM, the Red Air Force had finally succeeded in silencing most of the guns on top of the Seelow Heights, and whole battalions of Chuikov's infantry had overrun the first lines of defences at the base of the Heights. The third line, though, was proving more difficult, and the men were by now quite exhausted, and had not yet recieved any food or drink for some hours now.

It would not have been so bad, or tense, for Chuikov, except that Zhukov kept hovering around and breathing down his neck as he tried to plan his next move. He studied the maps spread out before him, and the first reports that had come in on the German's strength of resistance, and where their strongholds were located. If only it were possible, he thought, to get artillery redeployed, then he could simply blast the enemy strongpoints! But no, the gradient on the hills was far too steep to ever get anything up it easily... Perhaps he would order another air assault? It would take time of course, but it would certainly soften up the enemy's entrenched defences a bit...

Zhukov, who had been trying to cool himself down a bit, and who had decided to allow his top commander some leeway in getting them out of this mess, finally lost his patience again, and started yelling: 'Tanks! I want tanks on that slope dammit! I want those Heights and I want them now!'

Both Generals of Infantry Belov and Simonyak, who had come into the bunker room to find out what their orders were, and who had been warily silent during their boss's outpourings of rage and frustration, now felt that they had to say something, as both felt strongly that such tactics as this were the absolute wrong course to take at this time.

'But Marshal!' said Belov, 'To send tanks into the fight now would be counter-productive. The few good roads that we have are already clogged with trucks and men, and this would simply create even more confusion than is already there, and besides, those T-34's could never climb those hills. They would only get in the way!'

'Yes,' concurred Simonyak, 'the only chance for them to advance at all would be for them to take the heavily fortified towns of Freidersdorf and Dolgeline, but these towns have not yet been subdued by artillery fire. The tanks would be met with stiff resistance, and would be easy targets, especially during the day. We must allow the infantry to do its job before we send in the big guns, otherwise they will just be wasted.'

Zhukov knew full well that such an order as he was demanding would run counter to all sense of military logic, and even to his own carefully arranged plans. It had been decided that the tanks were originally not to be deployed until after the Heights had been taken, as there they would have better ground, and would be a full force of newly repaired and refitted machines.

But he was past all logic now, and was not interested in intellectual arguments. He wanted to force a dramatic break-through on the front, and also knew the value of doing something unexpected. As he stormed out of the room with a withering glare aimed at Chuikov, he met General Katukov of the First Guards Tank Army in the hallway, and he turned on the commander and roared in his loudest voice: 'Well! Get your ass in gear and take those hills!'

This was a nothing but a desperate attempt to turn the tide of the battle. Despite the Soviet's overwhelming numbers of men and machines, the Nazis had played their hand well, and until now, the weather had not cooperated with the Russians, nor had the terrain been good. Of course it was just a matter of time, and Zhukov should have known that. Chuikov had even told him that the end result was still inevitable, and that it was just going to take longer than they had expected is all. But this answer did not satisfy Zhukov, had never satisfied him, and that is why, he believed, it was he who was in overall command, and not the others.

Just as he had ordered, the tanks were thrown into the battle within the hour, and just as his commanders had warned him, they were soon bogged down in the mud, and were getting caught-up in traffic jams on the roads leading to the front lines. Now, both troops and trucks had to get out of the way of the tanks, causing endless delays, and inciting the men to curse and swear at each other in their frustration. Even once they got to the front there was not much they could do, and their formations had, in the meantime, gotten all mixed up.

Finally, at 1 pm, Zhukov felt ready to report to Stalin in Moscow, something he had been putting off doing. He had not wanted to have to tell the Premier that he was held up, and part of his decision to send in the tanks was to make it look as though he were hammering as hard as he could at the Germans. If he worded things just right, he believed he could make this seem like a wise tactical move, and not one of desperation.

Stalin agreed with his Marshal, but advised him to use bombers as well in order to accelerate matters.

'When will you have taken the Heights?' he asked Zhukov, the implied threat in his voice making it clear that he had better make it fast.

'By the evening of tomorrow, Marshal Stalin,' Zhukov replied, trying to sound more confident that he really felt.

'Good,' said Stalin. 'Keep me informed.' Then, almost as an afterthought, Stalin whispered silkily into the phone, 'Marshal Koniev's attack to the south is going very well. He is moving forward without too much difficulty at all... I thought I would just let you know...'

Zhukov said nothing, but felt his hands gripping the phone like a vice...

## **Chapter 6**

### **Koniev crosses the Oder.**

#### **I**

As Koniev had awoken on the morning of the 16th of April, he had been able to hear the distinctive sound of shelling in the distance. He knew that this was Zhukov's artillery, 70 km to the north, and he marvelled at the magnitude and power of such a barrage if he could hear it from that far away. No doubt the

Germans heard it as well, but little did they know that within an hour or so they too were to receive a blast from an almost equal amount of firepower.

There was no need for the Marshal to get dressed, as he had slept in his uniform, which was his habit on the night before a decisive battle. No one would know it though, to look at him, as he looked as clean-pressed as he had the day before. He put on his cap and made his way through the pine forest that led to his dugout observation post. From here he would watch the entire battle, and be ready to issue any last-minute orders.

And yet there was little chance that there would be much to do. He was a meticulous planner, and made sure that every detail was laid out beforehand and that his commanders knew exactly what to do. Unlike his rival Zhukov, he was not given to emotional outbursts, and rarely changed his mind about things once a fight was in progress. As far as he was concerned, once the battle had begun, he was more of an observer than anything else.

When he arrived at the observation post he was met by General Pukhov of the Thirteenth Army, who had thoughtfully set up a pair of binoculars on a tripod so that he would better be able to see what was going on. He looked at his watch. It was almost 4:00 am. Just another 15 minutes before the artillery opened up. He bent down to look through the binoculars. The smell of pine was heavy in the air. Crickets and Cicadas were whiring loudly, but other than that, all was silence. It was going to be a bright, beautiful day, he could tell, once the sun came up.

Finally, it seemed to him as though the gods of war (not that he believed in such things) were smiling down upon him.

Then, suddenly, he heard a loud crack! and something seemed to explode in front of him. He fell backwards, in slow-motion it felt like. He knew instinctively and at once that he was not seriously hurt, but was stunned. General Pukhov threw himself protectively over Koniev, and yelled at nearby sharpshooters to open fire. Koniev sat up, but did not stand. Pukhov peered up over the edge of the trench to see what was going on, then knelt and examined the binocular tripod. It had been hit with a sniper's bullet, right at the base of the crank. If it had been one inch to the left or right, it would most likely have killed Koniev instantly.

After this incident, the two men decided to sit on low stools within the trench, and to look through a periscope lens which went up over the side of the dugout. This is what they would usually use, but the area had been deemed safe enough that such precautions were not necessary.

Someone had messed up.

It was more difficult to see what was going on through the periscope, but it was the safer option, until their patrols had managed to flush out any German snipers in the area.

Koniev did not allow this brush with death to outwardly phase him, as he had come close to death before, and knew it was his duty to put on a brave would face of it before his men. He always thought of the example that he set, and knew that his soldiers faced greater dangers than this very shortly. And yet he would hardly have been human if he had not been at least a little upset by the incident. What concerned him most, above all, was that he should be killed before he could unleash the full power of his armies on the enemy.

He was not an especially superstitious man by nature, but then Russian culture is rife with superstition, and it is simply the vocabulary of the people, even if communism sought to wipe it out. He wondered, in that moment, if the bullet had been a signal to him to hurry up with his plans, as his own time on earth was limited, or if fate was somehow trying to rob him of his ultimate victory? But no! he decided. This moment told him that he had been meant to live—he had had a close shave—but destiny itself had intervened at the last moment so that he, Marshal Koniev, could mount his assault and see military glory as his!

Just then the artillery opened up, and the terrible noise of the cannonade began along 350 km of Front. Overhead, bombers from the Second Air Army roared by Koniev's trench on their way to bomb the rear areas and communications bunkers of the Fascists. Fighter planes, meanwhile, dropped smoke bombs near the Oder River, to screen the movements of the Soviet infantry and engineers, who were even now readying themselves to make their way down to, and then across, the river.

This was the first phase of the attack: The barrage would keep the Germans' heads down, while the Air Force would destroy key defences and set up a smoke-blind for the troops while they went across the river to establish a foothold on the far bank. They would be followed by the engineers who would build the pontoon bridges which would carry the tanks and supply vehicles across.

Koniev had had to think long and hard about where he was going to ford the river, but had eventually settled on this place, despite the fact that it was so heavily defended. This spot would give his men a good 20 km run before they would have to face another river crossing at the Spree. Just south of the city of Forst, there was access to the Autobahn highway, which led all the way to the south-east of Berlin. This would provide his tanks with exactly what they needed to make a quick dash north and into the city.

He had been thinking ahead: If, for whatever reason, Zhukov got caught-up on the Seelow Heights, he would immediately be able to order his men to swing north up the Autobahn and towards the capital. With this idea in mind he had placed his Third and Fourth Tank Armies—his most powerful force—on his right flank, ready to go at a moment's notice. He had over 150 places on the river where his men were now crossing, and once his engineers established their bridgeheads, his armoured divisions could be thrown into the attack, and the drive north could begin.

Far below, in the valley, as Marshal Koniev observed the progress of the battle from above, the infantrymen had now succeeded in getting to the other side of the river where they began hand-hauling heavier artillery pieces by chains and ropes through the water. Luckily, the bottom of the river was flat and rocky, so the guns moved relatively easily through the crisp cold water, to where they would be set up and used to distract the German machine-gunners.

Meanwhile, the engineers, knowing that everything depended upon them, were wading up to their chests, and deeper, in the freezing water, as they held large wooden beams above their heads while their comrades drove piles into the riverbed to support them. They shook and shivered in their various stages of hypothermia, and tried not to be swept away by the current. Small boats hauled



cables across, which were attached to winches, that were used to drag more sections of pontoon to where they would be fitted into place.

Within an hour of the battle having begun, the first tanks and artillery pieces had been brought across, and were engaged in the fighting. They were blasting out large avenues through the pines, which the toops could march through. The only problem was that because the wood was so dry, it immediately lit up, starting large forest fires, which not only smoked out the Germans, but the Soviets as well. Still, this did not delay the proceedings too much.

By 11 am the tanks of the Fourth Army were already going into action on the west bank. Koniev was delighted by how things were proceeding, and by now he had forgotten all about his near-death experience earlier in the morning. The day before, he had told his tank commanders: 'Once you get onto the opposite bank, stop for nothing. Do not assist the infantry. Bypass all enemy strongholds, and ruthlessly smash through everything in your path. Your only objective is to make for the Spree. Do not stop there either to wait for engineers, but simply go through it! Attack, attack, and then attack again! Always move forward, and don't stop for anything until you get there!'

Koniev looked again through his periscope, and saw that far to his right, moving quickly across the established bridgehead, were literally hundreds of his tough, versatile T-34 tanks. They were lined up for miles to the rear, but were not getting stalled in traffic jams, as he had heard that Zhukov's were. Nothing, nothing, thought Koniev, could stop the power of this steel fist; nothing could stand in his way now!

## II

Zhukov was sitting alone in the dark in his private sleeping quarters within the command bunker. He had been drinking vodka—not much—but just enough to take the edge off his nerves. Somewhere deep inside of himself he knew he had made a tactical error in trying to force the issue on the Heights with his tanks. And yet he was too deep in it now to turn back, and had to see it through, whatever the consequences. He had believed that a significant breakthrough was due to come any minute now, and yet it had not come.

He was bracing himself for the call he would have to make to Stalin in order to describe the situation. It was now midnight, and it could be put off no longer. He shivered, and knew that he would have to cash in all the goodwill that he had with Stalin in order to save himself from being relieved of duty, or worse. He had no doubt that Chuikov would love to wrest control from him of overall command of the First Belorussian Front, and he simply could not allow that.

At last, he mustered up the courage, and left his room, his head spinning slightly, and went to where there was a red phone. He guessed that Stalin would be at his desk, as he always was at this time of night, and sure enough, the call was put through immediately. After listening to Zhukov's report, and his attempts to gloss over the failures of the day, Stalin was unimpressed, and chastised Zhukov.

'Why did you send in your tank armies?' he chided. 'Why did you depart from the plan? It was a good plan, and would have worked. What made you jump the gun?'

But of course he already knew the answer to that, as he had encouraged Zhukov to be rash and unrelenting from the very beginning.

'But Comrade Stalin,' protested Zhukov. 'We have made some headway. Elements of the Eighth Guards have reached the Heights, and have even captured three houses there.'

'Three houses is not much, Marshal. Where is the breakthrough we were promised? You should be half-way to Berlin by now.'

'I feel,' said Zhukov, as he began to sweat, 'that this may not be a very bad thing at all. The enemy is now throwing machines and reserves into the fight to bolster their defences. It is always better to fight an army in the field than in a city, and so we are actually bleeding them white.'

'It sounds to me,' countered Stalin, 'as though you are the ones being bled white... But then, if you cannot handle this great responsibility, it is no matter, as I can just order Koniev to attack from the south, and Rokossovsky from the north. They will be happy to pick up the slack, I am sure.'

Zhukov was horrified. 'But Comrade Stalin. There is no way that Rokossovsky could be ready to launch such a strike...'

Stalin was in no mood to listen though, and hung up the phone with an abrupt 'Goodbye!'

#### **4 hours earlier:**

Gunnery Sergeant Arkady Renko was wounded in the leg. He could not walk and it pained him terribly to move, so he had sheltered for awhile behind the stump of a tree. It had not been easy to staunch the flow of blood coming from his thigh, especially in the dark, but eventually he was able to wrap a shred that he had ripped from one of his cloth socks around the wound. Hardly sanitary, he thought, but then it would have to do.

He had recieved the wound when a sharpshooter's bullet had grazed his leg as he and the other artillerymen in his unit had been unlashng their cannon from the back of their truck. They had driven up to the Front in the second wave, but before they had even had a chance to fire a single shot they had come under heavy fire. Arkady had been lucky—most of the others hadn't made it.

He had hobbled off into some brush so that he and one of his men could look after the wound, but just as they had done so, their truck, and all of their ammunition, had been blown to smithereens. It had sounded like a .88 mm shell coming in, and such a hit had rendered their truck into nothing but a smoldering wreck. There was no hope now for either of them to carry out the task for which they had been assigned, and the only weapons they had left were their sidearms. But Arkady wasn't finished yet.

He was now left with two choices: he could either wait here (just across the pontoon bridges of the Oder) for some medical orderlies to find them, or he could continue on, not as an artilleryman anymore, but as a common infantryman. His

first instinct had been to flee all this hellish scene of destruction and chaos, and his fellow soldier agreed, and quickly ran off with promises to return with an orderly, as he was too exhausted to drag him back himself. Arkady knew he would never see the man again.

And so he had lain there for several hours, behind a tree stump near a corn field. By 8 pm it was already starting to get dark, and he now heard a sound that lifted his spirits—it was the rumble of a giant armada of Soviet bombers. This fleet of heavy aircraft were carrying out a devastating attack upon the Heights, which were still a km or so from where he was laying. The roar of the planes was deafening.

Thousands of concussions rocked the hillside as the bombs fell, and as Zhukov's artillery opened up yet again with a rolling barrage. It was raining now, a slight, cold drizzle, and it froze Arkady to the bone. He knew that he couldn't continue to lay here, or he would slowly freeze to death. His every instinct told him to get as far away from all this destruction as quickly as he could, and yet he also knew that counter-intuition is the soldier's duty. 'When your guts tell you not to do something', he said, 'that is the very thing you must do above all else,' and so he turned and began to drag himself through the cornfield, and towards the hillside.

Within 15 minutes, the barrage was at its height, and he turned to see the hundreds of tanks that had suddenly burst forth, as they fought their way up the hillside to his left. Infantrymen were everywhere, swarming around the tanks, clinging to their sides, and hiding behind them from the machine-gun fire which rained down on them from enemy nests above. They were well lit up from all the fires that blazed, and made perfect targets for German shells.

Arkady was fearful to get any closer to the men and machines, and yet was drawn to the light of the blazing hulks of tanks that had been hit with near point-blank precision by artillery which was hidden in the trees. The flames called to him, and he responded like a moth, as he dragged his now numb leg behind him through the wet stalks of corn. Between the blasts of cannon and machine-gun he heard the cries of men, both shouts of pain, as well as the battle cries that all soldiers make when they face almost certain death.

He himself was beyond crying now, and as he got closer and closer to the flames of a smoking wreck, he could feel its inviting warmth, and it was wonderful on his face and hands. And yet somehow he knew that it was too late for him; that it had all been for nothing; that he should have turned around and gone in the opposite direction when he had first been hit. It might have been possible to live out the war, and even return home one day. Why had he done this? What had been his reasoning? He didn't know, and yet for some strange reason, even as the life slowly drained from his body, he had no regrets...

\* \* \* \* \*

High up on the hill, the Germans were desperate now, and had resorted to the use of close-range Panzerfaust rocket-launchers to take on the incoming tanks. This was a telling fact, that showed just how far the Soviets had made it in the last 20 hours, and yet the deadly launchers were taking a horrible toll on Russian strength. The method was simple enough: The German soldier just lay down and

waited for the tanks to come, then knelt, aimed, and fired his rocket. The shell that was lobbed forth, if it hit, penetrated the tank's steel armour plating, and then threw a jolt of hot copper into the inside. Needless to say, everyone was killed instantly, and the tank was rendered useless.

In a move of quiet desperation, Soviet tank crews had attached bed boxsprings to the outer hauls of their tanks, in order to try to deflect the deadly projectiles. The chances of such a thing actually working were, they knew, highly unlikely, but most of the men had no desire to die after having come so far in this struggle already. All they wanted was to take this hill so they could shorten this horrible fight a little. In their less optimistic moods, when they could afford them, they liked to grumble that only Generals enjoy war.

### III

Koniev was delighted with the way things were going. It was the morning after he and his men had successfully crossed the Oder, and once his artillery was in place, he ordered yet another barrage for 7:00 am. Once again, the intervening woods were set ablaze by all the constant shelling, and just like Zhukov's troops, they would now have to make their way through this on top of all of the other dangers.

Through all the heat and the smoke and skirmishing, his tanks raced at full blast, making their way directly for the Spree which was only 20 or so km away to the west. He was so eager to see to it that his armour was successful in their mission, that he followed close behind the lead tanks in a truck. He wanted to be there and to bask in the moment of his triumph. He really felt as though nothing could stop him now, although there was still the small matter of actually crossing the river. His junior commanders had been amazed that he had not even bothered to provision the lead units with pontoon equipment just in case it was needed, but Koniev had every faith in his intuition that somehow they would manage.

Little did he know though that the Germans had reacted very swiftly to the threat of an army directed towards the Spree, and they had hastily retreated thousands of men to set themselves up on the river's opposite bank so that they could meet the oncoming tanks with a stiff defensive line. They did not have a full tank or artillery complement, but did have plenty of machine-guns and sharpshooters, and could do a lot of damage.

By the time Koniev and his tanks reached the river, the sun was up and it was a clear bright day. Their journey here had only taken a few hours. They had stopped for nothing, and simply blasted their way through the resistance that was thrown up against them, and had left the mopping-up operations to their infantry divisions in the rear. And yet they were surprised to see that the Germans had outrun them, and that they were now coming under sporadic but accurate small arms fire.

Now was the moment of truth, and Koniev stuck his head out of the window of his truck and motioned for Rybalko, his lead tank man, who was in the truck just behind him. Rybalko came running, and Koniev ordered him to send their lead tank across the stream, to see just how deep it was. He had heard rumours that it

was only waist high here in this section, but there was never any way to be exactly sure, as the spring floods tended to vary from season to season. The only way would be to experiment.

When Lieutenant Grigov of the lead T-34 tank received his order that he was to proceed without delay across the river he inwardly blanched, and yet did not hesitate for a second. He knew that the success of the entire tank corp was dependant, in that moment, upon he and his men, and that someone would have to do it.

'I guess this is the reward for those who lead,' he said to himself.

To the credit of the crew of his tank, his men did not hesitate either, and the driver immediately threw forward the handles that propelled the tank onwards. The steel behemoth, which had been idling, lurched forward, its treads grinding the gravel under it, and then made its way down the steep bank, and slowly but surely began to move into the stream. At first everyone watching thought that it would fill with water. The crew had sealed its seams before proceeding, but if the tank were completely submerged, there was really no way to prevent it from leaking, and they would very shortly all drown in their metal coffin.

And yet they did not sink completely, and the bottom of the river felt solid and secure. The water only reached up to the top of the chassis just below their turret, and therefore, there was little danger of anything getting in. The river was about 60 m wide in total, so it only took about a minute to traverse it, and even before it got totally across, a second tank had been ordered forward, and then a third...

As soon as Koniev got the word that everything had gone smoothly, he breathed a sigh of relief to himself. He had gambled a lot on this decision, and if his men had been stalled here, they would have to have waited for bridging gear to reach them, which would have given the enemy time to bring forward heavier artillery, which could have had disastrous results.

Koniev now turned his attention to other matters: he would need a headquarters for the night, from where he could direct the passage of his divisions over the newly established bridgehead, and also somewhere to sleep. Such a place had to be elevated, so that he would be able to observe his men and vehicles on the the road below. When he looked to his right, he saw an old baronial-style castle, which overlooked the whole valley, and he knew that it would be perfect.

The first thing that he had to do was to talk to Stalin. He was eager to tell him of the day's proceedings, for it would offer further proof of his fitness as a commander, and his ability to move swiftly. He left his Generals in charge, while he ordered that a direct line to Moscow be established at once. While his technicians were doing that, he stepped out onto the balcony of the castle, and observed with great satisfaction the long, snake-like line of his tanks, trucks and baggage-train, that was even now pouring across the river and into enemy territory.

Within no time, a line to the Kremlin was established, and Koniev made his call from a large ballroom that was hung with magnificent old tapestries.

'Quite a place for a Communist,' he thought.

'Comrade Stalin,' he said excitedly as soon as the Premier came onto the line, 'As we speak, whole divisions are moving rapidly across the Spr...' But he didn't get to finish his sentence, as Stalin cut him off.

'Never mind that now,' Stalin said gruffly. 'Zhukov is having trouble. Resistance is strong in his sector.' Then he was silent, and said nothing.

Koniev was silent too, hardly daring to breath. Thoughts raced through his mind, as well as fears.

Did this mean that Stalin wanted him to take over the attack on Berlin? Or did it mean that he would order some of Koniev's badly needed forces north to help out his hated rival? Either way, he had to play things cool so that he would come out ahead.

'Is there any way,' asked Stalin, 'that Zhukov can funnel some of his forces through your own breakthrough? It would be easy enough to send some of his tanks through the hole you have made, so that they will have a clear path to Berlin.'

Of course Stalin knew that Koniev would rather die than assist Zhukov, especially as it was he who had done all the hard work of winning a foothold, but it was all part of his plan to set the men against one another.

Koniev didn't have to think long about his response, and half shouted-out at once: 'No, Comrade Marshal! That will not be necessary. This would only add to the confusion of the situation. Everything here is going according to plan, and we have more than enough forces to turn northwards toward Berlin. We can take the city!'

'Hmmmmmm,' said Stalin as he thought for a moment. 'Alright. I agree. Turn your tank armies northwards.'

'At once Comrade Stalin! At once!'

This was just the news that Koniev had been dying to hear, and as soon as he got off the phone, he immediately called his two senior commanders to the ballroom.

Once Rybalko and Lelyshenko had arrived, he made it very clear to them what they were to do: 'Within two days you are to be in Berlin comrades! You will advance daringly and resolutely in a northern direction. You will bypass everything, and will not engage in frontal fighting. We have one mission, and one mission only, and I am giving you the next two days to carry it out! As well, you will impress upon each and every one of your junior staff and all of your field commanders that from this moment on, this army has one, and only one objective, and that nothing else has any importance. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Comrade Koniev!' the two first-rate tank commanders shouted in unison, and then turned and marched quickly out of the room. They were nearly as happy as Koniev was, and yet both also knew that they had been issued orders, and a timeline, which would be nearly impossible to fulfill. The enemy still had a great deal of fight left in him...

## **Chapter 7**

### **Zhukov's Fury.**

## I

Zhukov was furious. He had just learned from Stalin that Koniev was having an easy time of it, and that his divisions were rolling along at a rapid pace. It seemed as though the Germans were not putting up much resistance in that sector. Just his luck that they had concentrated all of their efforts at holding him up. Something had to be done, and quickly, before the situation became intolerable.

It was at Zhukov's headquarters that his senior staff received the full blast of his anger.

'Why are we held up?!' he demanded of the men who were lined up before him standing at attention.

'Even with so many divisions none of you can't even take a tiny hill. We have the biggest army in history, and yet you falter before a nearly defeated foe. I should demote you all and put private soldiers in your places, and we would get farther no doubt!'

Zhukov was not a tall man, but he went right up to Popiel of the First Tank Army, and thrust his chin up into the General's face, challenging him.

'And how many tanks have you lost today?' he asked.

Popiel remained silent, but inwardly trembled.

Zhukov tried to calm himself down a little, so that he could assess the situation with a clearer head. He rubbed aggressively at his stubbly chin, and thought for a moment. He knew that tactically there wasn't much he could do anymore, as there was far too much chaos and confusion at the front line to be able reorganize the men now. As for retreat, that was out of the question... He had thrown himself headlong at the Germans, and in doing so had lost many men, but he was committed, and had to follow through. He did not have patience for elaborate strategies, and had only ever employed one, and to great success, and that was to barrel on, whatever the consequences.

'I want each of you,' he now said, pointing at his generals, 'to go to the Front yourselves. You will make a full assessment of the situation there, both of your own men, and of the enemy, and you will speed everything up so that you will be ready by noon tomorrow, the 19th of April. Then the attack will resume... Any man who cannot, or will not, follow these orders to the letter will be demoted!' (He did not need to tell them that they would end up in a punishment battalion on mine-clearing duties, which meant almost certain death).

The men hurridly saluted and marched as quickly as they could out of the the room. As they were going, General Popiel leaned over and whispered to General Chuikov:

'We have a real lion on our hands!' he said, and shuddered.

\* \* \* \* \*

General Chuikov was not nearly as anxious as Marshal Zhukov was to get to Berlin. To his way of thinking, Zhukov had only been peripherally involved in the now famous battle of Stalingrad 2 years before, while he, as the commander of that city-fortress, had witnessed firsthand the awful toll that streetfighting had on the men under his command. That had been an epic battle, and no matter how bad the war had seemed since, nothing could compare to it. It had been a victory

for the Soviets, and they had taken the entire German 6th Army captive, while Chuikov himself had interrogated Field-Marshal Paulus, its commander.

And yet, any battle that had cost that much in men's lives could hardly ever really be called a victory.

Now he feared that another such clash was coming, except that this time it would be the Germans who were the defenders of their capital city, while the Soviets were the invaders. Chuikov knew full well that the advantage lay with the defenders. Men could hide themselves away in attics, or on rooftops, or behind walls, only popping out for a second or two to lob a grenade, shoot a Panzerfaust, or fire a rifle.

As well, tanks would be rendered practically immobile in all the confined streets and rubble, and one could never really be sure that you had taken a street, because the enemy could just sneak back and retake a building in the darkness. The Nazis had learned much from Stalingrad; had learned from the Russians how to creep and crawl about in the rubble and in the sewers, always looking for new ways to sneak up upon the enemy's rear. The only thing that gave Chuikov any hope, was that most of the Germans who had fought there were now dead or captured, so hopefully the lessons would not have been learned too well by them.

If it were up to him, he would have preferred to have continued to fight here, on open ground. It might not be ideal, but it was better than the confines of a city. The sooner they broke through, the sooner the fascists would simply withdraw back into their capital, to set up their defences there.

He had tried to explain this to Zhukov, but his superior had been in no mood to listen. Chuikov thought that Zhukov was obsessed with taking the city first, before any of his rival commanders got the chance, and he felt that this was reckless, and unsound thinking. Zhukov, he believed, had thrown out the textbook on military engagements, and was willing to sacrifice any number of lives, all to speed the conquest of a city that had little strategic value. Chuikov knew that an enemy's strength lay within its army, and that once that was gone, it had nothing. Then the city could be taken easily.

And yet he had his orders, and also knew that it was his duty to follow those orders, even if they did not make any sense to him. He also understood that his own head was on the chopping block right now, with an axe hovering right above his neck. If the attack he was about to order failed, Zhukov would blame him, as the main thrust of the assault had been left to his Eighth Army. There was no way that Zhukov would report another failure to Stalin, not without spreading a good portion of the blame Chuikov's way. Hero of the battle of Stalingrad or not, he could very well end up in a punishment battalion.

He knew that the Germans would now throw everything they had of their armour against him, hoping to stave off the tide a little. He had heard from prisoners of war how many in the military high command were trying desperately to just hold off the Russians long enough so that the Americans would be able to conquer them in the rear. If given a choice, he knew that almost all Germans, especially the Nazis, would rather deal with the comparatively lenient Americans than with the vengeful Soviets, who would show no mercy. The crimes committed over the past few years in Russia by the Wehrmacht precluded any mercy being shown them by the Red Army.



Chuikov was almost pleased when the German infantry of General Weidling staged a fierce counterattack, as this, Chuikov felt, was the last such manouver that the enemy had any strength for. They had been weakened beyond repair now, and his own troops, some of them veterans of Stalingrad, stormed up over the hills and forests. Even the tanks were now getting some traction on the ground, and were able to join in the rout. Any Germans left alive now withdrew.

It was a victory of sorts, and Chuikov made sure to report it as such to Zhukov. Finally the Seelow heights had been taken! The cost in dead and wounded had been terrific, but at last those green rolling hills had been conquered! Now the road lay open to Berlin, only 50 km away, and it was just a matter of reorganizing the armoured divisions and getting them onto the road.

And yet, inwardly, Chuikov was not nearly as pleased as Zhukov, and believed that now the real fight had only just begun. 'I have now laid the city open for you, Marshal Zhukov' he said to himself, 'but what awaits us in the capital will not be pleasant.'

Surrounding a city, he knew from hard experience, and taking it, were two very different things.

He shook his head, and lamented the terrible cost of war, and marvelled with disgust at the vanity of men. His own main concern was always to preserve the lives of his troops as best as he could, and yet Zhukov's only goal, he felt, was self glorification. He hoped that somehow he was wrong about Berlin, and that his army had now successfully broken the back of the Nazis, but somehow he seriously doubted it...

## II

Marshal Rokossovsky was depressed, though he made sure not to show it to his men, as that would have been demoralizing. But things had not been going his way for some time now, and he was beginning to wonder what he had done wrong. He felt sure that part of the problem was that he was a very conscientious man, and that he could never justify going into battle without first dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's.

It had taken him almost a week, but he was at last fully prepared to go ahead and cross the River Oder near Stettin. He had everything in place: even now, bombers were flying overhead on missions to destroy enemy strongpoints on the opposite bank, while his tank and engineer brigades were champing at the bit to get going. If he had been Zhukov, he would have just blasted ahead several days before, and as a result, would no doubt have made much more progress than he had.

And yet, he was not Zhukov, was not anything like him in fact, and could never gamble with the lives of his men, especially not when they were so near the end. But the fire still burned in him, the desire, the ambition: to be the greatest of the great warlords of this patriotic struggle that would be remembered in his people's history for a thousand years. Yet with every day that passed, both Koniev and Zhukov drew nearer to their goal, while he remained practically at a standstill.

For the past several days he had spent a lot of time alone, just thinking. There was a gramophone record player that played the same record by the composer Shostakovich over and over again. That was alright, as he had ordered his men to do this. The music helped to cover up the noise of his assembling forces, so that the Germans could not judge by sound just how strong he was, or where exactly he was. When the gathered men and machines were ready to go onto the offensive, they were to change the recording to something else, and that was the signal to go.

It had been an inspired idea of his, and would no doubt help the cause, and yet he could not help but to regret that the men had not chosen something a little cheerier, as this particular piece of music did nothing to lift his mood. It did not seem fair somehow, that he, who had already suffered so much at the hands of his own government, should now also have to suffer the indignity of playing second fiddle to Zhukov, of covering his flank. Everything had always gone right for Zhukov, and now for Koniev as well.

He sat back in his chair in his makeshift headquarters, and looked out of the window. The music that came from his frontlines was dark, and melancholy, and it blended strangely with the sounds of tank treads and fighterbombers that circled overhead. This was a new, and otherworldly type of symphony, and was not without a certain kind of beauty.

He wondered if the Germans thought so too.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the night of 20 April, Rokossovsky's first wave of shock troops prepared to cross the river as soon as it was fully dark. They had waited impatiently in their dugouts, fighting off flies and mosquitos all the while, until the black blanket of night had fully descended upon them and made it safe to emerge.

Ilya Popov, a Second Sergeant of the Fifth Platoon of the Nineteenth Shock Army Special Forces, helped his comrades quickly run with their inflatable boat to the edge of the shore. Stealth and quiet were everything now. They did not wish to attract any attention to themselves, and were to do everything possible to get to the other side of the river without drawing enemy fire. Once on the opposite bank, they were to lay low until the next morning, when the rest of their armies were to follow in strength.

Ilya's mission was to suppress enemy counterattacks the next day as best he could with the small amount of men that he had, until the main force was able to land and get a foothold on shore. In all, there were twenty-four such rafts, sent out in two waves on opposite wings of the Oder. It would be no exaggeration to say that the success of the entire invasion depended to a great extent upon them.

With well-rehearsed motions, the 6 troops of his unit, as well as himself, now eased the craft into the water, and crept aboard. They carried with them small shovel-paddles, and with these they began to propel themselves forward into the darkness, as a few fireflies hovered just over their heads.

This was just the sort of mission that Ilya preferred, something where he was expected not to draw too much attention to himself. In the past, as a raw recruit, before he had become a member of the Special Forces, he had participated in at least a dozen blind charges, and had somehow, by the skin of his teeth, come through alive. He had always wondered how commanders could order men on

such suicidal missions, straight into machine-gun and mortar fire, and had come to the opinion that all battles should be fought the way that Special Forces fought them: that is, smartly.

Luckily, he had proven himself well enough in the infantry that when he had asked to be transferred to Special Forces, it had not been taken as a mark of cowardice. Anyway, the operations he was now given were sometimes even more dangerous than anything he had faced before, only he didn't mind this so much, because in his opinion, at least he was doing things the clever way, and was outwitting his opponents rather than merely giving them good target practice.

In truth, he wasn't really a fighter at heart. It was easy enough though, he had found, to fool everyone around him, as he certainly looked the part. He was fairly large, with big broad shoulders that he had acquired doing farm work back home, and this look was given maximum effect by the long scar that ran at an angle across the entire length of his face from his forehead, down his nose, and all the way to his chin.

Contrary to a belief (which he did nothing to contradict) he had not acquired this scar in battle, but had gotten it as a boy when he had been helping his father work on the roof of their barn. A sheet of tin caught the wind and had flipped up and sliced across his face. It had been bad, and it had taken months to get over it—not only the wound, but the fact that he was now ugly to look at—and yet he'd known that he had been lucky not to have lost his whole head.

The effect on his looks had been to his advantage recently though, and there was not a man who served under him, or even over him, who did not look at him with respect because of that scar. It made him look every inch the battle-hardened hero. But at the end of the day, Ilya was only here to do a job, and he had no real love for it. The sooner it was over the better as far as he was concerned, and it was his intention to get through this war with as little trouble as possible.

'Quiet there!' he now whispered to one of his men, who was dipping his oar too vigorously into the dark waters below.

The night air was cool, and the stars were shining extra brightly. Luckily, there was not much of a moon, or they would have been lit up for all to see. They were very quiet, considering there were seven men in the boat, and Grisha made sure that not a word passed between any of them. The far side of the bank was more visible now, though from here it was still just a distant jagged black line of trees. The water below was not deep, only a few feet, and every so often they came to an outcropping of marsh-grass, which they had to navigate around.

Ilya kept expecting at any moment that enemy flares would shoot up into the sky, and that by the light of the flares, German machine gunners would open up on them. There would be nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, they would be sitting ducks out in the middle of the river this way; and yet for all his worries, the flares never came, and their craft sliced almost silently through the waters.

When they finally got to the opposite bank, they climbed out of the boat, dragged it ashore into the trees, covered it with brush as camouflage, and then hunkered down to wait for morning. Unfortunately, the bugs were just as bad on this side of the river as they had been on the other, so one of Grisha's men went back to the water and got a handful of mud. This, they shared out amongst themselves, and spread it all over the backs of their hands and faces.

The battle that would begin in just a few hours would be a fierce one, perhaps the biggest he or his men would ever face. Intelligence reports suggested that the Nazis had set up defensive positions for a depth of at least 10 km inland, and had been shipping up trainloads full of artillery ammunition for weeks now in preparation. It would be a titanic struggle, but in the end, Ilya had every confidence that Rokossovsky's entire army would get across in the end.

He, and his small unit, would do everything they could to play their small part in harrassing the defenders in this sector, even if it meant that they were all killed. It was not so bad though, he thought, as had always felt as though he were living on borrowed time anyway, ever since the accident that had given him his scar.

### III

For most of the war, things had gone very badly for the Soviets: even when they won battles, they often took such heavy casualties that the gains made seemed to be far outweighed by the costs. That is why, to General Rybalko of Koniev's Third Guards Tank Army, it seemed as though something was terribly wrong.

All day long his tanks had been advancing virtually unopposed, with just light skirmishes along the way, and the ease of his success was alarming. Already today he had advanced 35 km, which was unheard of in this type of war! Was he being led into a trap, he wondered? Were the Germans simply retreating to stronger lines? Or, the more likely scenario, did they intend to cut him off in the rear and attack from the sides?

General Lelyshenko of the Fourth Guards Tank shared his concerns, and they decided to call Marshal Koniev to confirm that they were to continue with their advance on Berlin.

'No, no, don't worry about it,' Koniev had said over the telephone to them. 'Just leave the infantry and continue on. Trust me. There is nothing to stop us now!'

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, some 75 km to the north-east, young private Misha Volkov of the 8th Guards Army had decided, with his comrades, to take a break. Having made their way to the village of Munchenberg, which was halfway between the Oder and Berlin, they had found a two-storey house on the outskirts of town, and chosen it as the place where they would spend the night.

Just the day before, Misha's division had faced fierce opposition from the Germans in one of the small villages that lay along the road. The resistance of the Nazis there had been so heavy there that his entire division had been held up, and it had taken them nearly 10 hours to suppress the fire coming from the heavy tanks that had been dug into the ground and used as artillery.

The Germans had definitely not crumbled after their defeat at Seelow.

Ever since they had taken the Heights, the Eighth Guards had not been able to stop, and had barely rested at all for two days. Now they were all exhausted, and Misha and the others simply fell where they were once they got into the house. When he awoke a few hours later, he had looked about and found the kitchen, and had plundered it to get utensils to cook with. All they had were their army rations,

but he thought it might be nice to eat with some silver for a change, rather than with a dirty old spoon, or with their hands, which was what they were used to.

As he ladled out the food for himself and his comrades, one of the other men, Evgeny, had taken out his mouth organ, and was playing a song that he and all the other men loved. Somehow, music was always sweeter when you didn't know how much longer you had to live. Misha was only 17 years old, and had been fighting for over a year already. At first, when he had faced enemy shelling, he had thrown his arms up over his head and had cried like a baby, but now he had trouble even remembering what it was that had upset him so much. Being shelled was an everyday occurrence these days, and nothing to get alarmed about.

Somehow though, despite everything, he had retained much of his innocence and his naturally enthusiastic nature, and this amused his fellow soldiers. He had not yet completely gone through puberty, and his ears were still too big for his head, and appeared even more so since he wore his hair on the sides very short. He also wore an overcoat that he had gotten off a dead soldier that was several sizes too big, and this added to the impression that he was somehow too small and frail for such a place as this. And yet he had so far never failed to do his duty.

The other men liked and respected young Misha, and appreciated his efforts to fit in with them, which he did by rolling their cigarettes, or making them cups of tea. Doing these things made Misha feel that he was not so very far away from home after all, and that he was near, at least in spirit, to men that were not unlike his father and two brothers, all of whom were now dead.

Just as they were settling down to eat, all at once, and out of nowhere, an artilleryman burst into the house, and told the lounging men excitedly, 'Comrades! Who would like to see our artillery fire on Berlin for the first time?'

'But we are still too far away to reach Berlin, even with our biggest guns,' Sergeant Danton said laconically, not looking up as he tucked into his food with gusto.

'Come and see for yourselves then,' the artilleryman said, and then turned and left.

Misha was intrigued, and thought that he would just go out to have a look and check if there was any truth to the story, while the other men preferred to sleep and eat in their new-found digs.

About six houses away, he could see that a very large artillery piece had been set up, and he made to walk over. He stopped in his tracks, however, when he saw a group of senior officers standing around the gun. He was too intimidated to go any closer, because of his own lowly rank, thinking he would only be shooed away. But one of the officers saw him, and smiled and gestured in his direction.

'Do not be afraid, comrade!' the man said. 'Come on and see what is about to happen. You won't believe it!'

Soon, more and more men arrived, and Misha was fascinated to see that the shells that had been laid out on the ground for firing all had inscriptions scrawled on them. One said: 'This one is for Stalingrad!' while another read: 'Hey Hitler! Kiss this!'

There was a General there, and he quieted the men down before he explained to them:

'Men,' he said. 'Today is an historic occasion for our great Motherland! For over four years now we have fought off the invaders, from Moscow to Stalingrad, from Kiev to Leningrad. And now we stand at the gates of the enemy, having pushed them back nearly 2 thousand km! We have unleashed our fury and righteous anger upon the foe; the troubles they have bought us are many, and yet they are about to reap a harvest of death for their crimes. Today, the first artillery shell ever fired by our armies will land on Berlin, and we will not stop until that whole city is levelled.'

The General now turned to the gunner, who was holding the string which fired the gun.

Misha was trembling with excitement. He had never been this close to a cannon, and covered his ears for fear of the noise.

'Now!' shouted the General to the gunner, and the man pulled the cord.

A blast such as Misha had never heard before suddenly erupted, and flames shot out of the gun's barrel twenty feet high! He was shaking openly, and he felt the beginnings of tears start to form in his eyes; and yet they were not tears like those that he had shed in the early days, when he had first been introduced to the horrors of battle, but were, rather, tears more of relief and joy... To think that he had lived through so much, and was now here at this historic moment!

The other men were just as excited, and several of them raised their submachine-guns up into the air and emptied complete magazines as they cried out and hugged one another in celebration.

On the western horizon, the sun was beginning to descend, and the wide fields and grass of the landscape was tinged with a golden glow. Misha thought to himself that he would never forget this moment of happiness for as long as he lived.

Soon, shell after shell was launched, and though he and the other men hardly slept another wink that whole night, they did not mind, as the sound of the gun was music to their ears, music even sweeter than Evgeny's soothing mouth organ...

## **Chapter 8**

### **Into the Lair of the Fascist Beast.**

#### **I**

Marshal Zhukov was having a bath for the first time in a week. For one thing, he had just been too busy lately to worry about such matters, but he also had a long-standing habit that until a battle started to go his way, he refrained from cleaning himself or changing his uniform. He joked to himself that his men would fight extra hard just so as not to have to smell him anymore.

The tub that he was in had belonged to a prosperous German, a large claw-footed porcelin affair, which was in the bathroom of the mansion he had taken-

over as his temporary headquarters. The water wasn't exactly hot, but he had sprinkled some powdered soap in, and was luxuriating in the soapy suds.

He was happy now, delighted in fact, at the recent progress of his troops. It was true that there was still a long way yet to go, but he had at last managed to bust out of the Seelow Heights, and was well on the way to getting to Berlin, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. He had heard reports of Koniev's progress, which was lightning-fast.

'That man will stop for nothing,' he thought. 'He is desperate to outdo me, but I am not finished yet.'

Even Rokossovsky, whom Zhukov had earlier written off, was now making some good progress, and might very well turn out to be a threat.

It was time to step things up; to ensure that his generals knew exactly what was expected of them. Nothing could be left to chance, not with so much at stake. He would have to press the point home to them once again just how seriously he took the conquest of the city. Other lesser targets were not even to be considered at all.

There came a knock at the bathroom door. It was Zina, his private secretary, the only one he let into his private dwellings—especially while he was bathing. She came in hesitantly, her head peaking around the door, and asked: 'Is it proper Comrade Marshal?' (she still called him by his title, at his insistence, despite their intimate relationship).

'Yes,' it is proper,' he said, and she came in and sat in a chair with a notebook and pencil, sitting straight-up, as was her custom, prepared to take short-hand of whatever Zhukov told her.

Zhukov thought very highly of Zina, both as a secretary, and as a woman. She knew how to be discreet, and if she hadn't, he would never have risked having a relationship with her. He had a lofty position to uphold, and his men could never think of him as a mere human; they had to think of him as something much more than that, and that is why the way he felt about Zina was kept private. Once, Rokossovsky had commented upon this affair to him, having found out about it somehow, and acted as though he were happy to have at last found a weakness in his old comrade, but Zhukov had scowled at him so hard that Roko had not brought it up again.

Zhukov had picked her out of a pool of possible secretaries two years before, when he had been stationed near Leningrad, and had chosen her more for her looks than for her skills. Luckily though, she had excellent abilities professionally as well as being to his taste physically. She was not beautiful, but was well-rounded, and had a pleasant, rather than a pretty face. She wore her hair military-fashion, tucked up under a beret even when she was not working, and rarely took it down, even for him. He regretted this, as he thought it would be nice if she felt more free with him that way, at least when they were alone, but she was always very formal, though not cool.

Best of all, she understood how to play the game; understood that although he already had a wife and many children, she knew very well that life away from home, and being under dangerous circumstances constantly, could make one lonely. She also understood that her Marshal was a man like any other. She too, was very lonely in this new type of life that she had been called into, and yet she did not regret anything about it, as she was very patriotic. Zhukov also liked the

fact that she had never asked him for anything in return for their relationship, no promotion or anything else beyond intimacy.

'Write this down,' he ordered as he splashed some water over his balding head:

'Personal to Generals Katukov and Popiel. First Guards Tank has been assigned an historic mission: To be the first to break into Berlin!..'

He paused here and thought for a moment, as Zina wrote hurriedly, and without any expression on her face.

No, he suddenly thought. It was not enough merely to break into the city... The real race, he now realized, had already been spelled out by himself during the briefing to his generals weeks ago, when he had told them that they must reach the Reichstag. Only by planting the red flag atop its highest point would his army really be able to lay claim to having conquered the Nazi capital! What if he did get to the city first, but then Koniev's or Rokossovsky's men reached the Reichstag before his own, and planted their red flag? Who would go down in history then, he or they?...

Suddenly, the horror of his earlier omission struck home to him, and he sat up in the tub.

'Add this!' he said to Zina. '...To break into Berlin... and raise the Blood Banner on the rooftop of the Reichstag! Personally charge you with the organization and execution of this momentous task... Send up the best brigades from each corps to take the city. Once you have completed this, both upon reaching the outskirts of city, and of raising the flag, be sure to notify Stalin and the press at once...'

'There,' he said, and was feeling relaxed enough to lean back into the water again. Now he knew that his generals understood what he wanted. It would not be enough just to complete these tasks, but the politician in him understood that he had to be seen to have completed them, and that is why he had ordered his generals to report right away... Only then could he be sure he would get the credit he deserved in Moscow.

Of course, there had been no need to add, 'or else,' to the transmission, as both Katukov and Popiel knew well the price of failure. He was pleased with the tone of the note, and yet was still a little angry at himself for not having realized earlier that the symbolism of raising the red flag would far outweigh the symbolism or merely being the first to reach the city, as great as that was. Now, there would be a whole new layer to add to the struggle, and just when he was so close to the end, he realized that the fight would last at least a few days longer than he had expected.

'Take that note and deliver it right away to the transmissions office,' Zhukov said to Zina. 'Top priority obviously... And then report back to me at once,' he added slyly.

'Yes, Comrade Marshal. Right away!' Zina said as she got up, and he saw there the trace of a smile on her mouth and a blush on her cheeks as she glanced back at him.

After she had gone he smiled to himself; he had noticed that a faint whiff of perfume hung in the air when she had come in, and he was filled with pride as he thought of the effort she made to please him—even going so far as to steal a little perfume so that she would smell nice.



Momentarily he forgot about the war, about victory, and about Blood Banners, and thought only of Zina's soft skin.

Perhaps this night he could entice her to undo that ever-formal hair of hers?...

## II

Where before the air had been filled with the roar of engines, now all was silent. Koniev's tanks had stalled outside Baruth (still 25 km south of Berlin) because they had been pushed so hard over the past couple of days that they had simply run out of gas. The tanks were next thing to helpless as they waited for the fuel trucks to catch them up, and in the meantime, several Volkssturm and Hitler Youth brigades (consisting of old men and boys) got to them first, and began blasting the tanks one by one with their Panzerfaust rocket-launchers.

It was a real turkey-shoot: there was no Soviet infantry to protect the tanks, and not much that the crews within could do, and so the German boys had little trouble in sneaking up on them to fire at close range. One by one the machines went up in flames, and soon an entire armoured brigade had been virtually wiped out.

This is exactly the type of situation that both Generals Rybalko and Lelyshenko had feared: German counterattacks on their flanks at a time when they had no access to fresh fuel, ammunition, and, most importantly, no infantry. Even worse, was the fact that Rybalko's and Lelyshenko's armies now had a dangerous gap forming between them. A lot of Nazi soldiers could still be in this gap, unscathed and ready to fight.

But Koniev had no time for any excuses from his commanders, and as soon as he learned of the situation with the lead brigade being caught up with the Hitler Youth, he shot off an urgent message to Rybalko: 'Am furious at the delays! Advance rapidly under any circumstances as soon as refueled. Leave behind the brigade that is fighting, and proceed with rest of army. Do not stall every time you meet resistance—this is imperative!'

Koniev knew that going along the roads was not helping matters. The advantage to the highway was that it was paved and led right into the city, and therefore made resupply easier. The disadvantage was that it narrowed his men into a line, which not only had the effect of making him an easy target for ground assaults, but also to attacks from above by what was left of the Luftwaffe. He had made it far too easy for the Hitlerites to find him, and to lay traps.

Had he let his need to advance at all costs cloud his judgement?

From now on he would order that his tanks were to advance in battle order, both on the road and to its sides. He knew that the ground there was swampy, and this would cause real delays, but it also meant that he would not be such an easy target for enemy planes and infantry. This would also have the advantage of broadening his front, so that he could meet resistance head-on, rather than from the sides.

Still, all this meant was that he was slowed to a crawl, and his lightning run was now officially over. He had been dependant upon the fact that Zhukov and Rokossovsky had been held up before, which had given some breathing room, but

now it looked as though Zhukov was even now nearing the outskirts of Berlin, while Roko was pushing hard to the north.

Somehow, it didn't seem fair! Everything had been going so well for him, and then, suddenly and without warning, it had collapsed. Zhukov's momentum had surged him forward in the end, while his own momentum seemed as though it had already been used up, and had now peetered out. The only thing that he could think of to save the situation was that even if Zhukov beat him to the city, he could at least still try to be the first one to the city center.

In fact, he suddenly realised, that might even be a better target to shoot for! Perhaps that really had been the real goal all along! If he could get his men to the government district, and plant his flag there, then he, and not Zhukov, would no doubt appear to be the greater victor. Why had he not thought of that before?! All at once he had a new goal -a new way to beat his old rival, and he would not delay in making sure that his men understood what he wanted from them.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the end of that long day, both Rybalko and Lelyshenko had reached the outskirts of the city, having taken Potsdam. On Marshal Koniev's orders they had not even stopped to inspect the German military complex at Zossen, 10 km back, which they had all but bypassed, or the film studios at Babelsberg in south-west Berlin.

Zossen had been particularly impressive, as the Germans had managed to disguise the entire network of their main headquarters as though it were just a small, quaint little city. Bunkers had been camouflaged with meshing, and other buildings had simply been designed to look like harmless cottages, or farmhouses, while inside these structures lay the entire operating system of the whole German army. There were over 500 telephones and just as many teleprinters, not to mention numerous power generators.

What was most amazing though was that the only men left guarding this vast network were four drunken desk clerks. Needless to say, they had given in without even the semblance of a fight, and Koniev had ordered that nothing be destroyed, as it would all be useful to themselves. Still, there had been no time to gape in awe at Prussian efficiency, and only some technical engineers had been left behind to rework the sytem to the Soviet's advantage.

Three such engineers, who had drunk a little too much celebratory vodka, rang up one of the headquarters in Berlin and got an answer on the other line. The man demanded to know who was calling? The Soviet engineers almost laughed themselves silly as they demanded to speak to the Fuerher Adolf Hitler himself! They had a very important message, they said: 'Ivan is here now! Get ready for a ballsing!'

\* \* \* \* \*

Only as the sun was beginning to go down were the Russian tanks finally ordered to halt, as progress in the dark, and on unfamiliar terrain, would be all but impossible. The push into the city-center would not begin until early the next morning, and in the meantime, they were to just keep the men and supplies moving forward in shifts.

Koniev was pleased enough, all things considered, but was insistent that the men should receive no real rest until the battle for the city was complete.

That night, as he lay fitfully sleeping on his cot, he had a severe and terrible dream. He imagined that he was one of three large bears, Siberian Grizzlies. He and the other two bears were growling and slashing their teeth at a mangy pack of wolves they had trapped in their den. The wolves looked sickly, and weak, and yet it was clear that they were especially vicious when cornered, and they bared their fangs, ready to lash out. Even the wolf cubs were nipping at the bear's heels.

He himself, Koniev, as a bear, was covered in bleeding wounds, and he felt tired, so tired that he could barely lift his immense paws to strike, while the larger bear next to him growled and slashed away fiercely. He felt the compulsion deep within him to attack, and yet hardly had the strength anymore. His wounds had bled him nearly dry...

When he had awoken, some hours later, in a sweat, he knew that the wolves (the Nazis) were about to strike back at any moment, while the bigger bear (Zhukov) had simply brushed past him easily... Was that how it was to be? And was there any way he could still summon up enough strength for one last great push?...

### III

Zhukov's tanks and infantry were now in complete control of the northern and eastern outskirts of Berlin, while Koniev now controlled the south and south-west sectors. The city was now almost completely surrounded, and as the Soviet armies linked up with one another, they sealed it off from any German reinforcements that wanted to get in, but also from anyone trying to escape.

By the afternoon of the 21st of April, there were 9 armies in total that had engaged in the encirclement operation. Forceful attacks carried out by Chuikov's infantry and Rybalko's tanks had smashed their way so far into the outskirts that that were only 10 km from meeting up with each other. The rest of the men, meanwhile, who were not engaged in fighting, were busily reorganizing themselves so that they would be ready for their final plunge into the city.

Each division was now divided into separate assault detachments, that were specially trained for street fighting. This is where Chuikov's experience at Stalingrad came in so useful, and many of the men whom he put into the frontlines had had a part to play in that terrible battle. Each group was issued some cannons, a few tanks and self-propelled guns, as well as a couple of flame-thrower platoons.

Behind each detachment was also a battery of artillery and Katyusha rocket launchers, which the infantry could call upon if they faced any especially heavy enemy fortifications or obstacles. Up above, in the sky, squadrons of Ilyushin ground-attack and Yakolev fighter planes bombed and strafed German positions before the Soviets got there in order to soften them up. The Luftwaffe had been all but eliminated, so there was no danger there.

Chuikov was sure to remind his men of the fundamentals of street-to-street combat, telling them: 'Remember, you must clear each building before entering it

by throwing in a grenade first, and then blasting into the door with you submachine-gun. Use short weapons, pistols, knives or even shovels if you have to. Long rifles are not ideal under these conditions. Hug the enemy close when you engage, so that any artillery they have cannot be utilized without them risking hitting their own men. We will fight in shifts, 8 hours each, so that we are continually advancing. Do not take on strongpoints directly, such as machine-gun nests, but leave them to the bombers and artillery to take care of; and try to be wary of sharpshooters!'

\* \* \* \* \*

Zhukov, as ever, was fearful that Koniev might beat him at the last moment, and so on April 22, Lenin's birthday, he ordered that both Chuikov and Katukov were to have crossed the Spree River and have reached the Tempelhof airfield, in the city-centre, by not later than the 24th of April. The airfield was less than 1 km from the Reichstag, and from Hitler in the Reich's Chancellory building. From there he would be able to mount his final offensive, and effectively end the war, but he knew it would not be easy.

Chuikov took up the banner and sent his men into action right away. They were effective in crossing the wide Dahme River, and managed to take many prisoners, but at the edge of the Spree it was different, and the entire division came to a halt there. It was infuriating to be so close to the ultimate goal, and yet still to have to worry about river crossings, but he had faith that his divisional commander would be able to handle the problems.

To Major-General Mikhail Duka, an ex-partisan fighter and commander of the 82nd Division, there was something unnaturally quiet about the other bank of the Spree River. Usually one could see more activity in these circumstances, and there was also usually more sporadic fire raining down on them. And yet this time there was nothing, not a noise, not a breath of wind even. He studied the opposite side through his binoculars carefully for several minutes, hoping to see any sort of activity, which would tell him how strong the enemy was here, but there was nothing.

It was difficult to know whether the Germans were only trying to lull them into a false sense of security, so that the Soviets would expose too much of themselves, or if there really was no one occupying the houses that lined the edge of the river. Still, Duka knew that he didn't have a lot of time to think about it. His own Corp Commander was watching to see how he performed in these situations. As an ex-partisan, his superiors had looked askance at his credentials when he had applied to join the regular army, but they had been desperately short on men, and so had taken a chance on him.

In their opinion (and Duka could hardly blame them) he was inexperienced at handling large numbers of men and machines. Blowing up bridges and railways as a partisan commander was one thing, but moving thousands of men over major obstacles was another. But then, he had begged and had pleaded and flattered the right people, until finally he had risen from the rank of Major to his current status.

It had been a degrading, and humiliating process to go through, to have to take the insults and condescension from superior officers that he had had to over the

past two years, but he had endured all for the sake of being given a chance at military glory, and he was not about to be held up now by a little river. His men would have to be spurred into action.

Immediately, he got onto the radio and called ahead to the Major of the lead regiment that had reached the river. He could see clearly that the men had simply squatted down where they were without making any effort either to fire their weapons or to forde the river.

'Major!' he yelled into the receiver, 'What the hell is going on down there? I ordered you to advance, so advance!'

'But Comrade General,' said the Major apologetically, 'We think that the Germans are just waiting for us to move before they open fire... And besides, the water is so cold that the men who must get across to establish a foothold will probably freeze in the process...'

'You get those men across now, or I'll have you court-marshaled, do you hear me?'

'Yes, General, but we will take heavy losses, and I am concerned about losing my men when the war is so near an end.'

'It is not over until I say so... Just you wait there and I'll show you how it's done!'

Duka dropped the phone and stormed down the flight of stairs of the building where he had been observing the proceedings, and marched briskly down to the frontline.

Sometimes, he thought, when you wanted something done you had to do it yourself. He fumed at the delay that had been caused, which made him look bad to all those nay-sayers who said that he wasn't up to his job, and now he was being held up by some timid over-promoted mid-ranking officer!

By the time he reached the major, who was crouching behind some shelter, Duka had already removed his jacket and thrown it to the ground, and he just kept on marching by, headed straight for the river.

'Comrade General!...' the Major cried out, but Duka just kept walking and shedding his clothes as he did so until he had reached the edge of the quay. Without any hesitation, he dived straight into the water below, feeling the shock of its coldness instantly, as it robbed his breath away.

Still, he was a strong swimmer, and he recovered quickly, and despite the current, managed to cover the distance of the river, about 50 metres, in just a few moments. If he could get one of the many pleasure-craft that sat on the other side undone from its moorings, then he could bring it across to his men, who could use it for dragging pontoon bridge equipment.

His men on the other side watched on, dumbfounded. They had never seen a General who was so willing to take risks and get involved in such a hands-on way.

Surprisingly, no shots rang out from the Germans, and yet it was still unclear whether anyone was there or not. Perhaps they were still just waiting until the Soviets came out in force?

It was tough going, and Duka tried not to show the pain and exhaustion on his face, as he worked to undo the mooring ropes on a small sailboat. At last, it came undone, and instead of climbing aboard—as there were no paddles—he held onto the rope and swam back to his men, pulling the craft behind him.

By now several of the other men had taken heart, and had also jumped into the water, and were taking over the other boats. When Duka was able to get to his side, his men dragged him up, and he fell exhausted and shivering to the ground. Someone threw a blanket onto him, and he guessed that he had gotten out of the water only minutes before real shock set in. It had been a desperate move, but it had gotten things flowing, and almost miraculously, there had still not been a single shot fired.

As he lay there, recovering, the timid major came up to him, and looked down at Duka shame-facedly.

'I am sorry, Comrade General. I will never question your orders again.'

Duka looked up at the young man with some sympathy now, since he had clearly learned his lesson.

'Taking command' he said through his gritted teeth, which were still chattering, 'sometimes means sacrificing other men's lives, or your own. War costs a great deal, but think of how many have already died. We must avenge them, and the war is not over until the last stronghold is taken. Speed is now the main thing. The quicker we get to the city-centre, the quicker the war is over, and that is what will save your men... Now just see to it that the bridges are built and that everyone gets across, will you?...'

'Yes, Comrade General. Right away!'

## **Chapter 9**

### **A Hurricane of Fire.**

#### **I**

Koniev's tanks were hammering their way into the city, crushing everything in their path. There was little that the Germans could do to stand in their way, but physical obstacles continued to hamper their progress. Because the streets had been so badly shelled over the last week, piles of bricks were everywhere, and large potholes filled the streets. This made navigation difficult, but even worse were the canals and rivers that snaked their way through the city.

Grigory Pavlovich, a T-34 tank driver, tried his best to get around things, but it was a chore. He had driven a tank for years, and was highly experienced, but he had always, up until now, had open vistas and flat, if often muddy roads to drive on. Now he was cramped in, and it was necessary to slow down, roll over piles of bricks, and crunch over the man-made barricades that had been erected everywhere.

Added to that was the fear which every crewman in the tank was feeling, as each of them knew that at any moment a stray piece of artillery, or a Panzerfaust-wielding boy could come out of nowhere and blast them, not to mention landmines. And in all this dust and haze it was nearly impossible to see half the

time, and totally impossible to hear because of the roar of the tank's engine. It was like being deaf and half blind and wandering through a danger zone!

General Rybalko's army had been stopped short at the Teltow Canal, which was forty yards wide and had waters 3 metres deep. Normally, this would not have been too much of a problem, only now it was because every bridge for miles around had been blown up. For the moment, he was forced to call his men to a halt, while he consulted with Koniev as to how to proceed.

The two men met on the second floor of a relatively intact house which overlooked the canal. Koniev was sitting in a chair, and gazing fixidly through a pair of periscope binoculars which extended up through a high window (he had learned his lesson about sniper fire not long before, and wasn't taking any chances now). Rybalko thought that his commander looked concerned, and he was not surprised, as he had already glimpsed the formidable defences set up on the other side of the water.

All along the edge of the canal were old warehouses and factories, many with thick stone walls that rose into the air like medieval ramparts. In the streets, zigzagging trenches had been dug, which served not only to protect the defenders, but also acted as anti-tank ditches. On top of this, the Germans had buried their remaining tanks in the ground to act as artillery, with only their turrets sticking out, and Rybalko knew just how hard it was to take out a dug-in tank. It was almost impossible to get through both pavement and steel armour.

'It looks as though we have a fight on our hands,' said Koniev as he leaned back in his chair. He had not yet acknowledged Rybalko, but knew his favourite commander was there.

'I am guessing,' he continued, 'that we are facing 3-5 half-strength divisions of men, that is, about 15,000 troops.' (He was calculating in his head). 'I will order up all of our available artillery, so that we will lay on a barrage. But of course, that will take time, and so we won't be able to begin until tomorrow.'

Rybalko could sense Koniev's anger and frustration, which the Marshal managed to just barely keep in check. It hardly seemed fair to him that the Nazis should be throwing all of their best defences against him, and not against Zhukov. The Marshal's hands gripped the tripod of the binoculars tightly, and his already tight face was pinched even more as he set his jaw.

What he did not know though, was that at that precise moment there were barely three full companies of Volkssturm guarding the bank, and that they were only armed with out-dated weapons. If he had attacked right then, he would have easily overrun the position, but instead, he chose to wait for artillery support, thus losing valuable hours. The result of this decision meant that the Germans now knew exactly where they were going to be attacked, and so sent a few thousand men of the Panzergrenadiers to reinforce the weak Volkssturm units.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, at 4:15 am, everything was peaceful, and the silence was only disturbed by the sound of distant gunfire that was coming from some other area of the city. Within five minutes, however, that peace was shattered, as a concentration of three thousand guns opened up for a 50 minute bombardment of the opposite bank. It was the highest concentration of firepower ever launched on

a battlefield before, and no Soviet troop believed that anything could possibly live through it.

They watched as giant slabs of concrete went flying 50 metres into the air, and as flames and thick dusty smoke rose up in a great pillar of destruction into the sky. The blasting seemed to go on forever, until every square inch of earth had been upturned, and then upturned again. The noise was so loud that any trees in the area that had so-far somehow been able to hang onto their lives, now simply died.

When pilot Misha Russak, who was flying overhead with his copilot in a Ilyushin 'Beast' fighter-bomber, saw the plume of smoke rising into the air, he was in no doubt as to where he had to go. He had been ordered into this sector, and had been told to circle until he saw the smoke. He wondered to himself how anything could live in such a hell-fire, and also wondered if it were not just a waste of perfectly good bombs when so much had already obviously been destroyed.

And yet he knew that the bombs that he carried were special, were anti-tank bomblets in fact, and were no doubt meant to take out the machines that had been dug-in below. It was still dark, but by the light of the moon and the blazing fires he would drop them as close to where he had been told to as he could. Now he dipped down the nose of the plane, and began the gut-wrenching descent, as gravity pushed him back into his seat.

He waited though, and did not press the release catch until he was right in the thick of the haze—he didn't want to drop the bombs short, and onto his own comrades, and yet he didn't go down too low either, for fear of getting mixed up with the artillery shells that were whizzing through the air. When the moment was right, he let the bomblets go, and heard them whistle down. There was a multi-concussion impact as the explosives ignited a moment later, but he couldn't be sure whether or not he had hit anything. All he could do was to lift up the nose of the Ilyushin and head back to the airfield, where he would get loaded up with more bombs.

When the firestorm finally abated, Koniev ordered 3 entire Corps of infantry to attack, in this case, about 50,000 men. These massed hordes, who had been squatting all night in filthy old dugouts, now let out a giant cry and charged forward. The sight of them running heedlessly onwards, ten divisions worth, was a thing not easily forgotten; but the most impressive sight of all was that of all flag-bearers, who took the greatest chances of all with their lives. Koniev saw through his binoculars as one of them ran straight into machine gun fire, and yet kept dragging himself, and urging his fellows on until he died.

The idea was for the infantry to be able to establish a firm foothold on the Soviet edge of the canal, so that engineers would move forward and begin building bridges across, but this was easier said than done. Despite the heavy beating they had taken, the Germans resisted fiercely, and fired ripping swaths of deadly machine-gun fire at anything that moved, and also lobbed mortar shells at the high density Russian infantry.

Koniev was beginning to wonder if he would ever get anywhere this day, and was worried about the extremely high casualties that had been taken. Thousands had been killed, and both sides of the canal were chewed up beyond recognition.



But then at around 11:00 am, he got the message he had been waiting for: a bridgehead had been established a km down the line to the left. At last!

He immediately ordered that all efforts should be concentrated there, and that all mechanized units were to flood over the bridge as soon as the infantry had secured the opposite bank properly. It ended up taking the rest of the day just to move his men 2 km into the city on the other side, and that still left him about 10 km from the Tiergarten, where the Reich Chancellory and Reichstag awaited him. But still, it was a start...

## II

It was a stunning dawn that rose over Berlin on the morning of 25 April. Everything was calm, but it was the calm that comes just before a great storm. Almost half a million Soviet troops, as well as literally thousands of guns, and mortars, and Katyusha rocket-launchers, stood at the ready. These nine army groups had not only completely surrounded Berlin, but had penetrated deep into the city-centre. All that was needed was a signal to release the spring, and every one of these men and machines could be instantly hurled into the final battle.

The men who had control over this spring were Marshals Zhukov and Koniev, and both of them only waited for the last few units to be made ready. Neither of them believed, however, that the last stages of the war would be easy. Hitler was no pushover, and he had promised that every building and house would be made into an impregnable fortress. As the defenders, the Nazis had the edge, in that they could simply hole up and wait, while the Russians had to move forward, which exposed them to enemy fire.

The last thing Zhukov wanted, he thought to himself, as he looked down at his map, was another bloody battle of Stalingrad. That fight would haunt not only him, but every other Soviet commander for the rest of their lives. The huge casualties they had taken there were so great that their army and country would take decades to fully recover. It was amazing though, that where before his maps had covered most of eastern Europe, they now covered a mere 10 square km... How very far they had come.

Zhukov knew that he would have to be careful. Since Stalingrad, the Red Army had not taken part in any real street fighting. All of their engagements had been in the open air, out in the middle of wheat fields, or in forests. The only large city they had bothered to take was Warsaw, and that had already been abandoned by the Germans by the time they got there. He was not about to give Hitler the satisfaction of making him bleed for every inch of ground they captured.

But he had been smart, and even before he had crossed the Oder, he had had men in the rear training day and night in street-fighting tactics. These specially trained men would be formed into tactical assault groups, and would be unleashed where the fighting was toughest. He also spread some of them out to command untrained brigades, so that they too could learn as they went.

He would order that the most ruthless tactics be used starting today. He was not about to get squeamish now, not when the ultimate prize, the Reichstag, was so close within his grasp, and he had not a moment to lose, as Koniev's tank

armies were moving swiftly, now that they had crossed the Teltow Canal. He banged his fist down on his map table, even though he was alone. It was necessary to release some of the pent-up anger he had within. When would it end? When would he be able to claim the prize that was so rightfully his?!

Zhukov reached for the phone, and hearing the response of General Chuikov on the other line, he shouted: 'Advance immediately! Take this city!'

\* \* \* \* \*

The lead tank suddenly burst into flames without any warning, and just seconds after that the last tank in the row of eight also exploded -this one so fiercely that the turret actually flew up into the air. It did not take the other six T-34 commanders long to understand what had happened: they had proceeded down a narrow street, in single file; all the German Hitler Youth had to do was to fire a Panzerfaust at the lead tank, and lay a mine on the back of the rear one.

Once both machines were out of action, it was just a matter of finishing the rest off at their leisure, since in the narrow confines of the avenue, they were trapped, and could not get around their own tanks. Sure enough, within a moment, Hitler Youth boys, dressed in black uniforms, and between the ages of 8-12 years old, began springing out from behind piles of rubble, and out from shattered basement windows, to blast at the remaining tanks with their Panzerfausts.

Just before his own tank went up in flames, Captain Lev Topolski, Commader of the third machine in the row, wondered to himself who's crazy idea it was to send in armour without infantry support. Only by having a guard around their precious vehicles could they fight off these sorts of attacks. It was almost impossible to handle such problems with a tank's cannon, much like trying to swat a darting fly with a 40 pound stone.

By that afternoon, the High Command had realized their mistake, and now began to send in tanks only after they had been armed with a contingent of troops, who would sweep the streets on either side with rifle and submachine-gun fire, as well as grenades, which helped to flush out hidden anti-tank units. The Soviets also began to rely more on heavy artillery to clear the streets of snipers first. There was no point beating around the bush, and anytime there was even a suspicion that a sniper lay in wait in one of the buildings down the road, the whole building, and sometimes even the whole street, was simply levelled. Now they were killing the fly with a two-ton bomb.

These tactics were brutal, and effective. Zhukov's specially trained units now moved swiftly down the avenues and alleys, one by one, throwing hand-grenades through every doorway, and sweeping each home with heavy bursts of automatic fire. Smoke bombs covered their movements, obsuring them from enemy vision, and they made sure to stay well clear of the main sidewalks, and worked their way in and around the backs of houses, over fences and through gardens, to sneak up from the rear on any unsuspecting Germans.

They even figured out that it was easier to move from house to house through the basements, and did this by hauling along a big anti-tank rifle, which they used to blast through the concrete of the basement walls, so that they could move underground and not be seen. Then, they could simply pop up wherever they wished and again, surprise the Nazis. The casualties they were taking were

enormous, but they were making progress, slow as it was, and securing enough buildings and streets that the tanks could now move more safely forward.

That night, as darkness fell, fires burned everywhere on the street, and kept it well lit. In fact, it was so well lit, that Private Alexey Kuzma, who had been assigned to march alongside a tank, wondered why they didn't just keep advancing? He was frustrated. He had come a long way, a 1,000 km or more, and then, when there were only about 5 left to go, he was being told to sit and wait.

This was the idea of some bright officer, no doubt, but he wished that they could just get on with it. He was obviously supposed to take this time to relax, eat, drink, and perhaps even sleep a little. The High Command didn't want to burn the men out before the final objectives could be achieved. But all such things really did was just to put one's nerves on edge.

All of a sudden, memories of home and family, that one had suppressed in the course of the battle, would come flooding back as one found a place by a wall somewhere to have some nourishment, and to wrap oneself up in a blanket. In the flickering shadows cast by the fires that burned out of windows, or shattered automobiles, one could imagine all sorts of phantasms rising up menacingly. Yes, it was better just to get on with it, to deprive oneself of sleep, and therefore of dreams and nightmares, and to finish it all for good. What else were they here for? All this waiting did was to give the enemy a respite, and delay the inevitable.

Alexey was sure that the Red Army would win, the odds were simply too overwhelming by now, but he was not necessarily sure that he himself would come out of it alive. In fact, he doubted it very much. And yet, what could he do? Once he had been decorated as a Hero of the People, for having helped to destroy several German tanks, but he had been stripped of his medal by a jealous superior officer when he had failed to knock out a giant Elephant tank that subsequently destroyed more than a dozen T-34's.

Now he had been assigned what was essentially a death sentence as a punishment, and he awaited the moment when a sniper's bullet would find him, or he would step on a mine, or be killed by flying debris. Well, anyway, he hoped it would be quick whichever way it came, and that it didn't hurt too much...

### III

The only hill in all of Berlin was the 217-foot Kreuzberg, and it was from its highest point that General Chuikov decided to survey the city below. He had had no overall view of the battle since its inception, and somehow maps never really told the full story. Sometimes, one had to go out and tour around in order to get a sense of what was really going on, and Chuikov had never been afraid to put himself in harm's way.

Of course, he walked with his personal staff and bodyguards, but insisted that they give him some space as he looked out over the wrecked city-centre. In the distance he could see the smoking factories and the church spires that reached up higher than any other buildings. Plumes of greasy yellow smoke rose everywhere from buildings and houses where bombs had recently been dropped.

It was just morning now, on 25 April, and as the sun began to rise, it cast its red glow over everything. Swarms of what looked like birds swooped down in great flocks, and then soared back up into the clouds. Chuikov knew that these were the many dive-bombers, that were softening up certain target areas before the infantry and tanks went in. Even from here it was possible to hear the cracking and clacking of sporadic small-arms fire.

And at the centre of everything—the bull's eye—was the Reich's Chancellory building and the Reichstag, which were his ultimate target. Every Soviet army had closed in for the kill, and were all heading in the same direction. He could see that Koniev's forces were clearly in control of the south, south-west areas, while Zhukov's (and his own forces) now controlled both the northern and eastern sections.

Poor Rokossovsky had not made it after all. Chuikov and the others had been too quick, and Roko too unlucky. He had been cut off by Zhukov, and forced to merely guard his flanks and pursue some secondary targets in the north. Chuikov was disappointed for Roko, who in his opinion was the finest commander of any of them, and yet these battles were not made for the personal glory of any one man, but for the glory of the entire Red Army (no matter what Zhukov thought). How could anyone think differently? he wondered, as he looked down at the massiveness of what was happening below.

The only problem—the only thing holding them up—was the ring of canals that crisscrossed the government Tiergarten area, as well as the high slanted concrete walls that lined their banks. Canals meant that his troops would have to be concentrated into particular areas where they would have to cross on bridges, rather than being able to spread out and attack in many different areas at once. This made things difficult.

Clearly, the Germans had put most of their efforts into barricading this section of the city, as it was their most valuable, and any forces still capable of putting up a fight had been compressed back into this tiny area. Still, the two Air Armies that were even now flying thousands of bombing sorties over this hot little spot were certainly making life difficult for the Nazis.

Chuikov felt both a chill, and a thrill, as he looked down on what was left of Berlin. It was nothing but a roiling mass of twisted metal, piles of bricks, and shell craters. It chilled him because it never ceased to amaze him just how much destruction could be unleashed with modern weapons, and of how ruthless in general this war had been, and yet it also thrilled him, because at last his own people were proving themselves victorious. The Germans had called down this destruction upon themselves by invading Russia and wreaking misery there. Now they were paying the just price, and were reaping a hurricane of fire. They had boasted that they would wipe out the Soviet system, and now they were feeling the wrath of the entire Red Army. They were feeling red fury!

Chuikov had to admit that he did not always see eye to eye with Marshal Zhukov; he thought him vain, and pompous, and egotistical. But together they had unleashed hell, and had made Germany pay. Now both Zhukov and Koniev stood poised and ready to take the greatest military prize that had ever been on offer in all the long annals of military history, and it was unclear still who it would

be. It would have pleased Chuikov to see Koniev win out, and yet it was his duty to see that it was Zhukov, as he was his commanding officer.

Suddenly, Chuikov started to think of his daughter Irina, who was back home, and of how she always loved to play in her bath. Why he thought of this just then, he did not know? He did not often think of his family anymore, as to do so would be dangerously distracting when he had so many other things to do. And yet the image haunted him, perhaps because it felt so out of place; such innocence amidst all this human waste and destruction just did not fit; was like something from a soft dream of another world. He wondered just how long it would be, if ever, before what was happening now would begin to seem like a distant dream, and that that other, more simple life was the real reality? Hopefully soon, hopefully sometime.

In the meantime, a fresh wave of planes had swooped down and unloaded their bombs. Buildings far below began to disintegrate, but it was a few seconds before the noise reached him. It sounded not unlike the harsh roar that he had heard hundreds of times before, as thousands of men yelled and charged together into battle.

The city was disintegrating before his very eyes. It would not be long now until he would be ordered to close in on the Reichstag, while his fellow general did the same. It would not be unlike squeezing a lemon when you try to wring all the juices out, and he would make sure that it was he who twisted the hardest, so that Nazi Germany could never rise again!

\* \* \* \* \*

Far down below, far too distant for Chuikov to be able to see, a large brown Grizzly bear was loose in the rubble-strewn streets. Bombs had fallen on the Berlin Zoo, and many of the animals had escaped. Russian soldiers were amazed to see an Ostrich, and a camel poking about as if nothing were happening.

The bear stalked its way through the ashes, and over the concrete and the slivers of broken glass as it panted and sniffed, hungry for food. In the back of its mind somewhere, it sought out what it had known before it had been captured, long ago, and locked up; it sought out green forests, and grass, and sunlight.

It would never find these here, but it did eventually stumble into a public park where there was no fighting going on, and decided to stay put. There were some trees that were somehow still alive, and they were even beginning to sprout some leaves in the early morning sunshine. The bear had gone through untold miseries and uncertainties over the course of its short life, but here, at least, was a little greenery... and freedom...

## **Chapter 10**

### **To The Reichstag!**

#### **I**

Sergeant Sasha Kot of the 79th Corp had just not been able to get warm, no matter how hard he had tried. It hadn't rained during the long night, but there had been a thick fog which had made everything, especially his clothes and blanket, feel damp. He had been almost relieved when the morning had come, even though he knew that he would have to fight yet another battle, just because the night had seemed to go on and on. It hadn't been possible to sleep much, so he had taken out his small pad of paper that he kept in his pocket, and scratched out a poem in the light of a burning fire.

Sasha had never imagined himself to be the soldierly type, and if it hadn't been for the war, probably never would have given military things a single thought. And yet he had enlisted as soon as the Germans had invaded, before being forcibly enlisted, feeling it was his patriotic duty to do so. He had always been of an artistic temperament, much given to reading and writing, and had imagined that was the course his life would take.

But the Great Patriotic War had changed all that, and he had had to satisfy his poetic bent by writing only when there were a few moments to spare, and such moments were not easy to come by. It had been shocking though, to learn that military life had not been really as bad as he had thought it would be, and had been even more stunned to learn that killing was not really so difficult for him as it was for others. He had killed many Germans over the years, though he did not know many of their faces, as they had appeared only as blurs in the distance usually. But he HAD grown accustomed, and put this down to the fact that he was protecting his Motherland when fighting.

Just then, Sasha's Lieutenant came around, and roused the men from their blankets, where they had been huddled up against a wall, and told them to march forward with him. Sasha tucked his little book of poetry back into his pocket, and followed the other men. He felt groggy; it would have been good to have slept, but if he were killed, he reasoned, that would be sleep enough.

As they marched through the city, always staying wary of sniper's fire, they drew closer and closer to the sound of gunfire. They had walked for about ten minutes through the rubble, and arrived at a canal with a large iron bridge, which led into the heart of the city. Once they had taken this bridge, he knew that there were few defences to stand in their way after that. But this was a formidable obstacle, and he could see from behind the pile of bricks that he knelt behind that the bridge was defended on the other side by a Tiger tank that had been cleverly planted under cover of a thick stone wall. It was practically impregnable, and its large gun covered the bridge perfectly.

'Right comrades,' shouted Sasha's Lieutenant. 'We have to get across. If you don't think you can do it, then step aside and make way for those who can. We must take this bridge, and we must take it now!'

Sasha was ready. He would not shy away from a fight. He did not want to die, but he could not hide out and let the others do the hard work. He was determined to go. As he sat and waited, the lines of the poem he had written the night before came back to him:

*It was in the springtime  
When I left you, mother*

*The grass was just green  
And the fields of wheat  
Were not yet ripe for threshing.*

Then the artillery started to fire, and Sasha watched, as chunks of debree flew into the air as though in slow motion, and as Sturmovik planes flew low overhead to drop their bombs on the German positions. The noise was so loud, and Sasha was so close to the explosions, that his ears ceased to function, though he had covered them, and soon everything happened around him in a strange mute silence.

*I carried only a simple case  
With all my worldly possessions  
When you bid me goodbye  
At the end of our lane.*

The warehouses on the other side of the canal were surprisingly undamaged an hour later when the barrage stopped, and the Tiger tank had not been touched at all. Moments later a second rolling barrage was ordered, but this too seemed to do little real damage. It looked as though the bridge would have to be taken by the infantry. Sasha was not called up at first, but only two platoons of scouts were to proceed for now.

He watched as they ran towards the large steel structure. He knew that they were yelling, but could hear nothing still. As soon as they got to the bridge's threshold they were caught in a deadly machine-gun crossfire, and all of them fell to the ground, dead or wounded, within a matter of seconds.

Now two tanks were ordered into the action, and the T-34's rushed the bridge as fast as they could, but they too met the same fate, as the waiting Tiger tank fired three rounds in quick succession and destroyed both machines, turning them into blazing wrecks. Fire funneled up from the turrets like swirling tornadoes, and Sasha knew that there would be no point in hoping for survivors.

*It greaved my young heart  
To have to leave you behind  
There in our home, all alone,  
But such are our troubled times.*

Now there was a major obstacle to cross, and no vehicles would be able to get by those burning tanks, and so a young Captain, a leader of the Young Communist Battalion, rallied both his own men, and anyone else who was willing to join in storming the bridge in force. Sasha could not hear what the man said, but was inspired by his bravery, and by the fact that the Captain had decided to carry the Blood Banner himself. Sasha stood with the others, and checked his rifle one last time as he prepared to charge.

*Now, many seasons have passed, since  
The snows have come and gone*

*And the soft spring lane  
We walked down together  
Has been lined with a fresh white blanket,  
And with icicles that weep like frozen tears,  
From the branches of nearby trees.*

It was clear that the Germans still held the factories and the railway station on the other side, and fire would be coming from all directions. Sasha just kept his head down, and ran towards the bridge. His hearing was starting to return, a little, though it was still muffled, and the cries of his compatriots sounded strange, but comforting. He opened his mouth too, and let out what he hoped would be a fierce noise. He kept his rifle low, for now. He would not waste any ammunition firing at the Tiger tank, as he knew that that would be like firing a peashooter at an elephant. He would need every bullet soon enough. He was nearing the bridgehead.

*But do not weep for me, mother  
If word should come  
That your one and only son  
Has fallen for good in battle.*

Up ahead, he saw the Captain; watched him as much as he could, for he felt that he were spurred on, and drawn towards, that Blood Banner, as though a moth to a flame. When the Captain was hit, square in the chest, Sasha thought he looked almost graceful as he slid to the ground. Almost immediately, another man grabbed at the banner, and waved it high above his head as the running men reached the middle of the bridge.

Now Sasha was numb. He did not feel anything, nor think anything, but was familiar with this sensation, or lack of it, from previous fights, and knew that he had been taken over by a frenzy, part fear, part blood-lust, and part hope, hope that he would survive to see tomorrow. His body was so numb that he barely felt the first bullet as it slammed into his side, though it did wind him. Nor did he feel much of the second, which tore into his left shoulder. He did, however, feel the third slug, as it ripped into the side of his neck, and now he too, like the Captain before him, would fall. He could feel his knees growing weak as he slid to the ground.

*For I will still be with you  
In all of morning's newness  
There in childhood's home  
And there in the green grass  
And the fields of wheat...*

Stretcher-bearers ran to the wounded men on the bridge, and soon Sasha was put onto a flat piece of wood. He felt weightless, almost liberated, as the two men jogged along, carrying him on the plank back to their own lines. He held his hand to the wound on his neck, and tried to staunch the blood, but even though



he had not yet looked down to see, he had the feeling there was already too much of it gone. Was it possible to be hit three times and to survive?... It was doubtful.

His hearing was still muffled as the bearers laid down the plank in the rear area. Men still rushed past him in great droves, and so he surmised, in his rapidly weakening state, that the attack was still continuing, that men were still rushing towards the bridge. Then suddenly, he heard an explosion. It was so loud that he knew instantly it must have been the Tiger tank and its ammunition going up. Someone must have mined it from behind. This would make it easier for more men to get across, and eventually, for tanks.

Such a thought pleased him; it pleased him because he knew he was dying, was already dead, that by the time a doctor got to him it would be too late, but he also knew that many of his companions would make it, that the war would be over soon, and Russia would be safe.

*When the blackness came, it came quickly.  
...And I will run to you  
With wide-open arms  
If only in a dream,  
And just like the boy I was before  
We will embrace, forever,  
There at the waiting threshold  
Of summer's dark and inviting door.*

## II

Rybalko's tanks were charging through the streets of Berlin as fast as they could go. The great treads on their tracks crushed bricks into dust, and their engines roared like hungry lions. The General himself had taken personal command of a heavy Stalin tank, and ordered that every available machine should advance without stopping until they reached the Reichstag. Such was the command of Marshal Koniev himself, who had stressed to Rybalko the importance of his mission.

'This is our last chance, ' he had said, and the General sensed that his commander was filled with great anxiety and anger that he was not further ahead with more of his armies by now, but it had simply been impossible due to the restrictions imposed by Stalin.

'Zhukov has outflanked us at nearly every turn. His armies now stand poised at the Lanwehr Canal, and nothing will be able to stop him. But there is one last hope, and that is that you blast through the Wilmersdorf district with everything you've got. Once you've crossed the canal, you will have arrived at the Citadel, where the Reichstag and Chancellory are both located. I am counting on you to outsmart Zhukov with this run. Speed is everything -nothing else matters- and do not fail me!'

'In two more days,' he continued, 'we celebrate May Day in Moscow, and the victorious Marshal—he who reaches the Reichstag first—will ride a white steed through Victory Square, and past Stalin himself, who will stand upon Lenin's

Musoleum, as well as the entire population of the city. The losers, Zhukov and Rokossovsky, will ride dark steeds, behind me. We must take our objective by May 1st, and I must sit atop that white horse!

With these words ringing in his ears, Rybalko had immediately thrown his men into combat, ready or not. They had made excellent progress so far, simply by running roughshod straight through enemy positions. But this also had the adverse effect of leaving many pockets of resistance behind them, though he didn't care—they would be handled by the men in the rear. He had his order, and that was to race on without stopping!

\* \* \* \* \*

General Chuikov wiped his forehead with his handkerchief as he waited for Marshal Zhukov to speak. The Marshal had called him to find out why Chuikov had ordered a halt at the Landwehr Canal by the Mockern and Potsdamer bridges, which were located just over 1 km from the Reichstag and Chancellory buildings to the north.

'Why have you not been more aggressive?' Zhukov repeated, angrily.

'As I said, Comrade Marshal, the banks of the canal are heavily defended, and any tanks we have sent across have been Panzerfausted out of action. The bridges are also mined, and I have sent engineers to de-fuse the explosives, but so far they have come under heavy fire.'

'I don't want to hear your excuses!' fumed Zhukov. 'Don't you know that Koniev's tanks are racing through the streets at top speed. Do you think that I am going to allow my prize to be snatched away from me at the last moment by that man just because of a few explosives and some machine-guns. Do you think that I have come so far to be held up by these things?!... May Day is fast approaching, and I needn't remind you that I have pledged to Stalin himself that the Reichstag will be taken by then. I want you to get across the bridges now, and if they should be blown sky high by the Nazis, then so be it! Swim across!'

Now Zhukov slammed down the receiver, and Chuikov knew that he had better comply, and quickly, or face the consequences.

He tried to force his battered brain to think of what the overall situation was, so that he could formulate a plan of action. He understood that everyone was now converging on the Citadel, and that each army was desperate to be the first there. From the east came Berzarin and his Fifth Shock Army; from the north, Perevertkin and his 79th Corps, while part of Kuznetsov's Third Shock Army was already in Moabit, and had just to cross the Spree.

The armies were now so close together in their ring around the Citadel, that they needed to coordinate themselves so they didn't fire on each other. Any shell that didn't fall exactly where it should could easily overshoot, and land on fellow Russians... This was the situation; he just had to see to it that he got there before Koniev!

First things first, he had to find a way across the bridges, and that might have to involve some sort of duplicity. One of his officers offered the suggestion that they should attach sandbags covered in gasoline to the front of a tank. Such a thing had been tried before, and had fooled the enemy into thinking that a tank

had been taken out, when in fact it was still fully operational, due to all the thick black smoke that would pour off of it when hit.

Chuikov wasted no time, and ordered that preparations be made quickly. It seemed like a strange scheme, but by this point he was willing to try just about anything.

Within half an hour the sandbag-laden tank duly arrived at the Potsdamer bridgehead, followed by ten others. Chuikov watched from a safe distance through his binoculars as the tank raced over the bridge, taking machine-gun and Panzerfaust fire all the while. Soon enough, the fuel-covered sandbags burst into flames, and from all the smoke that came pouring off it, the Germans thought that they had fatally wounded it, and so stopped firing.

And yet, it just kept on coming, and by the time they had realized their mistake, it was too late, and the ten tanks which had come up in the rear had already reached the opposite bank, firing as they went. Close behind, there followed wave after wave of infantry.

Chuikov, who had witnessed the whole thing, felt a surge of excitement, and immediately ordered that the engineers be sent in to defuse the still dangerous explosives.

With this one action, of taking the bridge, Chuikov had now put himself in the strongest position to strike up the Hermann Goring Strasse, and straight into the heart of Nazi Germany, just like a final, fatal, plunged dagger.

Now the real fighting began, as more and more men poured into the Citadel, and here, unlike the rest of the city, every house truly had been turned into a defensive bunker by the fiercest and most loyal SS troops. Where before, Chuikov had been able to count his progress each day in kilometers, now he was forced to do so in metres, if that. It was slowly beginning to dawn on him that all of his worst fears were coming true, and that this city really was another Stalingrad.

Every street was heavily barricaded, behind every corner lurked a machine-gunner, and on every rooftop a sniper. It seemed that no matter how much artillery fire was slammed into the buildings, they could never eliminate every hostile German, and besides, the bombing only further plugged up the streets with rubble, making it impossible for tanks to get through.

Much of the fighting was now hand-to-hand, and it took even specially-trained infantrymen up to six hours to clear a single house. Pistols, hand-grenades and knives were the weapon of choice, and there was no quarter given. All this was frustrating, but nothing could have made Chuikov angrier than to learn that Koniev's General Rybalko was actually advancing on ground that he, Chuikov, had already taken. It seemed as though Koniev would do anything to further his advance, even stepping on a fellow Soviet's toes.

He did not bother to call up Zhukov in order to explain the situation, as he knew well enough that the Marshal would not except any excuses, so he simply got on the phone and ordered his own commanders to speed things up. He was under intense pressure, and though he knew that his men were doing their best, he also understood that at this point, all that mattered was a quick victory, and that it was his duty to deliver what his commander wanted.

### III

Lieutenant Grisha Sorokin sat eating with his best friend Sergeant Volya Denisov. Their battalion, the Young Communists of General Perevertkin's 79th Corps, had finally made it across the Moltke Bridge, just north of the Citadel. The fighting had been hard. The old stone bridge had been well defended, and now they were only 700 metres from the Reichstag itself, according to the map, though he still couldn't see it from where he was exactly.

A heavy mist filled the air, and this obscured everything. It was still early in the morning of the 30th of April, and he knew that the government buildings would be the most heavily defended in the city. It was SS men who controlled this district, and they were fanatical. It troubled Grisha that he would most likely not make it through the rest of the day alive, and yet it comforted him to think that he had gotten so close, so close that he could probably reach the Reichstag with a bullet from his gun, if only he could see it.

Beside him, where he had hunkered down for a moment's rest behind a pile of rubble, Denisov was mindlessly digging into his rations, and encouraging Grisha to do the same.

'You won't be able to fight if you don't get your strength up, and have a little vodka,' reasoned his friend.

Grisha loved Denisov like a brother. They had linked up as soon as they met nearly two years before, and had never been separated since. Denisov was tall, and fairly wide for a soldier, where Grisha was tall and wiry. But besides their differences in build, they shared an uncommon bond, even for soldiers in the thick of combat. He had taken it upon himself to see to it that his friend got through the war alive. Something told him that if Denisov were left to his own devices, he would not last long without his help, as he was fairly clumsy and inept at staying out of harm's way. But together, they made a good team, and his light sense of humour helped take the edge off of Grisha's more serious nature.

What was really bothering him, was that somehow, in this last phase of combat, he would not be able to do what he so far had, and that was to keep his friend alive. Within himself, he just hoped that they could ride out these last few days, and not be assigned to anything too dangerous. Up ahead, a forward brigade was engaged in taking the Interior Ministry, while their own battalion had been ordered to wait for now.

Then the order came that they were to advance. The Brigade that had engaged with the Ministry had been almost entirely wiped out, but they had captured their objective, and so it was safe to move on to the next target. Soon they had arrived at the Koningsplatz, a large open square, while at the other end, in front of a big drab building, and behind fortifications, there bristled dozens of anti-aircraft guns that were pointed right at them.

Once again, they were told to hunker down and wait, which was fine with Grisha. He overheard the telephone conversation between his Captain and the regimental Colonel on the other line. The Captain seemed confused, as though he were still just trying to get his bearings. He kept looking intently at the map he had spread out on his knees.

'But Colonel, we have not advanced because we are still trying to figure out how to get to the Reichstag. There is a heavy mist, which makes things difficult, and first we must get around a large grey building in order to reach it!'

Grisha strained his eyes to see through the early morning fog, and made out the large, bombed-out building that the Captain was talking about, and what appeared to be the Reichstag beyond, an impressive looking structure with a large stone figure and horses on its roof. He had never seen a picture of the building, but surely that must be it, he thought.

The Colonel on the other line, however, who was also studying his maps, disagreed.

'No, you idiot!' he shouted. The building that you think is the Reichstag is actually just the Brandenburg Gate. It is the Grey building right in front of you that is the Reichstag!'

Grisha was amazed at what he had heard, and he nudged Denisov beside him, as they both took a second look at the half-destroyed structure before them. Perhaps, in it's day, it had been a sight, with its large dome and so on, but now it just looked like a wreck, and Grisha had to admit that he was slightly disappointed.

The Captain, meanwhile, had tried to recover himself, as the Colonel shouted at him to attack at once!

'Lieutenant Grisha!' the Captain called out to him. 'I have decided to give you the Blood Banner, which yourself and Sergeant Denisov will carry to the top of that roof there.'

He pointed at the top-most point of the Reichstag.

'The 3rd Battalion will strike first, and will take the lower levels. You and your company must charge up the steps within, and get to the roof somehow. This is the most momentous day of the war, and I am giving you this responsibility... Other Blood Banners have been handed out to key men in other battalions, and I hear that some of Koniev's men have them as well, but it is the first man to the top who wins, so do not fail us. Marshal Zhukov himself is counting on you!'

And so saying, the Captain gestured to an aide who ran over with a backpack that contained the flag, which Grisha then put on reluctantly.

'Once that flag is flying.' the Captain continued, 'It means we have taken Berlin, and I am authorized to say that the one who gets there first is automatically made a Hero of the Soviet Union!'

'A great honor, Comrade Captain,' said Grisha weakly, though inwardly, he felt as if he would rather not have this honour, as it would only make his job of seeing to it that no harm came to Denisov that much harder, but he knew that he could never refuse such a thing.

Grisha's stomach now turned, as he looked out over the Koningsplatz gardens, with it's few remaining trees, and its wide open, battle-scarred ground. He knew that anyone attempting to charge into such an unprotected area would immediately be an easy target for the hundreds of SS troops that watched out from every window and door of the structure.

\* \* \* \* \*

The main assault on the Reichstag began at 1:00 pm with a large artillery barrage. Eighty-nine Soviet guns blasted away at the facade of the building, as well as a dozen Katyusha rocket-launchers. Grisha's and Denisov's company was ordered to remain behind, as the first waves of infantry tried to storm the building. The results were not encouraging, for as soon as they stepped out from their cover, they were met by withering machine-gun and accurate mortar fire. These SS defenders were the elite, and they obviously had no intention of being taken alive.

Any man who did get very far at all, soon came to a large excavation ditch which ran through the square. They were forced to wade through the brown rain water inside if they were not to get stalled. A few of them even made it to within 50 m of the Reichstag's entrance, where they hid themselves behind chunks of concrete until they could be reinforced for the final dash.

These reinforcements soon arrived, but to their dismay, the men found that the entrances to the building had been bricked-up, solidly. Another 20 minutes delay as mortars were brought forward. At point-blank range these weapons had soon blasted through the brick barricades, and the men had successfully captured the front entrance of the building.

Now, it was their turn to go, and as their company ran cautiously forward over the square, Grisha tried to position himself, as he always did, so that he was in front of Denisov (without his friend catching on to what he was doing, of course). Snipers were everywhere, but they would have to get through Grisha first, before they could get Denisov.

'Stay low! Get down! Let's go to the right, and then zig-zag a bit before we charge!'

These were the instructions that he gave to his friend, as they made their way slowly forward. All around, the heavy warm air was thick with the sound of combat. Machine-guns ripped, grenades exploded, rifles cracked, and artillery roared. Everywhere were the explosions of anti-aircraft fire which was being directed at them. Some of the forward units had managed to take out a few of the enemy artillery, but there were one or two pieces that were still very much operational.

Finally, Grisha and Denisov had made it to the large stone steps of the Reichstag's entrance. They huddled together behind the protection of a large stone pillar for a moment while they caught their breath.

For the first time yet, Grisha believed that the two of them might stand a chance of making it all the way to the top. He looked at Denisov for just a moment, and saw from the expression in his eyes that he was thinking the exact same thing. Was it possible that he, a humble junior officer, and his clumsy friend, would be the ones to fly the Blood Banner?

This would be a symbolic victory, and for it, many had died. He imagined it: There, from the top of the Reichstag, he and his friend would announce to the whole world the victory of Soviet Russia over Nazi Germany! All that he had ever hoped to achieve in this war was to save his friend's life, simply because he couldn't bare the thought of having to watch him die. All he had wanted was to ride these last days out, but now he had been ordered into the thick of it.

It seemed more like a dream, but Grisha knew that he had to act fast if he was to make it into a reality. The many floors of the building would be well guarded,

and there would be much fighting before they achieved the top-most level. But, with a little luck, and some courageous fighting, they just might make it.

'Come on, Denisov! Let's plant this flag so we can go home!'

The two men stood up, and then without a second's hesitation, charged through the large hole that had been blasted in the brick barricade, and carried on into the dark bowels of the Reichstag!...

## **Epilogue**

### **The Final Victor!**

It was the morning of June 24th, 1945, more than one month after the conclusion of the surrender of Nazi Germany. Stalin had decided to hold a victory parade in Red Square, the largest ever such event in Russia's long history. It had been raining, and the cobblestone streets were wet and glistening. The crowds of thousands had been gathered for hours, waiting. They were tired, but jubilant. Many of them had never thought that they would see this day arrive, and yet it had—their Motherland was saved, and the invaders vanquished!

There were infantrymen, tankers, sappers, artillerymen, and cavalrymen. Each Front of the Red Army—the First Belorussian Front, the Second Belorussian Front, the First Ukrainian Front, and so on, were represented by a combined regiment of five two-company battalions with one-hundred troops in each company. Every one of the men had been hand-chosen to take part because of singular acts of bravery in battle, and their chests glistened with medals on their crisp new uniforms.

This victory was owed to the men who stood ready in their Battalions, ready to march past the Kremlin walls, and their leaders. All was still, the military band was ready, but they would only commence to play at the signal. Quiet expectation filled the air. Suddenly, Stalin himself appeared, along with his ministers, and they strode up the long winding steps of Lenin's Mausoleum, where the preserved body of Soviet Russia's founder lay on display.

Once at the top level, they looked down at the thronging masses and waved. The crowd cheered and waved back, everyone eager for a glance from Stalin himself.

And yet, on this day, as much as they loved their leader, it was not even for Stalin that they had come, but to see the man who did more than any other to conquer the enemy, the greatest General in their history. They pulsed with energy, knowing that he would ride out on a white stallion, the symbol of victory, as the inspector of the parade. He who did the second most for victory in the war would come riding a black stallion behind him, as the commander of the parade.

Suddenly, the bells of a nearby church began to chime, sounding 10:00 am, and at the last resounding note, the trumpeters blared out a military call. All heads turned as they heard the clapping of hooves upon the ground. A line of drummer boys rolled out a long beat, and then their hands paused midair. The Marshal on

the white steed rode well, very well, and so did the Marshal behind him, on the black. Both men were former cavalry officers, so they had had years of training.

The white steed was an almost impossibly powerful and beautiful animal, and yet it handled superbly well under Marshal Zhukov's skilled hands. He had had a few days to practice, and get back into the feel of riding, after so long away from it, as had Marshal Rokossovsky on his dark mount.

'The trick is to make it all look effortless,' Zhukov thinks, as he gallops over the slippery cobblestones, past the cheering crowds, and past Stalin and his ministers, who looked down upon the two men benignly.

This is Zhukov's moment. This is the day he had dreamed about since being a boy—when he could emerge in full glory as the saviour of his beloved country. He was a communist, first and last, and a Russian, first and last, and because of his strategic efforts, more than those of any other, his country was now free, and his own future was all but mapped out as head of all Soviet ground forces, and deputy (or, second in command) to Stalin himself.

Rokossovsky's future also looked bright. He had managed to emerge from the shadow of his stay in prison, and to become one of the most highly rated military men in his country. Such honours as were being bestowed upon him would, even a few years ago, have been unthinkable. He was a Hero of the Soviet Union, and the second most highly decorated soldier in Russia's history. He had finally shed the stigma of suspicion, and was now also one of Stalin's most trusted advisors. But most importantly, his wife and daughter had been freed from the Gulag in Siberia.

Both men rode to the head of each battalion, stopped their horses, and Zhukov called out a question to the assembled troops: 'Soldiers, you who have sacrificed so much, are you willing to shed your blood again if you should be asked?'

The roar of approval was loud, and enthusiastic, and sounded eerily like the sound that had come from the men as they had charged into battle just months before. Zhukov was momentarily taken aback, as they memories flooded his mind...

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It is April again, 1945. Two men, Lieutenant Grisha and Sergeant Denisov, have just run into the Reichstag. The sound of their fellow Soviet troops calling out from the second floor urges them on. It is smoky in the interior of the building. Scorched gunpowder burns their nostrils. The first floor has been secured, but they must rush up the long, wide flight of stairs to reach the second level where the fighting continues.

Behind every corner and in every room there are Germans, and each area must be cleared before they can proceed. Grisha takes a grenade out of his pocket and throws it around a corner. It explodes, and fragments of carpet go flying everywhere. He lets loose with a burst from his machine-gun, and rushes across the landing of the second floor, making for the stairway leading up to the third. He tells Denisov to follow him.

He would have felt it his duty to help clear out each room one by one, but he knows that his and Denisov's real mission is to plant the flag, and so he orders several men to go in front of him to clear the top landing of the third floor.



Unfortunately, they are pinned down by rifle fire, and must wait for reinforcements. It is another hour before enough men have gotten into the building to make a viable attempt up the steps.

In the meantime, he and Denisov stay behind a corner of wall and try to figure out where they will go once they get up there.

There are windows at the very top of the stairs, and Grisha guesses that if they can break through those they will come out onto the roof, just below the great dome. It is important to him to get it right. He takes into account where the flag will look best as it flaps in the breeze. He knows that he will be photographed, and that these pictures will be seen all over the world, so it must look right.

Denisov is hesitant though.

'We're going to get shot to pieces if we try to go now. We must wait for more men.'

'No,' sais Grisha, determinedly, 'we must try soon, as it is only not long before it is May Day, and I do not want to be responsible for failing to get the flag up before midnight. The sooner we go the better!'

Within a couple of more hours, they are able to storm the top of the stairs with enough men that it is somewhat secure. Grisha asks for Denisov's grenade, and tells the others to get down, while he places it against the glass of the large windows overlooking the roof, and then runs and ducks.

The explosion tears right through the lead lining of the windows, and sends thousands of shards of glass tinkling down. Without wasting a second, Grisha, Denisov, and a war photograprer dash forward through the hole in the window, and find themselves standing on a ledge without a railing. The heights are dizzying, and they can see out over the whole of the bombed-out city. The air is still thick with smoke, and humidity, and they can see their fellow troops far below.

No one had seen them yet, but when Grisha reaches into his bag and takes out the red banner, all eyes soon look up at them. He unfurls it lovingly, and as Denisov holds his legs he makes to lean out and attach the flag to a large 8 foot high stone adornment as the photographer snaps pictures. But then, at the last moment, he changes his mind, climbs down, and hands the flag to Denisov, telling him to do the honours.

Denisov is skeptical. For the entirety of the war, Grisha had looked after him. He had made it look as though he weren't doing much, but he knew that if it weren't for Grisha, he would probably not be alive this day.

'No, you do it,' he tells him.

But again, Grisha presses the flag into his hand, and urges him up. Denisov gives in, climbs up the stone adornment, and ties the flag to an outcropping.

At last it is done, and now the men from below look up and cheer, and wave, and both Denisov and Grisha feel tears beginning to well up into their eyes...

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Flash forward to the Moscow parade.

Zhukov sits upon his horse, contemplating the fates of all those who had not made it.

'But now we are safe,' he thought. 'Now they were all safe...'

He and Rokossovsky rode on, down the straight wide avenues, and made a final galloping pass right in front of Stalin again. They drew their swords simultaneously, and held them near to their faces as they charged by. The crowd again cheered.

The final task for the two great Marshals that day was to review the men as they too marched past Stalin, and at the head of the pack was Marshal Koniev, resplendant in medals and a dark uniform, and followed by ten of his senior generals. Both Zhukov and Rokossovsky saluted as they looked down upon the Marshal from their mounts. He had not been given the honour of riding a horse, but there seemed to be no hard feelings as he marched briskly by, smiling victoriously as he went.

'A worthy opponent, was Marshal Koniev,' thought Zhukov. 'And Rokossovsky too.'

Looking up at both men upon their steeds, were Lieutenant Grisha Sorokin, and Sergeant Volya Denisov, who stood in the front row of the Young Communist Brigade. Upon their chests, they each wore Hero of the Soviet Union medals. And yet the thing that both men valued the most, was that they had come through everything alive, and unharmed.

Now their fury against the enemy had been exhausted, and they just wanted some peace for a change.

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