



SOLDIER

D O N W U L F F S O N

Behind Enemy Lines

Iron smashed into my head.

I was lying on my back when I came to. I had no idea as to how much time had passed. My entire skull pulsed with pain, and I was nauseous and dizzy. My right knee throbbed. It was dark, and for a moment I thought it was night. I turned my head and saw daylight, and from somewhere heard Russian being yelled. I looked up, and again saw the underbelly of a tank, about two meters above me; one tread was broken, putting it out of action. It had come to a stop above me, straddling the trench. I ran a hand through my hair. It was wet with blood, and there was a large lump just above the hairline. I reached down and felt my pounding right knee; it was bloody, and my fingers came upon a jagged piece of shrapnel that felt embedded in the joint. I rolled sideways. All around me were the ugly leftovers of the battle: shell casings, wooden boxes, helmets, weapons, empty canisters—and dead soldiers, both Russian and German. More of the same filled the trench to either side of the tank.

When I turned to look, a dead arm flopped down on the back of my neck, knocking my head downward. My chin came to rest on the gray-green of a dead German's chest. And looking right into my face was another face, that of a blond Russian boy, his lifeless eyes locked open in disbelief. I looked away as I suddenly became aware of the sound of distant battle—then almost jumped at the sound of a nearby gunshot.

I heard someone pleading in German—then another shot. I belly-crawled a half meter and peered out. What I saw sickened and terrified me. A Russian officer was methodically seeking out the German wounded and shooting them. A lumbering oaf of a foot soldier, using a bayonet, was dispatching other Germans. He seemed to be enjoying what he was doing. And many of those he was bayoneting looked already dead; he was just making sure.

I froze at the sound of nearby voices.

"I want this tank operational immediately!" someone was demanding in Russian.

"I will do my best, master sergeant," came the response. "Parts are in short supply."

"Just get it done!"

The voices were close, but I could not tell from where they were coming exactly. Two booted legs jumped into the trench, followed by another pair. My heart pounded so hard and loud I was sure it would be heard. Two Russians knelt down in the trench beside the tank and examined the

dangling, shattered tread. Remembering Dobelmann's words, I played dead among the dead.

"And how does the idiot think we are supposed to repair it?" groused one of the men.

"We will need another T-34 tank to pull it free," came the reply.

"Prinistoye mnye pazhalusta adin T-34!"

Both laughed. One had joked that their superior officer acted as though they could repair the tank by magic.

The two figures rose, and out of a slitted eye I saw two pairs of legs headed away, down the trench. They paused for a moment and huddled with a man who had the white cross of a medic on his helmet, and helped him tend to a badly wounded Russian soldier. Between the three of them, using a blanket as a makeshift stretcher, they trundled the wounded man out of the trench.

Entangled in carnage and debris, boxed in by the walls of the trench and the bottom of the tank, I lay there wondering what to do, too frightened to do anything. I wanted someone to help me, to talk to me, as my mother would, and tell me what to do. I looked for help, and saw only the dead.

From somewhere down the trench came another bang. Perhaps another wounded German had been executed?

My gut knotted with fear. Over and over, I kept hearing what Dobelmann had said to us just one day before.

I tried to think.

We had been overrun. In the distance, in the direction of the bunkered hill, fierce fighting continued; battles that I could not see were being fought. More Russians were passing by every minute. I heard them; I saw them scramble through the trench.

I was trapped behind enemy lines.

If discovered, I would be killed. Even playing dead would not save me; even dead, once found, I would be skewered on the end of a bayonet.

I had only one chance, I knew, to save myself.

The dead eyes of the blond Russian boy seemed to be watching me. With my fingers, I closed the lids. Strange though it may seem, I did not want him looking at me and at what I was about to do. In that cramped and bloody charnel house beneath the tank, I removed my clothes—even my socks and underwear—then exchanged my clothes for his. The task was very difficult. I was in considerable pain, especially from my right knee, from which the ragged bit of metal was protruding, and it was extremely awkward undressing then trying to re-dress the inert body, the limbs of which were already turning stiff.

During this last part of the gruesome process, I had to stop. The two Russians I had heard before returned; they crawled in amidst the bodies and examined the tank's underside, then commenced cutting and pulling out long strands of barbed wire that had become entangled in its drive wheels. At this juncture, I was no more than half done re-dressing the corpse in my own uniform. Sick with

fear, only a few centimeters from the two men, I lay frozen in place, certain that I would be found out. But the minds of the two—both seemingly mechanics—were on other things; they paid not the slightest bit of attention to me, to the half-dressed corpse, or to any of the bodies.

Finally, they left, and I finished my ugly chore as fast as I could. In the pocket of the brown jacket I felt a bulge, and removed a wallet. In it there were a few rubles and a military identification card. In the dim light I tried to make out the name. I was unable to, and returned the wallet to my pocket.

I crawled. I pulled myself from under the tank and along the trench, over more bodies and more trash. From somewhere came the sound of approaching vehicles and far-off voices. Russian voices. Amidst more dead and more trash, I leaned back against the wall of the trench, thinking back. Hals had been killed, and before that, Willi had lost an arm, Fassnacht a foot. Oskar had been shot in the back, running away. But Jakob was still alive, as far as I knew, and so was Dobelmann. I looked at the faces of the dead in the trench, wondering if I would see Dobelmann or Jakob—and hoping I wouldn't, hoping that somehow they were still alive.

Sitting there leaning against the wall of the trench, every part of me hurt, especially my knee. I pulled up the brown pant leg. The knee was badly swollen, and just below the kneecap a piece of steel was protruding. It looked as though a large, misshapen nail had been driven into my

leg. Something occurred to me: The shrapnel had hit my knee before I had changed uniforms, so there was no tear in the pants; someone seeing this might become suspicious. Rubbing the woolen fabric back and forth over the jagged spike, I ripped a hole in the pant leg, exposing the wound.

Over trash, dead bodies, and collapsed earth, I crawled out of the trench. Not knowing where I was going or what I was doing, I found myself wandering along what had been our front lines, limping, using a Russian rifle for support. The dead were everywhere, in whatever final pose death had forced upon them. Gutted tanks and other vehicles continued burning. I became aware that I was approaching a man—a Russian—sitting against the charred and shattered stump of a tree. His face was caked with grime and his hair singed off. He held badly burned arms out in front of him. They were lathered with some kind of yellowish unguent, as though they had been frosted. He was grimacing in pain; brown eyes gave me a distressed, curious look.

"*Galava krushitsa.*" I told him in Russian that I was very dizzy.

Brown eyes blinked, looked at me uncomprehendingly as I hobbled past him. The pain in my knee became more than I could bear. I sat down on a broken slab of concrete. Before me, amidst heaps of other debris, was what remained of a shattered German blockhouse. One wall had been shorn away; and inside the place I could see dead

men and a broken-looking weapon, a light artillery piece. An uprooted tree lay beside the blockhouse; beneath its fallen branches—a bouquet of dead, black-brown sticks—lay the body of a German officer. His body looked broken everywhere; his uniform was smoldering.

"*Moy!*"

"*Nyet, moy!*"

Across the way, two Russians were arguing like a couple of kids. Scrounging for souvenirs, food, and any usable goods, they had come upon something they both wanted for some reason. They started bargaining, haggling: for a can of peaches, one would give the other a German sheath knife. I grabbed to where my sheath knife should have been, and realized there was none: I was wearing a Russian uniform and Russian gear, and there was a canteen there instead of a knife.

From far behind me came a sudden flurry of gunfire, and then a series of explosions. Reduced to a spectator, I turned and looked to the horseshoe-shaped hillside—German battalion headquarters. A huge Soviet flag—red, with a hammer and sickle—had been raised. It looked tiny in the distance, but it told me most of what I needed to know. Flurries of fighting were still going on in various areas of the hill, in and around the bunkers. To the south, German tanks were burning; a few others were in retreat, firing as they raced backward. Clearly the battle had been lost.

We had been defeated.

I didn't know if I even cared.

I cared about the friends I had lost. Hals and Oskar. Their deaths filled me with grief. And I was angry with them—for dying, for leaving me.

I turned my attention to my knee and began pulling at the spike of shrapnel buried in my flesh. I could move it a little from side to side but couldn't pull it out, I leaned back against the blockhouse, my eyes on the dead German officer.

I heard footsteps, and looked up to see a large number of fresh Russian troops coming in my direction. I was terrified, momentarily; it was my delusion that they were coming just to get me. Frightened, I stood up. Using the wall of the battered blockhouse for support, I made my way around to the other side of it—as though I could hide there; then I did an even stranger thing: I waved at the Russians, as I had so many years ago at parading *Wehrmacht* troops.

Surprisingly, someone waved back.

Leaning heavily against the Russian rifle, I heard a scratching, rustling sound on the other side of the blockhouse. I saw a hand—a left hand—come around the other side of it. The hand was in a claw shape; fingertips dug into loose soil. A man, the German officer I had left for dead on the other side of the blockhouse, pulled himself into view. His face covered with grime and soot, his legs seemingly useless, he was dragging himself along the ground like some sort of fire-blackened, badly injured alligator.

He looked up at me, and at first I didn't realize that what he was seeing was the enemy—and perhaps his executioner.

"*Nein!*" he rasped.

I did not see the pistol in his right hand until he fired. A bullet whined past my face. He fired again. I flew backward as something hot hit me in the side; then I was just sitting on the ground, pressing a hand to my belly and looking at the German. He was continuing to slither away. A rifle shot rang out. He slumped, stopped moving.

"*Pamagite!*"

A Russian soldier hurried toward me, a smoking rifle in hand, and he was calling for others to come help him. Strong hands helped me lie down on my back.

A bearded face loomed into view. "Are you hit bad?" the man asked in Russian.

I looked up and saw what I thought was my grandfather.

"*Dyshyte narmal'na!*" Breathe normally, he said. Kneeling beside me, he pressed a pad of gauze to the wound in my side. "Just take it easy, son," he said in Russian. "You're going to make it."