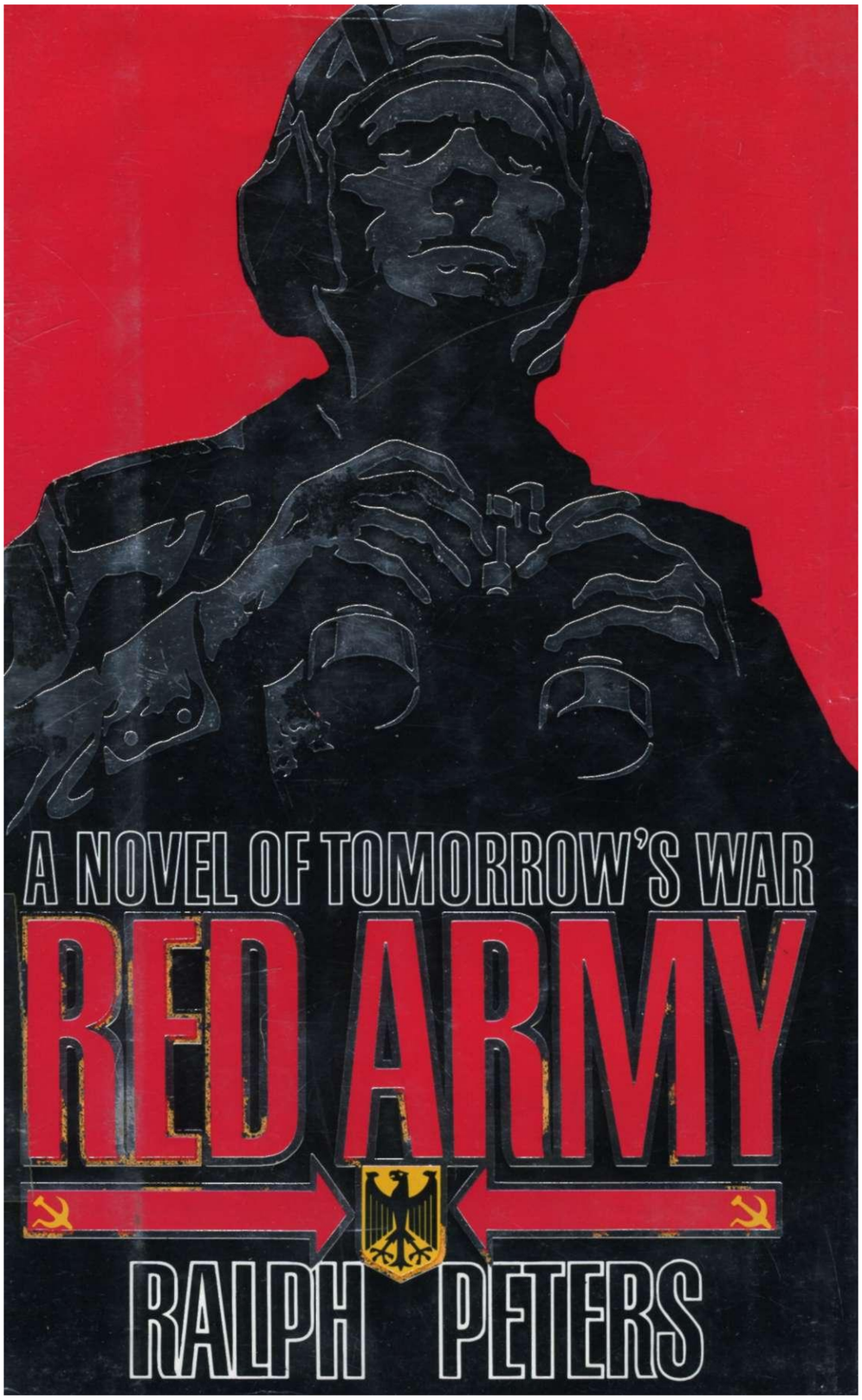
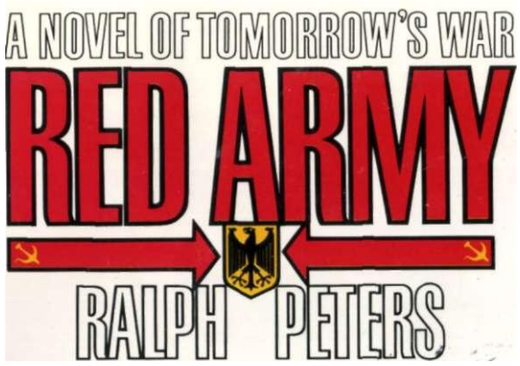

A NOVEL OF TOMORROW'S WAR
RED ARMY
RALPH PETERS

In the heart of a European forest, a young private dreams of home and rock 'n roll. At command headquarters, a four-star general pursues a family tradition of military honor that reaches back centuries. They could be any two soldiers in the world. It could be any army—but it's not. The place is the East German border. The time is tomorrow—and the Soviet Army is about to attack...

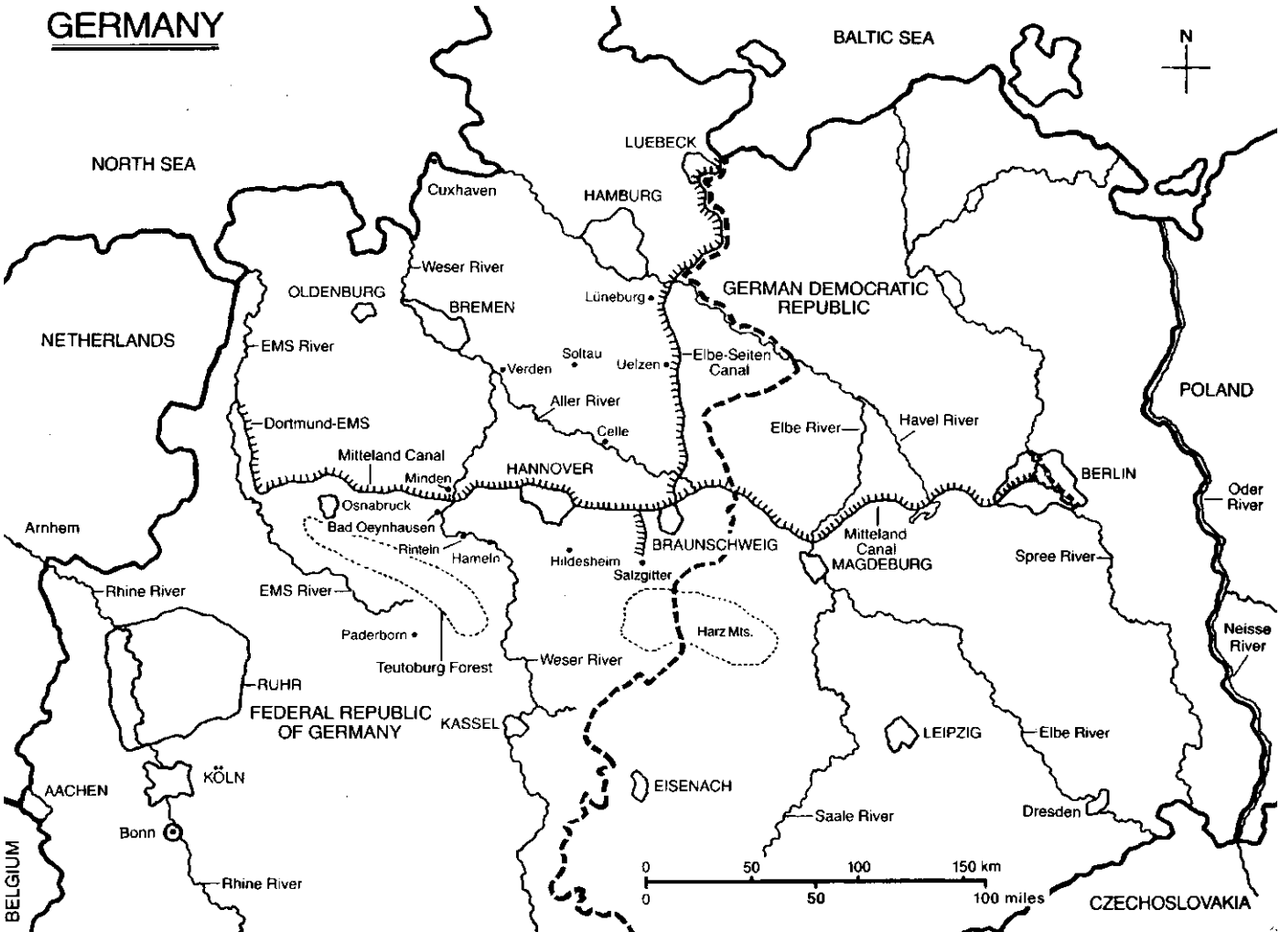


While Western leaders debate the use of nuclear weapons, the Soviet Army and its Warsaw Pact allies crash across West Germany, exploiting the NATO armies' deadly lack of preparation. In a matter of days, refugees clog the roads and cities are in shambles. The Soviet Army wages a brutal battle for Europe—even as the hidden rivalries and divided loyalties within its ranks begin to emerge.

In this extraordinary, controversial novel, author Ralph Peters—a U.S. Army intelligence officer specializing in the Soviet military—takes us inside an army of dozens of languages and ethnic backgrounds, into the belly of an armored personnel carrier, the cockpit of a MIG, and onto the bloody battlefield where sophisticated tanks duel like ancient, flame-spewing dragons.

From Chief of Staff Chibisov, fighting his ethnic heritage, to the daring tank commander Bezarin, locked in an unforgettable duel of wits with a British division, from bitter veterans of Afghanistan to raw recruits, a host of vivid characters are swept up in the chaos and drama. Some will be heroes. Some will die, and others will have their souls scarred forever.

As the NATO armies make their last, desperate stands —divided by Soviet maneuvers and their own political squabbling—RED ARMY thunders to a truly frightening climax.


GERMANY
BALTIC SEA
N
NORTH SEA
LUEBECK
Cuxhaven
HAMBURG
Weser River
OLDENBURG
BREMEN
Lüneburg
GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
NETHERLANDS
EMS River
Soltau
Verden
Uelzen
Elbe-Seiten Canal
POLAND
Aller River
Dortmund-EMS
Celle
Elbe River
Havel River
Mitteland Canal
Minden
HANNOVER
BERLIN
Oder River
Osnabruck
Bad Oeynhausen
Arnhem
Rinteln
Hameln
Hildesheim
BRAUNSCHWEIG
Salzgitter
Mitteland Canal
MAGDEBURG
Spree River
Rhine River
EMS River
Harz Mts.
Neisse River
Paderborn
Teutoburg Forest
Weser River
RUHR
FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY
KASSEL
LEIPZIG
Elbe River
AACHEN
KÖLN
EISENACH
Saale River
Dresden
Bonn
Rhine River
0 50 100 150 km
0 50 100 miles
BELGIUM
CZECHOSLOVAKIA

PROLOGUE

Night came to Germany. In among the pines, the low, sharp-prowed hulls of the infantry fighting vehicles turned black, and the soldiers gathered closer into their squad groups, huddling against the weak rain. Whenever possible, the vehicle commanders had tried to back off the trails in such a way that the nearby trees formed a protective barrier, allowing a safe sleeping space. Those who failed to pay attention to such details risked being crushed during a night alert.

The bivouac site was not virgin territory. When the unit had pulled in under the last afternoon grayness, which was more an ambience than a true light, it was evident that other troops had recently vacated the area. Huge ruts and waves of churned mud, the signatures of tracked vehicles, had ruptured the trails and broken the forest floor. Tins and scraps of paper littered the remaining islands of moss and pine needles, and the smell of human waste was almost as strong as the odor of vehicle exhaust. It was all instantly familiar to Leonid, who had just over a year's experience of training areas in East Germany, and he recognized his unit's good fortune in occupying the site while there was still a bit of visibility. The vehicles were much too cramped to sleep in, even had it been permitted, and when you arrived at a new location at night you had no idea where you might decently lie down.

For the first few days after the unit hurried out of garrison, they had

moved about only during the hours of darkness. But now the roads were constantly filled, and this last move had been conducted entirely during daylight, covered only by the overcast sky. Everyone craved news. It was evident that this was not a routine exercise, but little information reached the soldiers. Leonid had already heard enough rumors to cause him to worry. All of his life, his teachers and youth activities leaders had drummed into him that the United States and the other Western powers were anxious to unleash a nuclear war against the Soviet Union, and the descriptions of the horrors of such a conflict had been sufficiently graphic to stay with him. Now he wondered what in the world was happening.

Seryosha, the big man and unofficial leader of the squad's privates, sat under the awning of the vehicle's camouflage net, assuming its limited bit of protection against the elements as his due. He had opened an issue of combat rations. He picked at the food, telling more stories about his experiences with women. Seryosha was muscular and handsome, and he was from Leningrad. He loved to parade his sophistication.

Seryosha's audience, to which Leonid belonged, sat in a rough circle. All lights were forbidden, but the officers had disappeared to wherever officers went, and several of the squad members smoked now. Along with the last feeble twilight, the welling glow of drawn cigarettes lent an eeriness to faces and objects that did nothing to improve Leonid's mood. Off behind the trees, metal clanged against metal, and a voice fired a loud volley of what could only be curses in some Asian language. Then the local silence returned, coddled in the distant humming of the roads.

Sergeant Kassabian, their squad leader, came back from a trip into the woods. Leonid knew he was upset to find that Seryosha had broken open the reserve rations, but Kassabian paused before saying anything.

Seryosha ignored the sergeant's return. "And city girls," he went on, "know their way around. No nonsense, lads. They like it, too, and they know you know it." He noisily fed himself another bite of dried biscuit.

"We're not supposed to be eating those rations," Sergeant Kassabian said suddenly, finding his courage.

Leonid could feel Seryosha grinning. Seryosha had a wide, ready grin that seemed to overcome all troubles. Leonid pictured that grin loaded with the chewed mush of the biscuit now. He resented Seryosha's power but could do nothing about it.

Seryosha moved over to make room under the camouflage for another body. "Come and sit down," he told Kassabian. "You can't eat promises. If we wait for the battalion kitchens to feed us, it'll be the same story as last night. Come on, sit down. If there's a problem, I'll handle it."

Kassabian obediently took a seat beside Seryosha, as if the bigger boy's

natural authority might expand to include him. The rumble of another unit moving nearby seemed to bring a tangible weight to the darkness. The shadowy form of the sergeant seemed very small, almost childlike, beside the broad-shouldered outline of Seryosha. Kassabian was really just a conscript like the rest of them, except that he had been chosen for a few months of extra training, after which he had received the rank of junior sergeant. Perhaps in another squad, he might have gained more authority, but here Seryosha was impossibly powerful. When the officers were around, Kassabian passed on military orders and seemed to rule. But in the barracks, Seryosha was incontestably in charge.

"Seryosha," Leonid asked tentatively, desperately wanting to be included in the intimate circle of the group, "you think it's the real thing?"

The question was unexpected, and the seriousness in Leonid's voice spoiled the atmosphere of imagined women and the freedom to touch them. Leonid realized that he had used poor judgment, but it was too late. When Seryosha answered him, irritation undercut the practiced nonchalance of his voice.

"Think they'd trust us to lug around live rounds if it wasn't?" Seryosha laughed spitefully. "You think maybe we're going to the range and we've just been lost for the last several days? You think you're just out for a target shoot and snooze, boy?" Yet it was evident that Seryosha himself did not want to believe that they might truly go to battle.

Leonid tried to back out of his dilemma. "Lieutenant Korchuk didn't actually say there was going to be a war."

"Korchuk?" Seryosha said. "That sissy boy never says anything worth listening to. The Party loves you. The Party says, don't play with yourself in your bunk at night. The Party says, don't take a crap without a signed certificate giving you permission."

It was always odd to hear Seryosha ridiculing Korchuk, the unit's political officer, since Seryosha nevertheless went out of his way to cultivate Korchuk's favor, and the political officer was so impressed by Seryosha that he frequently designated him to lead group discussions and badgered him to sign up for the whole Party program. Korchuk seemed to be struggling to win over Seryosha's soul. But behind his back, Seryosha's commentary on the downy-faced lieutenant was merciless.

Everyone laughed at Seryosha's attack on Korchuk—except for Leonid. When the lieutenant had come by earlier to cheer them up, he had only managed to frighten Leonid badly. Leonid had counted himself lucky to be assigned to the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany. He had hoped that in the German Democratic Republic, so close to the West, he

might be able to collect a few unusual rock music records or tapes from special groups whose recordings were unavailable or very expensive back home. Instead, he had spent his first year restricted to barracks like a prisoner or on sodden training ranges, except for one escorted tour to a war memorial and a museum in Magdeburg. Then the routine had suddenly collapsed. The unit responded to an alert, hastening to its local deployment area. That much had been normal enough. But the accustomed return to garrison at the end of the test had been delayed. Instead, the unit had remained out all day, and at night they had marched their vehicles to a forest in the East German countryside. After that, the unit had shuttled about in a seemingly random manner for days. And then Lieutenant Korchuk had come by to ask them if they had any problems, and to encourage them to keep their spirits up. But the political officer had clearly been nervous about something, and he had talked a little too much and too earnestly about sacrifices for the Motherland and Internationalist Duty for Leonid's peace of mind.

Leonid just wanted his two years of conscripted service—easily the most miserable period of his life—to end so that he could go home to the state farm outside of Chelyabinsk, to his mother and his guitar.

"And this girl, Yelena, she's got a sister who wants to know what's going on, see?" Seryosha went on with his tales. "Her father's this big wheel in the Party, though, and everybody else is afraid to lay a finger on her. So I'm up in this fancy apartment, waiting for Yelena to come home . . ."

Everything seemed to come so easily to Seryosha. Leonid tried to master the prescribed military skills, but his uniform was never quite neat enough, and he bungled the physical execution even of tasks he clearly understood in his mind. But Seryosha seemed to be able to do everything perfectly the first time. And he made fun of Leonid, who was included in the squad group, but only as a member of the outer circle. Now, however, Leonid felt compelled to reach out to the others, to get through to Seryosha that matters were serious, indeed, and that something had to be done, although he had no idea what that something might be.

Seryosha finished his startlingly vulgar story, in which he was, as usual, a hero of dramatic capabilities. As the admiring laughter subsided Leonid tried again to reach the others, despite the risk.

"I think," Leonid began, searching nervously for the right words, "I think that things are . . . things must be bad."

He could feel Seryosha turning in the darkness. "Things are," Seryosha said imperiously, "the way they always are. In the shit. If you're not in

one kind of shit, you're in another." Seryosha laughed bitterly, then began again, speaking in exaggerated English, "Leonid, *baby.* Mister Rock and Roll." Then he collapsed into Russian. "You've been in pig shit all your life out on your collective farm, haven't you?"

"State farm," Leonid corrected.

"Out there in Chelyabinsk," Seryosha continued. "No, I mean from *beyond* Chelyabinsk. You must know what it's like to be in the shit."

Leonid desperately wanted to express something. But he did not know exactly what it was. He thought of Lieutenant Korchuk's pale cheeks and scrawny mustache, and of a mental collage of troubling images. But none of it would fit into words.

"I wish we had some music," Leonid said, drawing back again. It seemed to him now that he had never been happier than when he had been at home, with his small, precious collection of rock and blues music, his Hungarian jeans, and his guitar. He had dreamed of going to Leningrad, where a real music scene existed. Or at least to Moscow, where you could hear good blues. Now that he knew Seryosha, he had ruled out Leningrad. That garbage? Seryosha had said, when Leonid tried to talk to him about music. That's old hat. *Nobody* listens to the blues. They'd all laugh at you in Leningrad. Everybody listens to metal music now, everybody who knows what's going on is a metallist. You'd be lost in Leningrad, you little pig farmer.

The intensity of the drizzle picked up slightly, and the soldiers herded closer, each maneuvering for a greater share of the leaking protection of the camouflage net and stray bits of canvas.

"You know what?" Seryosha said. "If there is a war, I'm going to take care of one of those German bitches with her nose in the air. And I don't care if she's West German or East German, unless you can prove there's a difference between a capitalist piece and a socialist one. It just drives me crazy when we're driving by them and they act like they don't even see you, like they're looking right through you." He paused as they all remembered deployments that took them through tidy German towns where the handsome women showed no regard for them at all. "I'm going to take care of one of them," Seryosha resumed. "And when I'm done, I'm going to turn Genghiz loose on her for good measure."

The group laughed. Even Leonid laughed at this image. Genghiz was their nickname for Ali, their Central Asian antitank grenadier. Ali did not understand enough Russian to get the jokes, but he always laughed along. Once, during the squad's first field exercise, Ali had tried to sneak more than his share of the rations. Seryosha had begun the beating, and they had all joined in. The squad had almost gotten in trouble over the

incident, but in the end, Ali had not needed to stay in the sick bay overnight, and Seryosha had concocted a tale to bring in Lieutenant Korchuk on the side of the squad. Ali never repeated his mistake, and he carefully did exactly what Seryosha told him to do as long as the task was clearly explained.

"No music," Seryosha said wistfully. "No women. And nothing to drink. My father used to say, 'War solves all your problems.' My old man was in the big one, and he had a girl or two. Hell, he was on his third wife when I popped out."

"You father," Ali said happily, surprising them all. "You no know you father, Russian bastard."

The group laughed so hard they swayed and banged their shoulders against one another in the little circle. Even Seryosha laughed. It was a great moment, as if a dog or cat had spoken.

The squad grew boisterous. Everyone was supposed to be quiet, on precombat silence. But there were still no officers around, and you could clearly hear the other squads nearby.

Leonid wondered where the officers had gone, and why it was taking them so long. He wondered what in the world was going on.

Suddenly, a vehicle engine powered up a few hundred meters away. Then another vehicle came to life, closer this time.

"Here we go again," Seryosha said disgustedly.

They rode crouched in their armored vehicle, with the troop hatches closed. Only the driver and the vehicle commander were allowed to look outside. The interior was cramped and extremely uncomfortable, even though the squad was understrength with only six soldiers. The smells of unwashed bodies and of other men's stale breath mingled with the pungency of the poorly vented exhaust. The jittering of the vehicle's tracks seemed to scramble the brain. Leonid knew from experience that he would soon have a severe headache.

"Where do you think we're going this time?" a voice asked from the darkness.

"Paris," Seryosha said. "New York."

"Seriously."

"Who the hell knows?"

"I think we're going to war," Leonid said with helpless conviction.

All of the voices went heavily silent. The whine of the engine, the clatter of the tracks on the hard-surface road, and the wrenched-bone noise of shifting gears surrounded the quiet of the soldiers.

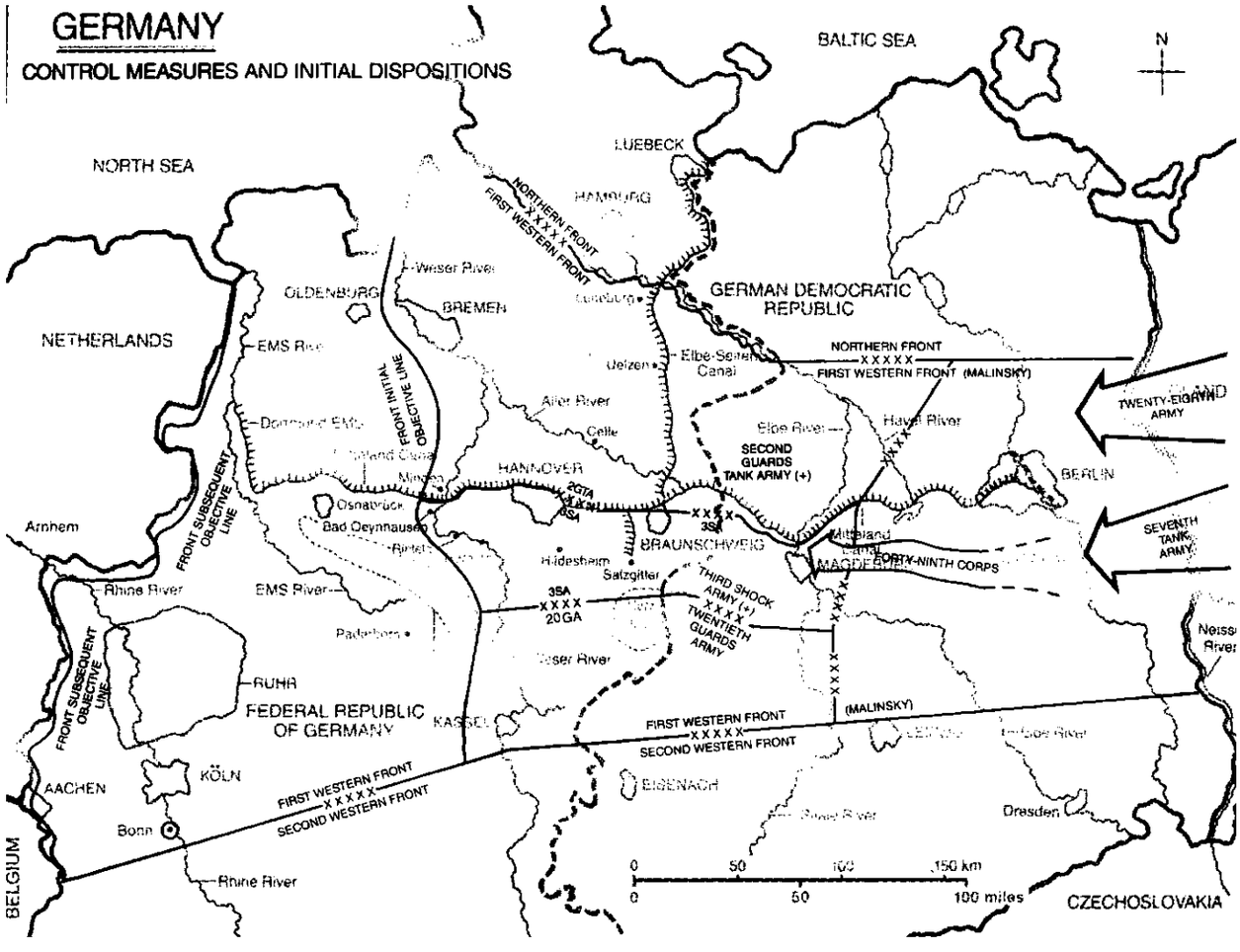
"You don't know," Seryosha said angrily, doubtfully. "You're just a little pig farmer from the middle of nowhere."

Leonid did not know why he had said it. He recognized that, in fact, he did not know where they were going. But somehow, inside, he was convinced that he was correct. They were going to war. Perhaps it had already begun. NATO had attacked, and men were dying.

The vehicle stopped with a jerk, knocking the soldiers against one another or into the metal furnishings of the vehicle's interior. Road marches were always the same. You went as fast as you could, then came to a sudden, unexplained stop and waited.

"Leonid?" a voice asked seriously, just loud enough to be heard over the idling engine. "Has somebody told you something? Do you really know something? What makes you think we're going to war?"

Leonid shrugged. "It's just my luck."


GERMANY
CONTROL MEASURES AND INITIAL DISPOSITIONS
BALTIC SEA
N
NORTH SEA
LUEBECK
HAMBURG
NORTHERN FRONT
XXXXX
FIRST WESTERN FRONT
GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
OLDENBURG
BREMEN
Weser River
NETHERLANDS
EMS River
Uelzen
Elbe-Seiten Canal
NORTHERN FRONT
XXXXX
FIRST WESTERN FRONT (MALINSKY)
Aller River
Celle
Elbe River
Havel River
SECOND GUARDS TANK ARMY (+)
HANNOVER
BERLIN
Osnabrück
Bad Oeynhausen
Minden
2GTA
3SA
BRAUNSCHWEIG
Arnhem
Hildesheim
Salzgitter
THIRD SHOCK ARMY (+)
XXXX
TWENTIETH GUARDS ARMY
FORTY-NINTH CORPS
Rhine River
EMS River
3SA
XXXX
20GA
Paderborn
Weser River
RUHR
FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY
KASSEL
FIRST WESTERN FRONT
XXXXX
SECOND WESTERN FRONT
(MALINSKY)
AACHEN
KÖLN
EISENACH
Bonn
Rhine River
Dresden
BELGIUM
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
0 50 100 150 km
0 50 100 miles

ONE

Army General M. M. Malinsky, Commander of the First Western Front, sat alone in his private office, smoking a strong cigarette. The room was dark except for a bright pool where a bank of spotlights reflected off the situation map. Malinsky sat just out of the light, staring absently at the map he knew so well. Beyond the office walls, vivid action coursed through the hallways of the bunker, blood through arteries, despite the late hour. From his chair, Malinsky heard the activity as half-smothered footsteps and voices passing up and down the corridor, resembling valley noises heard from a cloud-wrapped mountain.

And that, Malinsky thought, is what war sounds like. Not just the blasting of artillery, the shooting and shouting. But the haste of a staff officer's footsteps and the ticking of a clerk's typewriter. And, of course, the special, half-magical noises of computers nowadays. Perhaps, Malinsky thought, this will be the last real one, the last great war fought by men aiming weapons. Perhaps the next big one would be fought entirely by means of cybernetics. Things were changing so troublingly fast.

But there would always be a next time. Malinsky was certain of that. Even if they were foolish enough to toss great nuclear bombs across oceans, Malinsky was convinced that enough of mankind would survive to organize new armies to fight over whatever remained. Mankind would

remain mankind, and there would always be wars. And there would always be soldiers. And, in his heart, Malinsky was convinced there would always be a Russia.

A discreet hand knocked at the door.

"Enter," Malinsky called, leaning back deeper into the shadows.

A fan of light swept the room, then disappeared as the door shut again. A staff major padded up to the map without a word and realigned unit symbols.

Malinsky watched in silence. Germany, east and west. Virtually his entire adult life—more, even his straight-backed adolescence as a Suvorov cadet—had been directed to this end. Elbe, Weser, Rhine and Maas. Mosel and Saar. With the low countries and the fields of France beyond, where Colonel of the Guards Count Malinsky had raised his curved saber against the cavalry of Napoleon.

Malinsky believed he knew exactly how to do it. How to apply his own forces against the enemy on the right bit of earth along the correct operational directions, in the most efficient order, and at a tempo that would be physically and psychologically irresistible. He knew where the turning movements had to come, and where and when it would be necessary to drive on without a backward glance. He even believed he knew his enemies well enough to turn their own efforts against them.

His enemies would come, at least initially, from the Northern Army Group—NORTHAG—which was, in turn, subordinate to the Allied Forces Central Europe, or AFCENT. NORTHAG was, potentially, an operational grouping of tremendous strength. But intelligence assessments led Malinsky to believe that NORTHAG, with its defense straddling the terrain compartments of northern West Germany, had three great weaknesses, none of which the Westerners seemed to recognize. Certainly, NORTHAG was far more vulnerable than its sister army group—CENTAG—to the south. Despite possessing splendid equipment and well-trained cadres, the enemy leadership did not understand the criticality of unified troop control—there was reportedly so much political nonsense allowed that NORTHAG resembled a Warsaw Pact in which the Poles, Czechs and East Germans were permitted veto power over even the smallest details of military planning and operations. Compounding the first problem, the enemy clearly undervalued speed. When you watched them on their exercises, they did everything too slowly, too carefully, stubborn pedestrians in a supersonic age. Finally, Malinsky believed that his enemies underestimated their opponents, that they had hardly a glimmer of how the Soviet military could and would fight. Malinsky expected the defense by his enemies to be stubborn,

bloody, and in vain. He was fond of repeating three words to his subordinate commanders, as a sort of personal motto: "Speed, shock, activeness."

"What's that?" Malinsky leaned forward, cigarette thrusting toward the map like a dagger. "What's that supposed to tell me?"

The major quickly backed away from the map, as though he had received an electric shock. "Comrade Front Commander, elements of the Seventh Tank Army have begun closing on their appointed staging areas, but, as you see, there is a conflict with the trail elements of the Forty-ninth Unified Army Corps. The Forty-ninth is behind schedule in its move to its assembly areas west of the Elbe River."

Controlling his voice, Malinsky dismissed the staff officer, a clever, crisp-talking Frunze graduate. When the door had shut behind the major's retreat, as if the fan of light had swept him away, Malinsky reached for the intercom phone.

"Is the chief of staff there? Give General Chibisov the phone."

For a moment, Malinsky listened to the faint pandemonium of the briefing room on the other end. Then Chibisov's familiar voice, ever perfectly controlled, came on the line.

"I'm listening, Comrade Front Commander."

"Is Anseev here yet?"

"He just came in."

"Tell him to come down and see me." Malinsky considered for a moment. "How are we doing otherwise?"

"A few are still missing. But they'll be here in time."

"The Germans?"

"Yes. Nervous as puppies."

"Good. I like them best that way."

"The Polish liaison officers are here from the Northern Front. You can imagine how happy they are."

Malinsky could well imagine. He was always impressed by the talent of ranking Polish officers, but he could never bring himself to trust them. He saw them as always attempting to barter their way out from under their responsibilities, and he dealt with them more harshly than was his habit with others.

"Just send Anseev down to me," Malinsky said. "And let me know when we have them all assembled."

Malinsky hung up the phone. A waft of smoke hovered between him and the brilliantly colored map, as though the battle had already begun amid the clutter of arrows and lines. Malinsky lit another cigarette.

He thought of his son. Anton. Anton Mikhailovitch Malinsky. His son

was the newly appointed commander of a maneuver brigade in the Forty-ninth Corps, a youngish, handsome Guards colonel. Anton was the type of officer over whom the ladies at the Imperial Court had once swooned. Malinsky was terribly proud of his son, and although Anton was in his middle thirties, Malinsky always thought of him as "the boy," or "my boy." Anton was his only child. Malinsky had gone to extremes to insure that there was no favoritism, that Anton earned his own way. He could never be certain, of course, and no doubt the name had its effect—doubly so now that the old military families were back in style again. But Malinsky was determined not to behave like the patriarchs of so many military families, bashing down doors for their children. Anton was a Malinsky, and the traditions of the Malinsky family demanded that he be a fine officer of his own making.

They had been counts, if only of the second order, with estates not far from Smolensk. Before the Revolution, of course. Russian service gentry, with traces of Polish and Lithuanian nobility in their veins. At the hard birth of the eighteenth century, a Malinsky fought under Peter the Great at Poltava and on the Pruth. It was during Peter's wars along the Baltic littoral that a Malinsky first heard the German language spoken. Then Vassili Malinsky lost an arm at Kunersdorf in the hour of victory over the soldiers of Frederick the Great in 1759. Vassili went on to serve under Potemkin in the Turkish wars, and Catherine, the German-born czarina, rewarded Vassili's services with the title of "count." One Malinsky, the shame of the family, served with Suvorov in Italy and the Alps, only to be condemned for cowardice after the debacle at Austerlitz. But his brother rode through the streets of Paris in 1814 at the head of a regiment of lancers. Malinskys fought in the Caucasus and in Central Asia, and one claimed to have beaten Lermontov at cards. During the long afternoon of the nineteenth century, a Malinsky died of plague in camp before Bukhara, and another died of cholera in a ditch at Sevastopol. At Plevna in 1877, Captain Count Mikhail Malinsky won the George, Second Class, and as a general, he fought the Japanese in 1905. Major Count Anton Mikhailovitch Malinsky fell before Austrian machine guns in the Carpathians in the Great War, and his brother Pyotr Mikhailovitch joined the Revolution as an engineer captain. The Malinskys had been there, always, to serve Russia, whether as diseased young Guards officers in St. Petersburg or as reformers in the officer corps and on their estates. Malinskys had drunk themselves to death and struggled to rationalize agriculture on a modern scientific basis. While some did their best to gamble away the family fortunes, others had counted Herzen and Tolstoy

among their friends. It was a family full of all the contradictions of Russia, unified by a single name and the habit of wearing army uniforms.

After the Revolution, it had almost come to an end. Malinsky's grandfather, Pyotr Mikhailovitch, had been eager to join the Revolution, dreaming sincerely of a new and better Russia. But the Revolution had not been so enthusiastic about the Malinskys. The nobility, progressive or regressive, were all oppressors of the workers and peasants. Making the situation worse, Malinskys appeared on both sides in the Civil War, with two cousins serving under the counterrevolutionary Denikin, while Pyotr fought against the Whites as a military specialist and adviser to an illiterate commander of more bravery than skill. Then Pyotr had been allowed his own command in the Polish War, although his young wife, son, and mother remained hostages of the careful Bolsheviks. Pyotr fought like a savage, not so much for the Bolsheviks as for Russia. The Civil War and the fighting against the foreign enemies of the Revolution grew more and more merciless, but Russia towered over it all, absorbing the blood in her earth, relentlessly driving her sons.

In the end, it was a very near thing. Only his high level of technical expertise as an engineer and staff officer saved Pyotr. He received an assignment to the newly organized military academy, which would later become the Frunze. He taught mathematics and cartography to eager officers who had virtually learned to read and write on horseback during the Civil War.

The estates were gone, of course. No Malinsky dared go near them. But an officer's life remained a good one compared to the sufferings and dislocations Pyotr witnessed around him. At times, he considered an attempt to leave Russia with his family. But, he told himself, the Bolsheviks would pass, too, while the army would always remain. He looked for the good in the Revolution and in the strange new leaders it brought forth, still eager to believe in the good in men after swimming through seas of blood.

Pyotr's son, Mikhail, entered a military academy in 1926. The tradition had almost been broken, since the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army did not want the sons of former noblemen. But even then, there had been enough survivors among the military specialists recruited from the Czarist ranks to quietly find the boy a place.

In 1938, Colonel Pyotr Mikhailovitch Malinsky was arrested, tried, and shot by the secret police. His son, a captain, was arrested and sent to the camps near Kolyma. Captain Malinsky's wife and son remained behind with no knowledge of whether he was alive or dead until, finally,

after a year, a particularly brave comrade of the captain's revealed that Malinsky was alive in a camp in the east, and his family could write to him, so long as great care was taken in what was said.

In his well-furnished office in a bunker deep in eastern Germany, the son of the captive sat now, remembering how he had scribbled notes to a distant, half-remembered father. His mother always insisted that he add something, either a note of his own or, when there wasn't enough paper, a few scratched words on his mother's neat pages.

His father survived. When the Hitlerite Germans invaded on the twenty-second of June, 1941, even Stalin was soon forced to realize the extent of his folly. Imprisoned officers who were still healthy enough and whose records were not too black were returned to service. Malinsky's father fought from Tula to Berlin. Not for Stalin. And not for the Communist Party, although he was reinstated as a member. But for Russia.

Malinsky's father had looked sixty when he was in his late forties. The camps had ruined his health, and perhaps only his strength of will kept him going through the war and beyond. He had entered Berlin as a rifle division commander, with fewer than two thousand able soldiers on the divisional rolls. He died in a military sanatorium in the Caucasus in 1959. His son had come in his dress uniform to visit him, towing his own six-year-old boy, and in the quiet of a general's sickroom, the old man had looked his son in the eyes and said, "I outlived that bastard. And Russia will outlive them all. Remember that. Your uniform is the uniform of Russia."

In the year after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Malinsky had found himself on an inspectorate tour that took him through Smolensk. Hard drinking was still fashionable in the officer corps then, and the officers with whom he was traveling were a particularly hard-drinking bunch. One morning while they snored into their hangovers, he had taken the staff car out to the state farm where once his family estates had counted thousands of souls.

The great house was long gone, destroyed by the Germans during the Great Patriotic War. The Sovkhoz buildings were nondescript barns, shacks and sheds of tin and cinder block. Malinsky parked the car and walked beyond the litter of the state into the newly harvested fields. From a low rise he could see the chronicle of his blood stretching brown and yellow and green over tens of gently rolling kilometers. And he wept, taking off his hat. Not for the loss of land. Nor because he wasn't called a count, even though in intimate moments he thought of his wife affection-

ately as his countess. Rather, he wept for Russia, without understanding himself. With blurred vision, he stared off into the distance where the fields met the vast, empty sky, caught up in its timelessness, suspecting that good men had always wept for Russia, that there was no choice, ever.

The gagging of a stalled tractor roused him, and he walked back through the characterless plot of farm buildings. Upon his approach, an old woman, an eternal peasant of a woman, called out:

"No special bargains for officers here, Comrade. You can go stand in line like all the rest."

Major General Anseev came in cautiously. As he approached the island of light in front of the situation map Malinsky motioned for him to take a seat. A visitor's chair had been carefully positioned so that the guest could turn slightly to his left and address the map or twist to the right and face Malinsky, but with no possibility of comfort in either position. The chair was positioned exactly so that, whenever the guest had to turn toward Malinsky, one of the small spotlights that lit the map dazzled the subordinate's eyes. Malinsky was not a cruel man, but he firmly believed in establishing and maintaining control under all circumstances, and he believed in precision and in the importance of the smallest detail to the greatest military operations.

Malinsky knew Anseev well enough. During Malinsky's tour of duty in Afghanistan—easily the most frustrating assignment of his life—Anseev had commanded a combined arms unit. Anseev had been bold, a great improviser, where others were routinely overcautious. Once, denied the use of mountain roads by the dushman, he had personally led his armored vehicles up a dry riverbed to relieve a besieged garrison. But he did not pay enough attention to little things, and his casualties were always high. Each of his commanders had his own peculiar weaknesses, Malinsky reflected. Anseev just needed to feel the bit now and then.

Anseev had been given the command of a corps structured to perform optimally as an operational maneuver group, with the mission of thrusting deeply and rapidly into the enemy's operational rear, unhinging the enemy's ability to reorganize his defenses, seizing key terrain or striking decisive targets, and convincing the opponent that he had been defeated before the military issue was actually settled. Anseev had been selected for the command because of his boldness and the speed with which he moved. Yet here was a situation in which one of his subunits could not even clear its staging area on time. Malinsky suspected he knew the reason, but he wanted to hear Anseev's tale.

Holding out his cigarette case, Malinsky leaned forward into the light. Anseev was normally highly self-confident, even brash, and he was a chain-smoker like Malinsky. But now he waved away the proffered smoke with almost unintelligible thanks.

"Come, Igor Fedorovitch, you like a smoke."

Anseev obediently took one of the short paper tubes that bled dark tobacco from both ends.

From Anseev's behavior, Malinsky could tell that the man knew what the problem was, and that he had hoped it would slip by the front commander.

Malinsky leaned back into the shadows.

"Igor Fedorovitch," he said in a friendly, almost paternal voice, "are you aware that your trail brigade is still in its staging area, holding up another unit?"

"Yes, Comrade Front Commander."

"What's the problem there?"

"The roads are just too crowded," Anseev said anxiously. Anseev was a mongrel, with a great deal of Tartar blood and the guarded eyes of an Asian. "The supply columns from the front and army materiel support brigades are undisciplined. They act as though they are under no control whatsoever. I have tanks colliding with fuelers, and nobody can decide who has priority unless a senior officer is present. The commandant's service has not deployed adequate traffic controllers. You should see how it is along my routes, Comrade Front Commander. The river-crossing sites are an absolute nightmare."

"Igor Fedorovitch, do you imagine it will be easier to move in combat? Do you expect the British or the Germans to control traffic for you?" Malinsky paused for effect, carefully holding his voice down to a studied near-whisper that could be chilling and fatherly at the same time. "We're not in Afghanistan now. This is a real war, with mechanized opponents, with enormous mechanized armies the like of which the world has never seen in battle. Moving to war on the finest road networks in the world. And you, my cavalryman, are perhaps the most important formation commander in this front. Yet you can't move a lone brigade on time? Igor Fedorovitch, we've had reasonable weather, a little rain, but nothing to stop a good cavalryman. If the supply columns have no control, why didn't you take control? If you can't maneuver around a pack of field kitchens, how do you expect to get to the Rhine? How can I trust you even to get into combat on time?"

"Comrade Front Commander, this will *not* happen again. It's just—"

"No 'just,'" Malinsky said, his voice lowering in pitch and suddenly as cold as winter in the far north. "Fix the problem. And never let it happen again."

"Yes, Comrade Front Commander. By the way, I have to tell you that your son's brigade is the best in my command. Well-disciplined, and he moves his tanks like lightning."

It was the wrong approach to try with Malinsky, who instantly realized how shaken Anseev must have been to try anything so tactless and naive. Anseev would need watching as the pressure mounted.

"Guards Colonel Malinsky is no special concern of mine," Malinsky said emphatically. "He's one commander out of many. Anseev, did you personally review your march tables and routes in detail?"

"Comrade Commander, I flew the routes myself."

"Did you personally review the march tables? Was your movement plan fully cleared with my chief of the rear and my movement control officers? Or did you bend the schedule you were allowed by the front? Did you even know all that had been done or left undone in your name?"

"Comrade Front Commander, the automated support mechanism—"

"Yes or no?"

"No, Comrade Front Commander."

Malinsky drew on his cigarette, letting its glow briefly light his face. Anseev was clearly distraught. As he deserved to be. But Malinsky did not want him to return to his unit that way. And there was the final review to get through with all of the other commanders, the front staff, and the special representatives.

Anseev turned his face to the map, as though seeking a way to reach out and correct his error in front of Malinsky's eyes.

"Igor Fedorovitch," Malinsky began, weighting the paternal tone in his voice, "you are . . . perhaps the finest fighting commander I have. I frankly admired you in Afghanistan. You know that. It was a bad war for all of us, not really a war—a trial we were never permitted to win. But you did so well with what you had, under the worst possible conditions . . . we always counted on you in the desperate moments. And I am counting on you now. We're all counting on you. Of all the formations in the First Western Front, it is most critical that your corps and its brigades be responsive and exactly on time. You must always be there first." Malinsky sucked on his cigarette, blowing the smoke back out with a faint sigh. "We all have flaws, Igor Fedorovitch. And I'll be frank. Your flaw is that you see everything in bold, broad terms. This may also be your virtue. But a commander must take the time for the details. If the

artillery arrives but the ammunition doesn't show up, the artillery is useless. Precision saves lives, Igor Fedorovitch. It is perhaps the most important aspect of discipline for an officer. The soldier of the Soviet Motherland will give you everything he has. I will not see his life wasted because a commander was too busy to attend to administrative details."

"I understand, Comrade Front Commander. I won't forget."

Malinsky allowed a short silence to drain the tension.

"I'll see you in a few minutes then, Igor Fedorovitch. At the final review."

Anseev understood this form of dismissal. He rose sharply and presented his respects.

Malinsky nodded.

With Anseev gone, Malinsky lit a final cigarette, attempting to gather his thoughts. He wanted to keep the review short so that his commanders could get back to their formations, but he also wanted to insure that every last-minute question had been answered. There would be no time once the great machine had been set in motion. He tried to enumerate his last-minute concerns, but his mind strayed determinedly to his son, as if Anseev had cursed him. He suddenly felt as though, if he were a religious man, he would pray for the boy.

But pray to whom? To Russia? It was, Malinsky considered, the closest thing he could imagine to a god. Something so much greater than its children. Its stubborn, passionate, dreaming children, who always seemed to seek the most difficult solutions to life's problems. The idea of Russia remained hopelessly mystical, verging on melodrama. Intellectually, he could pick it apart, yet it was emotionally irresistible to him.

Spare my boy. And I will do everything for you.

And Paulina. How they had wanted more children. But those children had never come, and Paulina had endured the dreadful lieutenant's quarters on the edge of the world, with communal kitchens and the filthy shared latrines. And the separations, the lack of fine things that only those much closer to the Party, or those whose sense of duty was to themselves, would ever have. Paulina, his soldier's wife. His countess. Paulina, he thought, if I could choose, if I had to choose, I would send you back your son.

Malinsky felt ashamed of himself. He knew he hadn't a moment to squander on nostalgia and personal matters. He needed to concern himself with the movement of tens of thousands of war machines, of hundreds of thousands of men. There was no time for emotionalism.

The intercom phone rang. It was the chief of staff and first deputy

commander, the newly promoted Lieutenant General Pavel Pavlovitch Chibisov. The chief was a self-contained, coldly brilliant man with an analytical bent and almost obsessive self-discipline whom Malinsky had rescued from another ineradicable aspect of the Russian character—anti-Semitism. Chibisov was an ethnic Jew whose family had long ago renounced their religion, but he still felt compelled to struggle relentlessly against every last vestige of his Jewishness. And Chibisov was correct—his Jewishness never would be fully laid to rest in the eyes of many of his fellow officers. Malinsky felt a close personal bond to Chibisov, a deep, if quiet, affection. They were both outsiders, in their very different ways. In any case, Chibisov was the perfect chief of staff, a born mathematician and organizer, leaving his commander free to concentrate more of his own energies on the military art. Chibisov was the first of his fellow officers whom Malinsky had ever trusted to the extent that he allowed himself to depend fully on another, and he smiled to think of Chibisov the man, a lifelong bachelor who could express everything except emotion with utter clarity.

"Comrade Front Commander, they're all here except the chief of the political directorate—he's still occupied at the KGB site," the familiar clipped voice reported.

"All right. Have they had their tea?"

"They're settled in. We're ready. At your convenience."

"Good. I'm on my way."

Malinsky laid the phone to rest, then crushed out his stub of a cigarette.

But he did not move at once. He stared hard at the map one last time. The deep red arrows of his plan cut through the carefully detailed hopes of his enemies. He had waited for this all his life. But he had never quite believed the day would come.

Major General Dudorov, Malinsky's chief of intelligence, described the enemy dispositions in remarkable detail. Dudorov was clever and a good student of the enemy, but best of all, to Malinsky, he had worked the enemy problem so long that he had acquired not only many Western tastes but even something of a Western outlook. To Malinsky, it was the next best thing to having an intelligence chief right from the enemy's ranks. Malinsky had a great hunger to know his opponents, to fully digest their strengths and weaknesses. He recognized that, in order to apply the precepts of Soviet military science and art to fullest effect, detailed and accurate intelligence was indispensable.

The briefing room stank with the swampy smell of wet uniforms, and the audience shifted restlessly. For many of the officers present, Dudorov's portion of the briefing had gone on far too long. Dudorov was short and overweight, and he spoke like a condescending professor—exactly the sort of figure combat commanders tended to despise. And Malinsky knew that his subordinate commanders were anxious to return to their formations in order to put last-minute corrections into effect. But he took no action to shorten Dudorov's remarks. He placed great confidence in Dudorov's professionalism, and, as with Chibisov, he had carried Dudorov along with him as he rose to positions of ever-greater authority.

Malinsky wanted his subordinates to know their enemies, whether they felt interested or not. It was a common thing for tank and motorized rifle commanders—especially those who had not served in Afghanistan—to swagger about, assuming that the enemy was merely something to be used for target practice. But Malinsky believed their level of interest would rise sharply after a taste of the battlefield.

"And so," Dudorov began his summary, "we face a partially prepared defense. Engineer preparations have been most extensive opposite the Third Shock Army in the British sector, where a unilateral decision apparently was made to execute their obstacle plan early on. The Germans, on the other hand, appear to have been reluctant to dig up their countryside, but all-out preparations are now underway. The Dutch and Belgian efforts at engineer preparations only began within the past twenty-four hours. Overall, we face a much more favorable situation than the one facing our comrades in the Second Western and Southwestern fronts opposite NATO's Central Army Group. Of course, the limited aims of the Northern Front make it a secondary consideration. All of the materiel aspects of force reduction have clearly favored us. Even in the British sector, our most recent calculations do not indicate that the known preparations will significantly degrade our highly favorable operational correlation of forces and means."

"Any sign of Americans supporting NORTHAG?" Malinsky asked.

Dudorov pointed at the map. From his seat, Malinsky really couldn't see the details, but he had the map memorized. "The single U.S. brigade garrisoned in the north," Dudorov stated, "has apparently been withdrawn into a deep reserve role. Their exact location is presently unknown. There are no indications at present of additional U.S. ground forces opposite the First Western Front."

Timing is everything, Malinsky thought. He was not overly fond of the

General Staff, but he had to admit that their calculations on how quickly NATO would detect and, more importantly, muster the decisiveness to respond to a Warsaw Pact mobilization had been almost exactly correct. Discounting the period of discreet measures, it had taken seven days of overt activities to adequately prepare the key Soviet, East German, Czech, and Polish units and formations and to position them forward in a manner that decisively shifted the correlation of forces and means. Of the seven days of all-out measures executed by the Warsaw Pact, the first four had been almost completely free. NATO's intelligence evidently detected, evaluated, and reported the situation within twenty-four hours, but individual member governments of NATO had vacillated for several days. At his meeting with the commander-in-chief of the Western Theater of Strategic Military Action earlier in the day, Malinsky had been astonished by Marshal Kribov's stories of frantic diplomatic efforts that seemed absurd beyond belief. Kribov was not known for his sense of humor, but he had smiled as he remarked to Malinsky that, while he believed they could beat NATO's armies, he was absolutely convinced they could beat NATO's governments.

"Other questions?" Dudorov asked the assembly.

Lieutenant General Starukhin, the commander of the Third Shock Army, stood up. Malinsky smiled to himself. Starukhin always stood up, always had something to say. Starukhin was a bully, a heavy drinker despite the change in fashion, and a brutally tough and aggressive commander. Exactly the sort of man to command in the breakthrough sector. Malinsky had known Starukhin for years, and he well knew the man's long list of bad habits. But he also knew he could trust him to fight.

"Dudorov," Starukhin began, posing for his circle of paladins, "you stand there and tell me that the British engineer preparations don't make a significant difference. Maybe you'd like to ride in my lead tank."

Malinsky watched to see who laughed along with Starukhin. The army commander's subordinates, of course, and the commander of the Twentieth Guards Army and his companions. The East German officers laughed tentatively, while the Poles appeared disinterested. Trimenko, the commander of the Second Guards Tank Army, remained stone-faced, as did his clique. Trimenko and Starukhin were long-standing rivals, as different as summer and winter. It was a rivalry that Malinsky carefully exploited to draw the best efforts from each man.

None of the members of the front staff laughed at Dudorov. Malinsky and Chibisov took great pains to build a tight, loyal staff where backbiting was not tolerated.

Malinsky waited for the laughter and secondary comments to die down. Starukhin still stood posing, with a stupid grin on his face.

"If you're so worried, Vladimir Ivanovitch," Malinsky said coolly, "perhaps you'd like my chief of intelligence to command your army for you."

Now Trimenko's boys and the front staff smiled as a collective. But in the end, Malinsky did not want to further any contentiousness between his staff and his commanders. He only wanted to insure that everyone knew who was in control.

"My chief of engineers assures me that he will get you across the initial canal line and through the British obstacles," Malinsky told Starukhin. "I certainly don't underestimate the difficulty of the Third Shock Army's mission. No one does, Vladimir Ivanovitch. But I am certain you will accomplish it." Malinsky turned to the chief of staff. "General Chibisov, review the army missions."

The chief of staff exchanged places with Dudorov at the map. The bunker's ventilation system performed sluggishly in wet weather, and tobacco smoke filled the room with dirty wisps at the level of a standing man's shoulders. Chibisov was asthmatic, and Malinsky knew he survived such briefings on sheer strength of will. The chief of staff was the only officer in whose presence Malinsky limited his smoking. But in such a forum, such niceties were impossible, a mark of weakness, and Chibisov was on his own.

"The First Western Front attacks at 0600 Moscow time to seize an initial objective line here"—Chibisov traced a line on the map that ran just west of the Weser River, allowing for operational bridgeheads—"and a subsequent objective line that includes bridgeheads on the Rhine north and south of the Ruhr metropolitan complex. Follow-on missions or additional objectives will be designated by the High Command of Forces, Western Theater of Strategic Military Action, as the situation develops."

Malinsky watched Chibisov survey the crowded room, making high-speed calculations and judgments. The issue remained open as to whether the offensive would continue into the low countries and France. Although the plans already existed, even Malinsky did not know if the final political decision had been made to implement them. The chief of staff continued in a clear, controlled voice, dominating in its self-assurance.

"The Front conducts its attack with three reinforced armies in the first operational echelon.

"In the north, the Second Guards Tank Army, reinforced to a strength of five divisions, attacks in the Uelzen—Verden—Arnhem operational direction, with the immediate missions of crossing the Elbe-Seiten Canal in multidivisional strength on the first day of operations, locating and exploiting the boundary between the Netherlands Corps and the German Corps, and rapidly penetrating the Netherlands operational grouping in depth." As Chibisov reviewed the Second Guards Tank Army's mission, the formation's commander, Colonel General Trimenko, wore a mask of hard determination, but his fingernails fought anxiously with the shell of one of the pistachios that were his only public vice. "The line of Autobahn E4/A7 is to be reached by multiple forward detachments not later than local midnight on the first day of operations," Chibisov continued. "Not later than midnight on the second day of operations, initial bridgeheads will be established on the Weser line. The Second Guards Tank Army has two secondary missions. Its initial exploitation of the corps boundary is to be followed by a southerly turning movement into the tactical, then into the operational rear of the German Corps. The army also conducts a supporting attack, from the initiation of hostilities, against the frontage of the German Corps, with the objective of fixing the Germans as far forward as possible, facilitating their subsequent envelopment and encirclement. Upon the commitment of the army's second echelon, those first-echelon units not occupied in guaranteeing the flank of the breakthrough against German counterattacks and not involved in the closing of the ring behind the Germans will contain residual Dutch elements northwest of a line drawn here, from the north of Bremen to Buxtehude."

Chibisov paused for breath, disguising the break as an opportunity for the audience to ask questions. But all of this had been covered before, in much greater detail, and Trimenko and those supporting him knew the plan thoroughly.

"In the south," Chibisov continued, saving the central breakthrough operation for last, "the Twentieth Guards Army attacks in the Duderstadt—Paderborn—Dortmund operational direction, with the mission of developing a rapid penetration in the Belgian sector, thereby creating an early crisis in the vicinity of the enemy's army group boundary. In this instance, as in the example of the Second Guards Tank Army in the north, it is our expectation that early penetrations on its flanks will force the enemy's Northern Army Group—NORTHAG—to commit its available reserves early and in a piecemeal fashion as it attempts to stabilize both of its flanks. Finally, upon receipt of the

appropriate order, the Twentieth Guards Army is prepared to execute a turning movement to unhinge the British defense just to the north, should that prove necessary."

Chibisov breathed deeply, poisoning his lungs. "In the center, ultimately making the front's main attack, the Third Shock Army, reinforced with one East German division to a strength of five divisions, attacks in the Hannover—Osnabrueck—Venlo operational direction. Initially, the Third Shock Army's offensive is phased slightly behind those of the flanking armies, allowing NORTHAG to identify the threat to its flanks and commit its reserves, thus robbing the center of any depth. The initial structure of radio electronic combat operations will allow the enemy to maintain the necessary communications to identify the threat to his flanks and to initiate movement of his reserves. To that end, we will initially attack the enemy's air-ground and fire-support communications, but as soon as we have confirmation of the movement of the enemy's reserves to commitment, we will redirect the full weight of our radio electronic combat effort against NORTHAG's command and control and intelligence links."

As Chibisov spoke Malinsky watched Starukhin, the Third Shock Army's commander. Starukhin was always restless, looking for a fight or for a superior's attention. Now he sat fitfully, obviously swollen with energy and nerves, rubbing at his stubbly chin and blotched nose. Malinsky knew it was only a matter of time until Starukhin opened his mouth again. Malinsky could not help feeling a personal distaste toward Starukhin, even as he valued the man's unrivaled ability to smash his way through problems.

Starukhin managed to rein himself in a bit longer, and Chibisov continued smoothly, a perfect staff officer, choosing each word exactly without losing the rhythm of his speech. "In support of the front's plan, the Third Shock Army initially structures its attack to give the appearance that all four of its organic divisions have been committed, while actually holding the bulk of the Seventh and Tenth Tank divisions and all of the attached East German division as a ready second echelon. The commitment of this second echelon is not contingent upon the commitment to battle of the enemy's reserves, only upon the confirmed movement of those reserves to the north and/or south, or upon the personal authorization of the front commander.

"Third Shock Army has the primary mission of seizing multiple bridgeheads on the Weser River not later than 0600 on the third day of the war, and of thus facilitating the immediate commitment of the

Forty-ninth Unified Army Corps to breakout and exploitation operations from the Weser line. The corps functions as the front's initial operational maneuver group.

"Third Shock Army has the secondary mission of supporting the Second Guards Tank Army's encirclement and destruction of the enemy grouping in the German Corps pocket.

"In the second operational echelon, Seventh Tank Army follows Third Shock but is prepared to release one division to Third Shock Army upon order of the front commander. Seventh Tank Army also prepares for options calling for it to repel an operational counterattack launched by CENTAG to relieve the pressure on NORTHAG, or to follow Twentieth Guards Army, should the initial success prove greater in that sector.

"In the north, Twenty-eighth Army follows Second Guards Tank Army. The primary mission of the Twenty-eighth is to break out from the Weser line and conduct exploitation operations that culminate in the establishment of operational bridgeheads on the Rhine. Twenty-eighth Army also prepares to release one division to Second Guards Tank Army upon order of the front commander if reinforcement of the Second Guards proves necessary to contain and reduce the German pocket.

"Other reserves or follow-on forces will be allocated to the First Western Front from the High Command of Forces based upon the developing military and political situations."

Malinsky believed it was as good a plan as could be devised with the available forces and technical support. An apparent pincer movement on a grand scale to draw off the enemy reserves, then a smashing blow to splinter a fatally weakened center. And the real beauty of it, as only Malinsky knew, was its function as a trap within a trap. Marshal Kribov expected Malinsky's breakthrough to draw off NATO's last operational reserves from the south, possibly even units stripped from CENTAG's front line. At that point, a powerful, sudden thrust would be directed against the weakened German-American defenses in the south in the Frankfurt and Stuttgart directions, employing follow-on forces that had, up until then, been portrayed as following Malinsky's armies. It was a series of blows of ever-increasing intensity, always directed at the unexpected but decisive point, on an ever-grander scale.

"Questions?" Chibisov asked.

Starukhin, the Third Shock Army commander, rose. Usually, when Starukhin got up a second time, it was to voice a legitimate concern. Malinsky watched Trimenko, the Second Guards Army commander, as Trimenko watched Starukhin. Trimenko was the type who never whined

or complained, who just coldly went about the business at hand with the available tools.

"While I'm content with the allocation of indirect fire assets," Starukhin declared, "I remain troubled by the initial unavailability of fixed-wing air support. The Air Army needs to be reminded that it is ultimately under frontal control—*army* control. In my case—in all of our cases—it's imperative to deliver a crushing blow that reaches the enemy's tactical-operational depths simultaneously with the main assaults against his front. My attack helicopters can barely support water-obstacle crossing operations and the accompaniment of air assault missions—which are heavily scheduled. I say nothing about their use as a highly mobile antitank reserve." Starukhin paused, gauging the other commanders in the room. "The present allocation of fixed-wing aircraft allows the armies very little control over the battle in depth."

There was no question about it. Starukhin had a point. But there were never sufficient assets to please everyone. Malinsky had made his decision based upon his evaluation of the situation within the constraints imposed by the High Command of Forces. In any case, he was a habitual centralizer, having experienced too much subordinate incompetence over the years, and he felt the army commanders already had more assets than they could effectively manage.

Malinsky stood up and approached the map. Both Chibisov and Starukhin took their seats, leaving the front commander as the only focal point in the room.

"Vladimir Ivanovitch has a strong case," Malinsky said, surveying them all. As his eyes passed over the East Germans he almost laughed. He doubted they were the men their fathers and grandfathers had been. They looked as though they expected to be fed to the serpents. Starukhin would insure that they were employed to the best possible effect.

"However," Malinsky continued, maintaining his straight-backed, straight-faced gravity, "I am convinced that the key to the ground war is the air battle. I fully support Marshal Kribov's decision to employ the bulk of the air and deep-fire weapons of all the fronts to support the initial air offensive. If we failed to reach a single ground objective on the first day of the war, if your units did not accomplish a single mission of the day, but we managed to destroy the enemy's air power on the ground or while it was in a posture of reaction, I'm certain we could recover lost time in the ground battle. Since the withdrawal of his intermediate-range missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles, the enemy has only his air power to rely upon to reach deep and attempt to rupture our plans. His

air power is the cornerstone of his defense. Remove it, and you can knock his military structure apart with relative ease." This time it was Malinsky's turn to pause for effect, making eye contact with his leading commanders and finally settling his gaze on Starukhin. "I am committed to the initial requirement to destroy the enemy's air defense belts and his fixed-wing combat capability. Even if it meant diverting maneuver forces, I would do it. A parochial attitude begs for defeat.

"Now," Malinsky continued, stalking through the mist of cigarette smoke, "I also understand that some of you are worried about the enemy's possible employment of weapons of mass destruction. That will always remain a concern. But, as Comrade General Dudorov told us, we have no indications that we are presently in a nuclear-scared situation. If you accomplish the tasks assigned to each of you within the plan, I believe we can defeat the nuclear bogeyman. *Speed. . . shock . . . activeness . . .* " Malinsky surveyed the group of officers, each one a very powerful figure in his own right. "Once we are deep in their rear, intermingled with their combat and support formations, how will they effectively bring nuclear weapons to bear? The object is to close swiftly with the enemy, to achieve and exploit shock effect, to penetrate him at multiple points, and to keep moving, except to destroy that which you absolutely cannot outmaneuver." Malinsky turned to face his chief of missile troops and artillery. "I also understand that some of you are troubled by my targeting priorities. Let it be on my shoulders. But I do not believe it is possible to destroy every nuclear-capable system in the NATO arsenal. Anyway, why cut off the fingers and toes when you can more easily lop off the head? Once our trap has been sprung, the targets for the front and army reconnaissance strike complexes must be the enemy's command and control infrastructure and his intelligence-collection capability. If he cannot find us, he cannot hope to place nuclear fires on us. And without effective command and control systems, the requirements of both nuclear targeting and conventional troop control are insoluble. Yet even such targeting must be selective. For example, we know what we want the enemy to see and how we want him to respond initially. That, too, must be factored into our decisions regarding what targets to attack and when to attack them. Modern warfare is not merely a brawl. It is both a broad science and an uncompromising art. If you have not asked yourself every possible question, the unasked question will destroy you."

Malinsky considered the men before him one last time. The anxious and the stubborn, men of finesse and born savages. He never ceased

marveling at the varieties of character and talent the military required or could at least manage to exploit. Ambitions as different as their secret fears, Malinsky thought.

"I know you are all anxious to return to your formations and workplaces. There's always too much to do and too little time in which to do it, I know. And every man among us has his own devils, his own worries. *My* concern in these last hours is that the enemy might strike first. But I know, in my mind and in my heart"—Malinsky touched his fist to his chest—"that once we have begun, no power on earth will be able to stop us. Each of you wears the trappings of tremendous power, commanders and staff officers alike. Consider what your badges of rank represent. Each of you has come to personify the greatness, the destiny of the Motherland. And your actions will ultimately decide that destiny."

Malinsky thought of his son, a flashing instant of worry, affection, and pride intermingled. "I hope at least a few of you get a bit of sleep, too. I just want to leave you with one final caution. Most of you have heard it from me many times. If there is one area in which I profoundly disagree with the theoreticians, it is in regard to casualties. I believe that none of us, on either side, is prepared for the intensity of destruction we will encounter. Not everywhere. But at the points of decision, and in priority sectors, I expect some units—on both sides—to suffer unprecedented losses. Certainly, the number of soldiers who fall on a given field will not rival the casualty counts of antiquity. But we have not yet found the algorithm to relate modern systems losses to preindustrial manpower losses. The manpower losses will be severe enough, but the losses in what might appropriately be termed the 'capital' of war will appear catastrophic to the commander who is weak or has not prepared himself sufficiently. I hope . . . that each of you is just sufficiently better prepared than your opponent... to remain steadfast when he wavers, to impose your will on him when he takes that fatal pause to count his losses. You must be hard. Each of us will experience things that will haunt him for the rest of his days. That goes with the rank and position."

Malinsky thought for a moment, searching for the right closing words. "This is not my permission to take needless casualties. One life lost unnecessarily is too much. But . . ." He reached for words. Without sounding weak, he wanted to tell them to value the lives of their men, and without callousness, he wanted to communicate to them what needed to be done, to prepare them. "Simply do your duty."

Malinsky strode abruptly toward the door. The officers jumped to attention. Malinsky could feel the collection of emotions grown so

intense in the men that it almost demanded a physical outlet. The door opened before him, and a voice barked down the hallway. Malinsky marched back toward his private office in a press of concerns that obscured the braced figures he passed in the long corridor. He wondered if any of them really understood what was about to happen. He wondered if it was humanly possible to understand.

Two

The meeting broke up behind Malinsky. Officers hurriedly folded maps and pulled on their wet-weather garments. A few lower-ranking officers gleaned the remnants of the refreshments that had been set out earlier, while others discussed problems in low, urgent voices. The images were the same as those at the end of a thousand other briefings, but the air had an unmistakably different feel to it, an intensity that would have been rare even in Afghanistan.

Chibisov had another meeting to attend, and a host of actions to consolidate or check on, but he hoped to sneak a few minutes outside of the bunker, breathing fresh air. The East German medicine he took for his asthma now was better than that available in the Soviet Union, but the smoke-filled briefing room nonetheless made his lungs feel as though they had shrunk to the size of a baby's and would not accept enough oxygen to keep him going. The fresh night air, thick and damp though it might be, would feel like a cool drink going down. But Chibisov could not leave until all of the other key officers had cleared off. Patiently, ready with answers to any of their possible questions, he watched the others leave, judging their fitness for the tasks at hand.

Starukhin, the oversized Third Shock Army commander, suddenly veered in Chibisov's direction, followed by his usual entourage, aug-

mented now by a lost-looking East German divisional commander and his operations officer. Starukhin was the sort of commander who was never alone, who always needed the presence of fawning admirers and drinking companions. He was a tall, beefy, red-faced man who looked as though he belonged in a steel mill, not in a general's uniform. His heavy muscles were softening into fat, but he still cultivated a persona of ready violence. Starukhin was definitely old school, and he only survived the restructuring period—bitterly nicknamed "the purges" by its victims—because Malinsky had protected him, much to Chibisov's surprise.

Chibisov and Starukhin had known each other on and off for years, and they casually disliked one another. At the army commander's approach, Chibisov drew himself up to his full height, but he still only came up to Starukhin's shoulders. The army commander smoked long cigars, a habit he had acquired as an adviser in Cuba. Now he stepped very close to Chibisov, releasing a cloud of reeking smoke that carried a faint overtone of alcohol. And he smiled.

"Chibisov, you know that's nothing but crap about the aircraft." Starukhin gave his admirers time to appreciate his style. They gathered around the two men, smirking like children. "The Air Force always wants an absurd margin of safety. There are plenty of aircraft. I know, I've examined the figures personally. And Dudorov, that fat little swine, needs to get his head out of the clouds and do some real work. You know the British won't give up all of their tank reserves. I'll be stuck in unnecessary meeting engagements when I should be pissing in the Weser."

"Comrade Army Commander," Chibisov said, "the front commander has taken his decision on the matter of aircraft allocation." He chose his usual armor of formality, even though he and Starukhin wore the same rank now and Starukhin was technically subordinate by virtue of their respective duty positions. In an odd way, though, he sympathized with Starukhin. Beyond the dramatics, Starukhin, too, was a tough professional. Now he was trying to build his own margin of safety, a type of behavior the shadow system taught every perceptive officer as a lieutenant. But there was nothing to be done.

"Oh, don't tell me that, Chibisov. Everybody knows he does whatever you want him to do. Comrade Lieutenant General Chibisov, the grand vizier of the Group of Forces. Just get me a few extra aircraft, say one hundred additional sorties. And tell Dudorov his number-one job is to find the British reserves so I can send the aircraft after them. Oh, and Nicki Borisov tells me I need more one-five-two ammunition."

"Two more units of fire per gun would be good," Borisov put in from Starukhin's side. Borisov was a talented enough officer, a recent Voroshilov graduate who was betting on Starukhin to pull him along.

"Comrade Army Commander," Chibisov said, "at present, you have received a greater proportion of the front's allocation of virtually every type of ammunition than your comrades. You have more march routes with fewer water obstacles. You have more hauling capacity than any other army. You have more rotary-wing aircraft of every type. You have *two* deception battalions in support of you, as well as an extra signal battalion that came right out of the front's hide. You have the lion's share of the front's artillery division, you—"

"I have the best maneuver terrain"—Starukhin cut him off—"and I have forty-six percent of the tactical bridging assets to cross under thirty-four percent of the projected water obstacles. Don't play numbers with me, Chibisov. I also have the main attack, and the toughest opponents. In addition to which I expect half of the German Corps to come down on my northern flank when Trimenko gets stuck in the mud."

"That's nonsense. The Germans will hold on too far forward and too long. It's a given. And if they hit anybody, it'll be Trimenko."

"A few damned aircraft, Chibisov."

Chibisov could tell now that Starukhin was sorry that he had initiated the exchange and that he was looking for a token prize so that he would not be embarrassed in front of his officers.

"Comrade Army Commander, as the aircraft become available, I promise you will have priority."

"But I need to *plan."* Suddenly, Starukhin lost his temper. "Listen, I don't have to beg you, you little . . ."

Say it, Chibisov thought, looking Starukhin dead in the eyes. Go ahead, say it, you cossack bastard, say the word. Chibisov knew Starukhin better than the army commander realized. Dudorov had a finger in everything—he was a superb chief of intelligence—as a result of which Chibisov knew that Starukhin strongly encouraged his officers to affiliate with Pamyat, a right-wing nationalist hate group that wanted to revive the days of the Black Hundreds and to rid the sacred Motherland of Asians and other subhuman creatures, such as Chibisov himself. Oh, he knew the bully with the big cigar. His grandfathers had come for a drunken frolic in the ghetto, coming by the hundreds, to cut a few beards and perhaps a few throats, to rape the women . . . and to steal. The Slav was a born thief. And Chibisov's ancestors, but a few generations removed, would not have resisted. They would have bowed and prayed.

Those days were over. And the Starukhins of the world would never

bring them back. Even for officers who were not Party members, such affiliations were illegal. Pamyat had even reprinted *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the infamous Jew-baiting book of the Czarist Okhrana so beloved of the Hitlerite Germans. Chibisov needed all of his self-control now not to spit in the army commander's face. He consoled himself with the thought that he could destroy Starukhin, if it proved absolutely necessary.

"You were about to say something, Comrade Army Commander?"

"Pavel Pavlovitch," Starukhin began again, switching suddenly to the ingratiating tone that Russian alcoholics always kept at the ready, "our concerns should be identical. The Third Shock Army has a terribly difficult mission to accomplish under unprecedented time constraints. I only want to insure that we have covered every requirement."

He would really have to watch Starukhin now, Chibisov realized. Now and forever. In a moment's embarrassment, they had become eternal enemies.

No, Chibisov corrected himself, the enmity between them had merely been uncovered. The Starukhins and the Chibisovs of the world had always been enemies.

"Comrade Army Commander, I am convinced that our concerns are truly identical. As soon as ground-attack aircraft become available, you'll have your fair share of sorties."

Staruhkin looked at him. Chibisov had great faith in Starukhin's ability to bully his way through the enemy. But just in case there were problems, he wanted to be certain that they fell on Starukhin's shoulders, and that there were as few excuses as possible available to the man.

"About the ammunition," Chibisov went on, "I believe I can help you with that. Front can provide an additional point-five units of fire for your heavy guns, and perhaps even for your multiple-rocket launchers, if we can align the transport. There's a projected movement window opening up behind your divisions in midafternoon. Have your chief of the rear call Zdanyuk and tell him where you want it delivered. We'll bring it right to the divisional guns. And the best of luck tomorrow, Comrade Army Commander."

Starukhin went off without thanks, without even an acknowledgment, like a man turning away from an empty shop window. When the army commander's entourage had left the room, Chibisov turned to one of his staff assistants.

"Tell Colonel Shtein that I'm a bit behind. Then see that Comrade Army Commander Trimenko has some refreshments and ask if he needs access to any communications means. Have Shtein begin the tapes as

soon as General Trimenko has settled in. I'll be down in a few minutes. Oh, and make sure Samurukov knows he's to sit in."

The staff officer turned smartly to execute his mission. The handful of technical and service officers remaining in the room had no immediate call on Chibisov's time, and he went out into the hallway, fighting back his cough.

Even the stale air in the corridor felt refreshing after the smog of the briefing room. Chibisov strolled down the hall to the main tunnel corridor, not allowing himself to hurry. The officers and men of the front staff were careful to allow plenty of room as Chibisov passed. But the chief of staff was not prowling for defects tonight. He just wanted to breathe.

As soon as he reached the backup stairwell and found it deserted, he nearly collapsed with pent-up coughing. He felt as though his face must be changing color with the intensity of the struggle for breath. He went up the stairs slowly, lungs clotted shut. With no one to see him, he spit as though ridding himself of wreckage. He hurriedly took one of his steroid pills, which were only to be used in emergencies, washing it down with his own saliva. In the cemented stairwell, his coughing sounded especially destructive.

What did that bastard Starukhin see when he looked at him? An asthmatic little Jew? Chibisov had come up through the airborne forces, and he had been a martial-arts specialist as a young officer. He had done everything possible to toughen himself, to reject every weak, infuriating image clinging to him from a thousand years of pathetic East European Jewish history. He resolutely turned his back on all aspects of Jewishness. He worked to be a better Soviet patriot than any of them, a better *Russian* patriot, as had his father and his grandfather, the first enlightened members of a fiercely traditional family. He even downplayed his intellectual abilities when it came to studying the theoretical aspects of socialism and communism, since he felt it was too Jewish to overly master political philosophy. Instead, he had turned to military engineering and mathematics, to cybernetics and troop control theory. Then they tried to turn him into an instructor, the star young theorist on the staff of the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School. But he maneuvered his way back into a fighter's job, even volunteering, although already in his middle thirties, for training as a special operations officer.

Accepted despite his age, he survived the agonizing training only to be defeated by an unreasonable and unexpected enemy: asthma. It was as though a millennium of weak-lunged Jewishness, of reeking ghettos, had taken their revenge on him, as though some bitter and malicious Jehovah

were having his little joke. He completed his training only to collapse and end up in a military sanatorium in Baku. His jumping days were over.

But he refused to give in. He fought to remain an officer, obsessive in his determination to wear the uniform. He knew they did not understand him. He had never in his life attended a Jewish service. He had no understanding of the Jews who wanted to leave the Soviet Union, to leave Russia, their home. To Chibisov, the emigres were incomprehensible, weak, and selfish. For him, Israel was a distant land of superstition and fascist enthusiasms. And yet he knew that his fellow officers always saw him as the little Jew, a born staff man, perhaps meant to be a senior bookkeeper in some great Jewish banking house, or a student of arcane texts, shut in a musty study. Chibisov, the little Jew who wanted to be a Soviet paratroop officer.

Chibisov left the stairwell, sweating, near exhaustion. He labored up the ramp to the massive blast-proof entry doors. The interior guards saluted with their weapons, and, behind a glass panel, the duty officer jumped to his feet. Everyone knew the little Jew chief of staff, Chibisov thought bitterly.

He stood in limbo for a moment as the inner door shut behind him. Then the outer door began to slide back, and the cool air raced in, carrying flecks of rain and a multilayered drone of constant noise from the trails and roads and highways. The forecast called for a wet first day of the war, and Chibisov felt lucky to emerge from the bunker at a moment when the rain had softened to little more than a mist. As the outer door closed Chibisov stood still, breathing as deeply as his lungs would permit, almost gasping. The nearest sounds came from the departing helicopters that carried away the more important briefing attendees. The blades hacked at the darkness to gain lift. Underlying the throb of the rotors, countless vehicles groaned toward carefully planned destinations. Chibisov's mind filled with timetables. It had been a key consideration that the Soviet forces could not close on their jump-off positions too early. It was unthinkable to put everything neatly into place, then wait in a silence that telegraphed to the enemy that you were ready to attack, with your final deployments even telling him where the main effort would come. The plan kept forces on the move, shifting, realigning toward a fluid perfection that would appear no different than the preceding days of road marches and hasty bivouacs, but that would allow the swift convergence of overwhelming forces at the points of decision, achieving tactical surprise, and even a measure of operational surprise. Chibisov looked at his watch. If the march tables were on schedule, the noise in the distance would be from one of the divisions of

the Seventh Tank Army, leapfrogging closer to the Elbe. As the lead echelons moved into the attack the follow-on forces would already be closing on their vacated positions, leaving as few exploitable gaps as possible. Chibisov had confidence in the mathematical model and in its tolerances. Yet he recognized that, to the drivers and the junior commanders out on the roads, it probably seemed like chaos. It was important to cultivate Malinsky's talent for standing back, Chibisov thought. Not to get caught up in the frustrating details, even though you remained aware of them. From the grand perspective, the minor scenes of confusion on the roads or in assembly areas simply disappeared, consumed by the macro-efficiencies of the model.

It only seemed remarkable to Chibisov that the enemy had not reached out to strike a preemptive blow. He and Dudorov had discussed the situation at length with Malinsky. In the twenty-four hours prior to the attack, the posture of virtually all of the Warsaw Pact forces, and especially their supply and rear services deployments, was terribly vulnerable. But so far, NATO had done nothing. Dudorov was convinced that there was absolutely no danger of NATO striking first. But neither Chibisov nor Malinsky could quite believe that the enemy would passively wait to receive the obviously impending blow.

Chibisov tasted the night air. The passages of his lungs had reopened slightly, and he felt like a man reprieved. He thought that the plan for a high-powered, relentless offensive would be like depriving a man of oxygen. NATO would have its wind taken away by the initial impact, and it would never be allowed to regain its breath. The damp night air felt vivid with power; the vehicle noise sounded as if the earth itself were moving. In just a few hours, the first wave of aircraft would be on their way. And still the enemy did nothing.

A lone helicopter growled by overhead. Probably Starukhin, Chibisov thought. But the army commander had already receded in his mind.

The last faint rain stopped. Chibisov could feel that it would return, stronger than before. But for the moment, he stood peacefully in the spongy air and thought of Malinsky, who had saved him. Recovering from his collapse in the sanatorium, Chibisov found that paperwork had been initiated without his knowledge to remove him from active service. The old anti-Semitism. He struggled through the bureaucracy until he managed an interview with the deputy commander of the Transcaucasus Military District. That was the first time he met Malinsky. Comrade Deputy Commander, the army is my life. I'm as good as any officer in this uniform. Malinsky listened, watching him in silence, unlike the bluster-

ing, self-important general officers with whom Chibisov was familiar. The Starukhins of the world.

Malinsky put a stop to the separation proceedings and gave Chibisov a trial job in his operations department. They were designing contingency plans for the invasion of Iran at the time, and they needed someone with a solid background in airborne matters. Chibisov quickly discovered something new in himself. Perhaps because of his technical training, he had an eye for the telling detail, and he almost intuitively understood how to make a plan intelligible to its executors. He loved the work.

He especially enjoyed working under Malinsky. Brilliant operational concepts and dazzling variations seemed to come effortlessly to Malinsky. Chibisov had never seen anyone who could grasp the overall context and true military essentials of a situation as thoroughly and as quickly as Malinsky. The two men seemed fated to work together, Malinsky rich with ideas and Chibisov perfectly suited to turn those ideas into the words and tables, the graphics and the monumental paperwork that moved armies and brought them efficiently to bear. In the end, Afghanistan had put all of the Iran plans on hold, possibly forever. But Chibisov had gone with Malinsky to the general's first military district command, his trial run, in the Volga Military District. Chibisov had been the most junior military district chief of staff in the Soviet Army, and he did not underestimate the jealousies, or the pressure Malinsky received over the matter. The two men had worked together almost constantly since then, and it was Chibisov's sole regret that he was not the sort of man who could ever tell Malinsky how deeply grateful he was to him.

Breathing regularly now, Chibisov turned back toward the bunker. There was no more time to waste. Trimenko, the Second Guards Tank Army Commander, would be almost through watching the videotapes now, and Chibisov did not want to waste any of the man's time. He had no doubt that Trimenko, whose horizons did not extend beyond the strictly military, would be angry, impatient, and skeptical by now.

The tape was still running as Chibisov entered the darkened room. He stood until his eyes adjusted to the darkness, watching the colorful footage of destruction and disaster, some filmed on rainy days, other segments reflecting good weather in order to be prepared for either circumstance. Then he made his way to the chair that had remained empty for him between Colonel General Trimenko and Major General Dudorov. Samurukov, the front's deputy commander for airborne and

special operations forces, sat on the other side of Trimenko. Colonel Shtein, the master of ceremonies, stood beside the television screen.

Chibisov had seen the footage before, but it still seemed remarkable to him. The filmed destruction of a West German town that had not yet been taken in a war that had yet to begin. Shtein had been sent to the First Western Front directly from the special propaganda subdepartment of the general staff in Moscow. As Chibisov watched he was convinced by the sights and sounds that this was, indeed, what modern war must look like. The filming was magnificently done, never too artful, never too clear. The viewer always had the feeling that the cameraman was well aware of his own mortality. Chibisov could not understand the German voice-over, but it had all been explained to him the day before, when he and Malinsky saw the film for the first time. Only then had certain directives suddenly made sense to them. Malinsky had been furious that he had not been trusted longer in advance, and he was sincerely uneasy about the whole business. There was something old-fashioned, almost gallant about Malinsky, and this particular special operation was not well-suited to his temperament. The staff called Malinsky "the Count" behind his back, half-jokingly, half in affection. Such a thing would not even have passed as a joke when Chibisov was a junior officer, and he forbade the use of the nickname. But he secretly understood how it had developed. It was not just a matter of the well-known lineage, which Malinsky vainly imagined might be ignored. There was something aristocratic about the man himself.

Malinsky had readily agreed with Chibisov's suggestion that he handle the matter with Shtein, freeing the commander for battlefield concerns. Chibisov had recognized the arrangement immediately as the only practical solution. Personally, he remained undecided on the potential effectiveness of the planned film and radio broadcasts. The approach was to attempt to convince populations under attack that it was only their resistance that made the destruction of their homes inevitable, and, further, to convince the West Germans that their allies took a cavalier attitude toward the destruction of their country. The goals were to create panic and a loss of the will to fight, while dividing the NATO allies. Chibisov doubted that such an approach would be effective against Russians, but Western Europeans remained something of an enigma to him.

Colonel Shtein commented on a few salient points as the film reached its climax. Then the screen suddenly fuzzed, and Shtein moved to turn up the lights.

Trimenko turned to Chibisov. It was clear from the bewildered look on the army commander's face that he had not grasped the total context. Chibisov felt a certain kinship with Trimenko, although they were both men who kept their distance. Both of them were committed to the development and utilization of automated troop control systems as well as sharing the no-nonsense temperaments of accomplished technicians. In staff matters, they were both perfectionists, although Trimenko was quicker to ruin a subordinate's career over a single error.

"At least," Trimenko said coldly, "I now understand all the fuss about rapidly seizing Lueneburg. It never made military sense to me before—and I'm not certain it really makes military sense now." Trimenko glanced at Shtein, hardly concealing his disgust. "Our friend from the general staff has explained his rationale to me. But I frankly view the scheme as frivolous, a diversion of critical resources. And"—Trimenko looked down at the floor, then back into Chibisov's eyes—"we're not barbarians."

Trimenko's concern mirrored Chibisov's own. But the chief of staff knew he had no choice but to support the General Staffs position. Overall, he was relieved that there had been so little interference with the front's plan. Marshal Kribov's approval had been good enough. This matter with Shtein was a special case, and it was important not to make too much of it. But Trimenko had to support it, one way or another.

"Comrade Army Commander, let me try to put it in a better perspective," Chibisov said, unsure that he could manage to do what he was promising. "As you know, we are living in an age in which there has been something of a revolution in military affairs. Personally, I would say a series of revolutions—first the nuclear revolution, which may have been a false side road in history, then the automation revolution, with which you are intimately familiar. In the West, they speak of the 'information age,' and perhaps they're correct in doing so. The Soviet system has always realized the value of information—for instance, the power of correct propaganda. Today, the powerful new means of arranging and disseminating information have opened new possibilities. In light of the successes of our propaganda efforts in the past, we must at least be open to the new and expanded opportunities offered by technology. Certainly, we both realize the value of battlefield deception, of blinding the enemy to your true activities and intentions, of confusing him, or even of steering him toward the decision you desire him to make. But how do we define the battlefield today? If warfare has expanded to include conflict between entire systems, then perhaps we must also be

prepared to redefine the battlefield, or to accept that there are, in fact, a variety of battlefields. This little film is an information weapon, a deception weapon, aimed above the heads of the militarists. It targets the governments and populations of the West."

"If the film is as accurate as Colonel Shtein tells us it is," Trimenko said, "what's the point of diverting a portion of my forces to actually destroy this town?"

"Lueneburg has been carefully selected by the general staff," Chibisov said, parroting Shtein's own arguments now. "It is easily within the grasp of our initial operations, it is defended by one of the weak sisters, and it has great sentimental value to the West Germans because of its medieval structures. Yet the town has no real economic value. Colonel Shtein's department went to great expense to construct the model of the town square and other well-known features so that they could be destroyed for this film. The wonders of the Soviet film industry, you might say. But when this film is broadcast twenty-four hours from now, it must be augmented with additional dating footage, and, most importantly, it must stand up to any hasty enemy attempts at verification. The historic district must be flattened. We must destroy the real town now that we have filmed the destruction of the model."

Trimenko was not yet ready to give in. Chibisov knew him as a hard and stubborn man, and he recognized the locked expression on the army commander's face. "But what good does it do? Really? One of my divisions squanders its momentum, you tie up air-assault elements needed elsewhere, aircraft are diverted, and perhaps irreplaceable helicopters are lost. For what, Chibisov? So we can show the West Germans a movie? So we can broadcast to the world that we *are* barbarians after all?"

Chibisov sympathized but could not relent. Malinsky had commented that this was the sort of thing the Mongols would have done, had they possessed the technology.

"But you see," Chibisov said, "the broadcasts will portray *future* incidents of this nature as avoidable. Tomorrow we will have film crews all over the battlefield. I expect Goettingen will be a positive example of what happens when there is little or no resistance. We'll see. But what the West German people and their government get is a threat that, if resistance continues, there will be more Lueneburgs—because of their resistance, not because of any will to destruction on our part. They'll also see undestroyed cities and towns where we were not forced to fight. Anyway, we can easily convince a substantial portion of the West German population that the Dutch are more responsible for the town's

destruction than are we, simply because they chose to fight to defend it. *We* would not have harmed the town, had *they* not forced us into a fight."

"What if the Dutch don't fight for Lueneburg?"

"Immaterial. You saw the film. Even if the Dutch fade away tomorrow, they will still have caused the destruction of that town on the film. And film doesn't lie, Comrade Army Commander. Technically, the Dutch may have proof to the contrary. But frightened men have no patience with involved explanations. What could the Dutch, or NATO, bring as an effective counterargument? A bluster of outrage? Denials are always weaker than accusations. It's elementary physics, you might say."

Colonel Shtein interrupted the conversation. As a representative of the general staff on a special mission, he was not about to let slight differences in rank get in his way.

"Comrades," he told them, lecturing, "it is the assessment of the general staff that the West Germans have grown so materialistic, so comfortable, that they will not be able to endure the thought of seeing their country destroyed again. They have lost their will. The Bundeswehr will fight, initially. But the officer corps is not representative of the people. This operation will complement your encirclement of the German corps and its threatened destruction. And consider its veiled threat should NATO look to nuclear weapons for their salvation. It sets up numerous options for conflict termination."

The army commander looked at the staff colonel. "And if it doesn't work? If they simply ignore it? Or if they fight all the harder because of it?"

"They won't," Shtein said. "But no matter if they did respond that way initially. We have similar film for Hameln. And we may actually be required to strike one mid-sized city very hard, say Bremen or Hannover. But in the end, the General Staff is convinced that this approach will help bring the war to a rapid conclusion, and on very favorable terms."

Trimenko turned to Chibisov. "I don't like it. It's unsoldierly. We mustn't divert any assets from the true points of decision."

Chibisov noted a change in Trimenko's voice. The army commander was no longer as adamant in tone, despite his choice of words. He would accept his responsibility, as Chibisov had accepted his own. Now it just required another push, for form's sake.

Chibisov turned to Dudorov, the chief of intelligence. "Yuri, what do you think of all this? You understand the West Germans better than any of us." Dudorov always preferred to be called by his first name without the patronymic, another of his Western tastes.

Dudorov looked at Chibisov and the army commander with all of the

solemnity his chubby face could manage. And he was unusually slow in speaking.

"Comrade Generals . . . I think this is absolutely brilliant."

Chibisov wandered down to the operations center after seeing Trimenko off. The local air controller did not want to clear Trimenko's helicopter for takeoff, due to expected traffic. The air controller did not know that the traffic would be the beginning of the air offensive, only that he had been ordered to keep the skies cleared beginning one hour before military dawn for priority air movements. The clearance had required Chibisov's personal involvement, and the delay further contributed to Trimenko's bad mood. He needed to be at his army command post now. Shortly, the skies would be very crowded indeed, as aircraft shot to the west, their flights cross-timed with the launch of short-range missiles and artillery blasting corridors through the enemy's air defenses. Then the entire front would erupt.

The operations center was calmer, quieter than Chibisov expected. The calm before the storm, he thought to himself. Malinsky was still napping, and Chibisov let him sleep. Tomorrow, Malinsky would move forward to be with the army commanders during critical periods and to direct operations from the front's forward command post closer to the West German border. He needed all the rest he could get. Chibisov required less sleep than the front commander, and they had an unspoken arrangement between them on that, too.

An officer-clerk moved to the big map now and then, while other officers took information over telephones. The bank of control radios remained quiet, except for routine administrative traffic that the enemy would be expecting. Out in the darkness, formations and units were sending just enough routine transmissions, usually from bogus locations, to lull the enemy into a sense of normalcy. But the critical war nets still slumbered.

Seven minutes, and the first plane would take off from an airfield in Poland. Then the other aircraft between Poland and the great dividing line would come up in sequence, a metal blanket lifting into the sky. Chibisov agreed with Malinsky. The air offensive was critical.

Chibisov walked around a bank of data processors to the second row of desks back from the master situation map. He stopped at the position of the front's radio electronic combat duty officer. He put his hand on the shoulder of the lieutenant colonel, signaling him to remain at his screen.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes, Comrade General."

"No surprises?"

"Not yet. We won't know for at least half an hour, maybe longer if it gets really bad. Nothing on this scale has ever been attempted before."

Chibisov was aware of the potential problems. When you attempted to employ these weapons of the new age, attacking the enemy's communications complexes and radars, there was always the worry that you would strike your own critical networks—that, somehow, key aspects had been overlooked or inadequately tested. There was so much that was about to happen for the first time. Chibisov pictured the electromagnetic spectrum as crowded with an almost visible flood of power. The manipulation of nature itself, Chibisov thought, of natural laws and properties, more of the deadly wonders of technology. Yet he knew that there were men out there, waiting to blast and fill and tear at the border barriers, waiting at the literal edge of war, who were as frightened as their earliest ancestors had been when they came out of their caves to do battle.

Chibisov moved on to check the latest returns on fuel consumption.

THREE

Nobody wanted to touch the body. The soldiers stood around the corpse in the drizzling rain, staring. The rain tapped at the open, upturned eyes and rinsed the slack mouth under the glare of the lantern. Bibulov, the warrant officer who had been left in charge of the vehicle trans-loading, tried to remember the soldier's name. He recalled that the boy was a Tadzhik. But the elusive Asian consonance of his name escaped him, teasing just beyond his mental grasp. The boy had come to the unit unable to speak any Russian beyond the primitive sounds necessary for survival. And all of the prissy, well-intentioned efforts of the language skills collective had not brought him to proper speech. The boy had done as ordered, imitating when he did not understand, and had waited as mutely as a resting animal between jobs. It seemed to Bibulov as though the boy had set his mind to endure the two years in uniform required of him with the minimum of personal engagement. To do as he was made to do, uncomplainingly, until it came time to return to his distant home. Now he was dead, and the war had not even begun.

Bibulov believed that there would, indeed, be a war, and that it would come soon. But now there was only the frantic shifting of cargoes in the middle of a rainy night. The guns had not yet begun to squander their accounts of ammunition. Yet the boy was absurdly dead, as though fate could not wait a few more hours or another day. Bibulov shook his head,

attempting to select the correct response, the course of action that would result in the least trouble.

Somehow, it was in the natural order of things. If not this, then something else. The premature death accorded with Bibulov's view of the world and of his own place in it. What more could reasonably be expected?

And what did they expect, when exhausted soldiers were detailed to trans-load the unwieldy crates of artillery charges and rounds in the rain with their bare hands, without even the most rudimentary tools? It seemed to Bibulov as though nothing of significance had changed in a hundred, perhaps a thousand years. Oh, there were the trucks, of course. The big trucks from the army materiel support brigade brought the cargo from the army's forward supply base to the transshipment point at division. Then brute strength—wet, splinter-riddled hands—shifted and hoisted and lugged the stone-heavy boxes through the mud to the smaller trucks of the artillery regiment or to the shuttling division carryalls. The trucks were fine. But between the full and empty trucks lay a pool of timelessness, where animal labor continued to dominate.

Bibulov had watched helplessly in the muted glow of the safety lights as the unbalanced crate began to slip. It started with a fatal shift on the shoulders of weary boys. Then it proceeded relentlessly, a dance of silhouettes, as the crate slowly edged forward, quickening, then dropping very fast as the struggling boys abandoned it one after the other in a swift chain reaction. At the climax of the brief drama, the Tadzhik was a last tiny shape, twisting in a moment's terror and sprawling backward under the weight, padding its fall with his chest. By the time they heaved the crate off to the side, the boy was dead.

Bibulov tried to get the thing in perspective. The rain licked at the back of his neck. How big an event was the boy's death now? In a training exercise, everything in the unit would have come to a halt. But events had moved fatally beyond training exercises. The inevitability of war had come home to him the evening before, when the responsible officers had suddenly stopped demanding signatures of receipt on their delivery inventories. Bibulov had never known such a thing to happen, and it jarred him profoundly. At the same time, the grinding pace of the past few days had increased to an inhuman tempo.

Bibulov decided that, although the boy's death was undoubtedly a very significant event to somebody, somewhere, there was nothing to be done about it here and now. And the cargo had to be transferred.

He stared down, tidying up his conscience with quick last respects. The corpse appeared ridiculous and small, an ill-dressed doll. The flat Asian

face shone in the cast of the lantern as though the rain had polished it with wax.

"Pick him up," Bibulov ordered. "We're wasting time."

When the soldiers responded merely by shifting their positions, milling a little closer as each one waited for another to begin, Bibulov hardened his voice.

"Pick him up, you bastards. Let's go."

It was always like this, Bibulov consoled himself. The big men decide. And there's nothing to be done but obey, hoping you're not the one who gets crushed in the mud.

Shilko woke abruptly in response to the careful hand on his shoulder. "Has it started?" he asked, with the urgency of disorientation.

Before Captain Romilinsky could respond, Shilko had gained sufficient mastery of himself to realize that everything was still as it should be, and that his big guns had not yet begun their work. The only sounds were the dotting of rain on the roof of his range car and the background noise of vehicles in movement that had not ceased for days. The local area had its own little well of rain quiet. The battalion was ready. Waiting.

"Sleep well, Comrade Commander?" Romilinsky asked. Shilko liked his battalion chief of staff. Romilinsky was wonderfully earnest, an officer of excellent staff culture. It had been no plum for him to be assigned to a battalion whose commander obviously was not soaring through the ranks like a rocket. Lieutenant Colonel Shilko was easily the oldest battalion commander in the high-powered artillery brigade, perhaps in the entire Second Guards Tank Army. He was, in fact, older than the new-breed brigade commander. But if Romilinsky felt any disappointment at his assignment, he never let it show. The captain was a good officer and a fine young man. Shilko wished that his daughters had chosen husbands more like Romilinsky.

"Sleep, Vassili Rodionovitch?" Shilko said, moving his tired body in the seat and drawing up his reserves of good humor. "I slept like a peasant when the master isn't looking. What time is it?"

"Two o'clock."

Shilko nodded. "Always punctual, Vassili Rodionovitch. But I'm keeping you out in the rain. Go back inside. I'll join you in a moment."

Romilinsky saluted and trotted off toward the fire-control post. Shilko shifted in the seat, wishing he were younger or at least wore a younger man's body. His kidneys ached. He had slept only a few hours, but it had been the plunging, hard sort of sleep that wants to go on for a long time.

The preparations for war had exhausted most of the officers and men. What effect would war itself have on them?

Despite his seniority, Shilko had never been to war. Instead, his son had gone to Afghanistan as a junior lieutenant, fresh from the academy, and he had come back after only four months, with neither his legs nor a career. Shilko continued to be haunted by guilt, as though he had sneaked out from under his responsibilities intentionally, sending his son in his stead, although that certainly had not been the case. Meeting his returned son for the first time in the military hospital, with the medal "For Combat Services" and the Order of the Red Star pinned to his pajamas, and the bottom half of the bed as flat as the snow-covered steppes, had been the most painful experience in Shilko's life.

Overall, he counted himself a lucky man. He had a good wife, and they had had healthy children together. He had work he didn't mind, and he enjoyed the personal relationships that developed in the small unit families where he had spent most of his career. He had never expected to be a marshal of the Soviet Union, recognizing even as a young man that he was not cut out for special honors. So he simply tried to do that which was required of him as honestly as possible, content to be at peace with himself. His daughters had always seemed like the real fighters in the family, and it seemed to him as though they only married so they would have new opponents against whom to try their tempers. He could not understand it. His wife, Agafya, was a fine big happy woman, well suited to him. But the girls were an untamed, greedy pair. Perhaps, Shilko thought, trying to be fair, Romilinsky was much better off just as he was.

Pasha had been different from the girls. He had excelled at sports but had not been overly proud, with nothing of the bully about him. All things considered, he had been a kind boy, and decent to the girls. He had never given Shilko any serious trouble, and he had done well enough at the military academy.

Shilko had been proud to see the boy off to Afghanistan, although ashamed that he himself was staying behind. Then Pasha had come back missing parts. The boy had stubbornly tried to make it on his own, but the reception for the *Afgantsy* was not a good one. Shilko could not understand what was happening to the country. Instead of being respected, veterans were ignored, or even mocked and slighted. Pasha had been denied ground-floor living quarters, despite his handicap and although such an allocation had been easily within the powers of the local housing committee. And, as Pasha himself bitterly told it, when he complained about the low quality of his prostheses to the local specialist, the doctor had replied, "What do you expect *me* to do? / didn't send you

to Afghanistan." The prostheses had not changed much since the Great Patriotic War over forty years earlier. But something in the spirit of the people had changed.

No, Shilko told himself, that was probably incorrect. Even the Great Patriotic War had undoubtedly had its little human indignities and examples of ugliness. That was human nature. Yet . . . somehow . . . there was something wrong.

Shilko fitted his cap to his head. He avoided wearing a helmet. He valued small comforts. And he was conscious of how foolish he looked with his big peasant face and potato nose under the little tin pot. He had no illusions concerning his appearance. He had grown fatter than he would have liked, and he would never appear as the hero in anyone's fantasies. But that was all right, as long as he didn't look like a complete fool.

He swung his legs out into the slow drizzle, then grunted and huffed his body out of the vehicle. He stood off to the side for a moment, relieving the pain in his kidneys. Then he moved toward the shelter of the fire-control post at a pace that compromised between his desire to get in out of the rain and his body's lethargy.

Inside, behind the flaps of tentage, the little control post was bright, crowded, and perfumed with tobacco smoke. Shilko felt instantly alert, comfortable with the reassuring sensory impressions of a lifetime's professional experience. The feel of the place was right, from the pine branches spread over the floor to keep the mud at bay to the intense, tired faces and the iron smell of the command and control vehicles that formed office compartments at the edge of the tentage.

The crew snapped to attention. Shilko loved the small tribute, even as it always embarrassed him just a little.

"Sit down, Comrades, sit down."

A sergeant bent to draw tea from the battered samovar, and Shilko knew the cup was for him. They were all good boys, a good team.

"Your tea, Comrade Battalion Commander."

Shilko took the hot cup lovingly in both of his big hands. It was another of life's small wonderful pleasures. Hot tea on a rainy night during maneuvers. The army couldn't run without its tea.

He caught himself. It wasn't a matter of maneuvers this time. He stepped into the fire direction center vehicle and bent over the gunnery officer's work station, where a captain with a long wave of hair down in his eyes poked at the new automated fire-control system.

"And how are we progressing, Vladimir Semyonovitch?"

The captain looked up. His face had a friendly, trusting look. It was the

sort of look that Shilko wanted every one of his officers to have when their commander approached. "Oh, it will all sort out, Comrade Commander. We're just working out a few bugs in the line. The vehicles keep cutting our wires. But the battery centers are each functional individually."

Shilko put his hand on the man's shoulder. "I'm counting on you. You can't expect an old bear like me to figure out all of this new equipment." Although he said it in a bantering tone, Shilko was serious. He understood the concepts involved and what these new technical means theoretically offered. And he was willing to accept any help they could give, just as he was ready to lay them aside if they failed. But he was personally frightened by the thought of sitting down behind one of the forbidding little panels and attempting to call it to life. He suspected that he would only embarrass himself. So he gladly let the young men pursue the future, and when they performed well, he was grateful, and he encouraged them to go on attacking the problem.

He approached his battalion chief of staff. Romilinsky and a lieutenant sat bent over a field desk covered in manuals, charts, and loose papers. The lieutenant worked on a small East German-made pocket calculator that always seemed to be the most valuable piece of equipment in the battalion.

Romilinsky looked up. Shilko knew the man's expressions well enough to know that, beneath the staff discipline, Romilinsky was frustrated.

"Comrade Battalion Commander," Romilinsky said, "no matter how we do it, the numbers will not come out right. Look here. If we fired every mission assigned under the fire plan, as well as the projected number of response missions for the first day, we would not only have fired more units of fire than we have received under our three-day allocation, but we would not even have time to physically do it. The division's expectations are unrealistic. They're not used to working with our type of guns, and they think we can deliver the sun and the moon."

"Well, Vassili Rodionovitch, we'll do our best."

"If we were to conform fully to the tables, if we used the normative number of rounds per hectare to attain the designated level of suppression or destruction for each mission they've assigned us, it just wouldn't come out. The numbers refuse to compromise."

"Everyone wants the big guns," Shilko said. Then, in a more serious tone, he asked, "But we can meet each phase of the initial fire plan?"

Romilinsky nodded. "We're all right through the scheduled fires."

"And the rest," Shilko said, "is merely a projection."

"We're looking at minimum projection figures."

"Don't worry. We'll manage. If they keep dropping off ammunition the way they've been dumping it since yesterday, we may end up with too many rounds and not enough vehicles to move it when we displace."

"But the matter of the physical inability to fire the missions within the time constraints?"

Shilko appreciated Romilinsky's nervous enthusiasm. He liked to have a worrier as chief of staff. "I have confidence in you," Shilko said. "You'll make it work, Vassili Rodionovitch. Now tell me, has Davidov gotten his battery out of the mud yet?"

Romilinsky smiled. There was a slight rivalry between Romilinsky and Davidov, and Shilko knew that the chief of staff had been amused at Davidov's embarrassment. He had delighted in helping the battery commander recover his bogged guns as publicly as possible.

"He's out and in position. But he was in a heat. We teased him a little. You know, 'Getting one gun stuck may be an accident, but getting an entire battery mired begins to look like a plan.' He still hasn't calmed down completely."

Shilko stopped smiling for a moment. He truly did not like their fire positions. The terrain over which they had been deployed seemed like a German version of the Belorussian marshes. You had to go carefully, and there were areas where you absolutely could not get off the roads. The precious little islands and stretches of reasonably firm ground were absurdly overcrowded. His own guns were too close to one another, batteries well under a thousand meters apart. And still their position was not completely their own. A chemical defense unit, which, to Shilko's relief, appeared utterly unconcerned about the war, and an engineer heavy bridging battalion had both been directed to the same low ground. There was so much steel out there in the darkness that it seemed to Shilko as though the woods and meadows should sink under the weight. He worried that they would all become hopelessly intermingled when it came time to move, and, more seriously still, that his ability to displace, due both to tramcability problems and the unavailability of alternate sites, would be dangerously restricted. The evening before, he and Romilinsky had conducted a reconnaissance, looking for alternate fire positions, but they had not found a single suitable piece of ground that was unoccupied. Now he was waiting for the division to whose divisional artillery group his battalion had been attached to designate alternate sites for his guns. In the meantime, he comforted himself with the thought that he was positioned in depth, thanks to the long range of his pieces, and that the worst initial counterfires would be directed against batteries much closer to the direct-fire battle than his own. But he still had

difficulty maintaining an even temper when he imagined his battalion attempting to displace and sticking in the bogs and sodden byways of East Germany, unable even to make it across the border. He was certain of one thing—space on the roads was going to be at a premium.

On the other hand, the initial fire plan in support of the opening of the offensive was just fine with him. Romilinsky's concerns notwithstanding, Shilko had been pleased when he reviewed the schedule of targets, his "gift list" to be sent to the enemy. The staff officers who had compiled it under the direction of the division commander and his chief of missile troops and artillery were clearly professionals. Shilko prided himself on the traditional professionalism of the Soviet and the earlier Russian artillery. This fire plan did it right, emphasizing concentrations of tremendous lethality at the anticipated points of decision, as well as on known and suspected enemy reserve and artillery concentrations and in support of what Shilko suspected were deception efforts. The concept for maneuvering fires in support of the attack had a good feel to it. Now it was a matter of executing a good plan.

"Anything else, then, before we all go to war?" Shilko asked. He tried his usual easy tone, but the word "war" did not come off with the intended lightness. The moment that would forever after punctuate their lives had drawn too close.

"Well, we received another delivery of the special smoke rounds," Romilinsky said. "I still don't see why we have to post so many guards on them. It's a waste of manpower, and we're short enough as it is."

Romilinsky was speaking of the new obscurant rounds that had been compounded to attenuate the capabilities of enemy observation and target designation equipment. The existence and purpose of the rounds were well known, but the security personnel still insisted that they be handled as though they were vital state secrets.

"Be patient," Shilko said. "We'll fire them up tomorrow, and then we won't have to guard them." He had learned long ago not to argue security issues. "Have all of the troops been fed?"

Romilinsky nodded. He had an exaggerated manner of nodding, like a trained horse determined to please his master. "I'm not certain it was the finest meal we ever served, but it was hot."

Shilko was glad. He tried to feed his battalion as though they were all his own children, although it was very hard. Now he didn't want them going to war on empty stomachs. The food in the Soviet military was of legendarily poor quality, but his battalion's garrison farm was one of the finest in the command. Shilko himself came from peasant stock, and he was proud of it. In the past year, his battalion had been able to raise so

many chickens that they not only exceeded the official meat allocation per soldier but were able to sell chickens to other units for almost five thousand rubles. His soldiers were better fed than those in any other battalion of which Shilko was aware, yet he used only six soldiers full-time in the agricultural collective . . . although each boy had been carefully selected because of his background and expertise. The brigade had gotten quite a bit of mileage out of the accomplishments of Shilko's "gardeners," and their achievements had even been featured in a military newspaper as an example to be emulated by all. It had been Shilko's finest hour with the high military authorities and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Shilko slipped into one of his old peasant attitudes. The Party. He was in the habit of occasionally going down and working a bit with the soldiers in the garrison garden and poultry sheds. He had realized too late how much he loved the land and animals and the sense of growing things, and he suspected that he really had been born to be a farmer, like his forefathers. But, as a young man, he had viewed life on the collective farm as hopelessly drab and unsatisfying. Now, when he dug, the political officer got nervous. Publicly, Shilko received praise for his spirit of proletarian unity and his vigorous conformity to the essential principles of the Party. In fact, however, he knew very well that it made the full-time Party boys very nervous when lieutenant colonels took up shovels and hoes. Afraid they might have to do a little proletarian duty themselves. Shilko had half expected to be denounced as a Maoist, and, while he had in fact been a full member of the Party for twenty years, he had never taken that membership too seriously. It was something you did because you had to do it, like wearing the correct uniform for the occasion. But all of the theory had been a bit too much for him. He liked things he could do with his hands.

His son was another matter. Pasha had a better mind than his father; he was clever and quick. Although he had been an enthusiastic Young Pioneer and a good Komsomolist, Pasha had never immersed himself in the theoretical aspects of Marxism-Leninism to any unusual extent. He had simply accepted the Party as a fact of life, as did most young men of reasonable ambition. Then he had come back, legless, from Afghanistan, to find himself last on the list for everything. No salutes for the boy without legs. And Shilko had watched his son turn from a loving, open youth into an extraordinarily dedicated member of the Party. The Party accepted Pasha the invalid, seeking to exploit him even as they genuinely sought to help him. But Pasha had turned the full weight of his talents and his anger to exploiting the Party. Shilko knew from experience that

that was the kind of ambition on which the Party thrived. At first, upon his son's return, Shilko had worried about the practical aspects of his well-being. Then he had watched the legless boy develop himself into a man with long arms.

Pasha was doing very well within the Party apparatus. He seemed to have developed a taste for manipulation, and Shilko had no doubt that his son would become a powerful man, that he would long ride the ribbons he had been given to compensate for his missing legs. Shilko no longer needed to worry about the mundane aspects of his son's welfare. Pasha would have a fine ground-floor apartment, or an apartment in a building where the elevator worked. But the simple, loving father in Shilko worried now about other aspects of his son's future.

And in a matter of minutes, there would be a war. It still seemed unreal to Shilko, as though this could not possibly be a rational decision. But there was no mistaking the level of preparation, the intensity, the inevitability of it all. Shilko wondered if the decision to begin this war had been made by the kind of men his son was coming to resemble. The men who knew best, for each and every living creature.

Well, Shilko thought, it didn't matter. He and his boys would fight and fight well, no matter who made the decisions. The event was infinitely greater than the men caught up in it.

The mood in the fire control post had begun to change. The frantic action tapered off. Officers began to sit down. Men looked up at the master clock above the communications bank.

It would not be long now. Shilko looked at his watch, even though he had just glanced at the clock. He went to the samovar and tipped himself another cup of tea. Then he took his chair near the situation map, proofing the schedule of fires one last time.

The radios were silent. Romilinsky sat down beside Shilko and nervously patted the handle of the field telephone, the wires of which led directly to the gun batteries. Soon it would be time to pick it up and say the single word that would unleash the storm.

Shilko was almost as proud of the big guns with which he had been entrusted as he was of his men. When he had entered the service, his first unit had been equipped with field pieces designed before the Great Patriotic War, towed by Studebaker trucks from the war years. Now the enormous self-propelled pieces in his battalion made those little towed weapons seem like toys. Shilko felt that he had seen enormous progress in his lifetime.

"Comrade Battalion Commander," Romilinsky said, "you seem admirably relaxed."

"The sleep did me good," Shilko said, content to wait and think through these last minutes.

But the chief of staff wanted to talk. "I believe we are as ready as possible."

Shilko accepted that the needs of other men were different from his own. If his chief of staff needed to talk away the final minutes of peace, Shilko was willing to oblige him.

"I'm confident that we're ready, Vassili Rodionovitch. This is a good battalion. I have great faith."

"I can't help thinking, though, of things we should have done, of training that should have received more stress . . ."

Shilko waved the comment away. "No one is ever as prepared as they should be. You know the dialectic. A constant state of flux."

"Five minutes," a voice announced.

Shilko looked up at the clock. Then he sat back. "You know," he began in his most personable voice, "when I was a junior lieutenant, I was horrified by the conditions I found upon arrival at my first unit. Nothing seemed to be as we had been promised at the academy. Nothing was as precise, or as rigorous, or even as clean. I was very disturbed by what I viewed as a betrayal of the high standards of the Soviet military. Oh, I wasn't especially ambitious. I never expected to change the world. But this unit didn't seem as though it could go to war against a pack of dance-hall girls. Half of the equipment didn't work. The situation seemed intolerable to a brand-new lieutenant who had been coached to go up against the capitalist aggressors at a moment's notice. Anyway, my commander was a wise man—a veteran, of course, in those days. He watched my struggles with some amusement, I think. Then, one day, he called me into his office. I was worried. It wasn't so common for a battalion commander to speak to a lieutenant in those days. And it usually didn't happen because the lieutenant had done something to be proud of. So I went to his office in quite a state. I couldn't think of anything I'd done incorrectly. But you never knew. Anyway, he asked me how I enjoyed being in the army, and how I liked the unit. He was teasing me, although I didn't realize it then. I talked around my real feelings. Finally, he just smiled, and he called me closer. Very close to his desk. And he said he was going to reveal to me the one military truth, and that if only I remembered it, I would do very well in my military career."

Shilko looked around. Everyone was listening to him, despite the unmistakable tension.

The clock showed two minutes to go.

Shilko grinned. "You know what he said to me? He leaned over that

desk, so close I could see the old scars on his cheek, and he half whispered, 'Shilko, wars are not won by the most competent army—they are won by the least incompetent army.'"

His audience responded with pleasant laughter. But the undercurrent of anticipation had grown so intense now that no man could fully master it. The tension seemed almost like a physical wave, rising to sweep them all away.

Romilinsky gripped the field telephone, ready.

Less than one minute to go.

In the distance, a number of guns sounded, startling in the perfect stillness. Someone had fired early, either because of a bad clock or through nervousness.

Shilko looked at the clock one final time. Other batteries and full battalions took up the challenge of the first lone battery, rising to a vast orchestra of calibers. Shilko turned to Romilinsky, utterly serious now.

"Give the order to open fire."

FOUR

Junior Lieutenant Plinnikov wiped at his nose with his fingers and ordered his driver forward. The view through the vehicle commander's optics allowed no meaningful orientation. Rapid flashes dazzled in the periscope's lens, leaving a deep gray veil of smoke in their wake. The view was further disrupted by raindrops that found their way under the external cowl of the lens block. Plinnikov felt as though he were guiding his reconnaissance track through hell at the bottom of the sea.

The shudder of the powerful artillery bursts reached through the metal walls of the vehicle. Suddenly, the armor seemed hopelessly thin, the tracks too weak to hold, and the automatic cannon little more than a toy. Occasionally, a tinny sprinkling of debris struck the vehicle, faintly audible through Plinnikov's headset and over the engine whine. He could feel the engine pulling, straining to move the tracks through the mud of the farm trail.

"Comrade Lieutenant, we're very close to the barrage," his driver told him.

Plinnikov understood that the driver meant *too* close. But the lieutenant was determined to outperform every other reconnaissance platoon leader in the battalion, if not in the entire Second Guards Tank Army.

"Keep moving," Plinnikov commanded, "just keep moving. Head straight through the smoke."

The driver obeyed, but Plinnikov could feel his unwillingness through the metal frame that separated them. For a moment, Plinnikov took his eyes away from the periscope and looked to the side, checking on his gunner. But Belonov was all right, eyes locked to his own periscope. Three men in a rolling steel box. There was no margin of safety in personnel now; everyone had to do his job without fail. Plinnikov had never received the additional soldiers required to fill out his reconnaissance platoon for war, and he had no extra meat, no dismount strength in his own vehicle. As it was, he could barely man the essential positions in each of his three vehicles.

It was impossible to judge the exact location of his vehicle now. If everything was still on track, his second vehicle would be tucked in behind him, with Senior Sergeant Malyarchuk to the rear in an overwatch position. Plinnikov laughed to himself. Overwatch. You couldn't see ten meters. He glanced at his map, anxious to orient himself.

He could feel the trail dropping toward a valley or ravine. Artillery rounds struck immediately to the front.

"Keep going," Plinnikov said. "Get down into the low ground. Stay on the trail as long as the smoke holds. *Fast* now, *move."*

Plinnikov sensed that they were very close to the enemy. Clots of earth and stone flew into the air, hurtling across his narrowed horizon. Plinnikov guessed that, if he moved off the trail, there might be mines, but that the trail itself would only be covered by direct fires—which would be ineffective in the confusion of the Soviet artillery preparation.

"Lieutenant, we're catching up with the barrage. We're too close."

"Keep going. We're already in it. Go right through."

"Comrade Lieutenant . . ." It was Junior Sergeant Belonov, his gunner and assistant. The boy's face was milky.

"It's all right," Plinnikov told him through the intercom. "Just spot for targets. If we wait and try to sneak through, they'll get us for sure."

An unidentified object thumped against the vehicle so hard that the vehicle jolted, as though wincing in pain.

"Go *faster,* "Plinnikov shouted to the driver. "Just stay on the road and go as fast as you can."

"I can't see the road. I lose it."

"Just *go."* Plinnikov brushed his fingers at his nose. He felt fear rising in his belly and chest, unleashed by the impact of whatever had hit the vehicle.

Suddenly, the artillery blasts seemed to swamp them, shaking the vehicle like a boat on rough water. Plinnikov realized that if they threw a track now, they were dead.

"Go, damn you."

In the thick smoke, the lights of the blasts seemed demonic, alive with deadly intentions.

"More to the left . . . *to the left."*

The tracks seemed to buckle on the edge of a ditch or gully, threatening to peel away from the road wheels.

"Target," Plinnikov screamed.

But the sudden black shape off to their right side was lifeless, its metal deformed by a direct hit. The driver swerved away, and the tracks came level, back on the trail again.

Plinnikov broke out in a sweat. He had not seen the shattered vehicle until they almost collided with it. He wondered, for the first time, if he had not done something irrevocably foolish.

Slop from a nearby impact smacked the external lens of Plinnikov's periscope, cracking it diagonally, just as the vehicle reached a pocket where the wind had thinned the smoke to a transparent gauze. Several dark shapes moved out of the smoke on a converging axis.

"Targets. Gunner, right. Driver, pull left *now."*

But the enemy vehicles moved quickly away, either uninterested in or unaware of Plinnikov's presence. The huge armored vehicles disappeared back into the smoke, black metal monsters roaming over the floor of hell. None of the turrets turned to fight.

"Hold fire."

The enemy were evidently pulling off of a forward position. The fire was too much for them. Plinnikov tried his radio, hoping the antenna had not been cut away.

"Javelin, this is Penknife. Do you hear me?"

Nothing.

The heaviest fire struck behind them now. But the smoke, mingled with the fog and rain, still forced them to drive without points of orientation. Plinnikov worried because he had once turned in a complete circle in a smokescreen on a training exercise, in the most embarrassing experience of his brief career. He could still hear the laughter and the timeworn jokes about lieutenants.

"Javelin, this is Penknife. I have a priority message."

"Penknife, this is Javelin." The control station barely came through the sea of static.

"Enemy forces in at least platoon strength withdrawing from forward positions under fire strike. I can't give you an exact location."

"Where are you? What's your location?"

"I'm in my assigned sector. Visibility's almost zero. We just drove under the artillery barrage. We're in among the enemy."

"You're hard to read. I'm getting a garbled transmission. Did you say you're *behind* the artillery barrage?"

"On the enemy side of it. Continuing to move."

There was a long silence on the other end. Plinnikov sensed that he had surprised them all. He felt a bloom of pride. Then the faint voice returned.

"Penknife, your mission now is to push as far as you can. Ignore assigned boundaries. Just go as deep as you can and call targets. Do you understand?"

"Clear. Moving now."

Plinnikov switched to the intercom. The smoke thinned slightly. His first instinct was to move for high ground so he could fix his location. But he quickly realized that any high ground would not only reveal his presence but was likely to be occupied by the enemy.

"Driver, follow the terrain, stay in the low ground. Just watch out for ditches and water."

He switched again, this time to his platoon net, trying to raise his other two vehicles.

"Quiver, this is Penknife."

He waited. No answer. He tried again and still received no response. He swung the turret around to get a better view, straining to see through his cracked and dirty optics.

There was nothing. Misty gray emptiness.

"Penknife, this is Stiletto." Plinnikov heard Senior Sergeant Malyarchuk's voice. "I can't hear any response from Quiver. My situation as follows: moving slowly with the barrage. Can't see a damned thing. I lost you twenty minutes ago."

"This is Penknife. Clear transmission. Continue to move on primary route. Watch for Quiver, he may be stuck out there. End transmission."

His other vehicle might be broken down or mired. But, he realized, it was more likely that they were dead. He was surprised to find that he felt little emotion, and ashamed to experience how swiftly his thoughts turned to the implications the loss of the vehicle and crew had for him.

"Driver, get on that trail to the right. That one."

The vehicle moved sharply now, with the worst effects of the barrage well behind it. Plinnikov's optics had deteriorated severely. The crack in the outer lens allowed water to seep in.

"Slow. See the trail into the trees? *Slow.* Take the trail."

The vehicle eased onto a smooth forest trail that appeared very well-maintained. Plinnikov hoped to find a spot to tuck into for a few minutes so they could clean off all of their vision blocks and lenses and tighten the antenna. One barrage had already passed over the forest, and patches of trees had been splintered and blackened. The driver worked the tracks over a small fallen trunk. He drove the vehicle cautiously, with no desire to throw a track in such close proximity to the enemy.

"Comrade Lieutenant, I can barely see," the driver said. "Can I pop open my hatch?"

"No," Plinnikov said. "Stop right here. I'll get out and clean the blocks."

The vehicle rocked to a standstill. Plinnikov unlatched the safety bolt and pushed up his hatch. The sudden increase in the noise level was striking. The weight of the artillery preparation was incredible, and the fires sounded much closer now. It was difficult to imagine anything surviving such an effort.

In the wet green woods, fresh forest smells mingled with the stink of blown ordnance. Raindrops worked through the overhanging branches and struck Plinnikov's nose and cheeks, touching cool at his lips. The hatch ring felt slimy with moisture and dirt.

Just ahead, another trail crossed the one along which they had moved. The other trail was deeply rutted and black with mud, evidence that several tracked vehicles had passed along it.

Plinnikov drew himself back down into the turret. "Belonov," he told the gunner, "make sure the auto-cannon's ready to go. I don't think we're alone."

"Comrade Lieutenant, let me check the exterior."

"No. You stay on the gun. Just be ready." Plinnikov stripped off his headset and snaked out of the turret. The deck seemed to slide away under his boots, and he grasped the long, thin barrel of the automatic cannon to steady himself, crouching.

The armament appeared to be all right, with no metal deformities. But there were numerous spots on the vehicle exterior where the paint had been stripped away and where the bolt-on armor had been gashed or even sheared away. One fender twisted toward the sky. An external stow-box was gone, and the spare track pads were missing. The shovel was gone. The main antenna for the high-powered radio set was nicked, but functionally intact.

Unidentifiable objects ripped through the foliage, their noises an occasional whisper. Big raindrops burst like shells on his skin. More rain

coming. Plinnikov hurriedly cleaned all of the optics with a rag, trying not to smear them too badly.

He got back into the turret as soon as he reasonably could. "The trail looks clear enough up ahead, but you can't see very far. The enemy has either passed through these woods or he's still somewhere in here with us."

"Perhaps we should wait here for a while, Comrade Lieutenant. See what the enemy does, you know?" Belonov was clearly frightened. Plinnikov hoped the gunner would be able to work his weapon when the time came.

Plinnikov twitched his nose, then rubbed at it with his dirty knuckles. "No. We have to get a fix on our location. And if we just sit, the artillery will roll back over us. We're moving."

The truth was, Plinnikov realized, that he was afraid to remain motionless, afraid he couldn't handle the stress of inactivity.

"Driver, can you see all right now?"

"Better, Comrade Lieutenant."

"Let's go. Nice and easy." Plinnikov wanted to make sure he spotted the enemy before they spotted his lone vehicle. He knew it would be impossible to detect moving vehicles until they were fatally close, due to the noise of the artillery preparation.

The vehicle dug itself into the peat of the trail, then gripped and lurched forward. Plinnikov unlashed his assault rifle. He expected to fight with the automatic cannon and the on-board machine gun, but he wanted to be prepared for anything. He stood up behind the shield of his opened turret, weapon at the ready, headset flaps left open so he could hear a bit of the world around him.

The vehicle pivoted into the rutted trail. The rain picked up, slapping Plinnikov, making him squint. Nervously, he ejected a cartridge from his weapon, insuring it was loaded and ready.

"Belonov?"

"Comrade Lieutenant?"

"How well can you see?"

"I can see the trail."

"If I duck down and start turning the turret, be ready."

"I'm ready."

Plinnikov heard the nerves in both of their voices. He was furious about the lack of soldiers to fill out his crew. He wanted all of the fighting power he could get. He wished his lost vehicle was still with him.

The tracks slid and plumed mud high into the air behind the vehicle.

The immense roar of the artillery seemed part of another reality now, clearly divorced from anything that would happen in these woods.

Black vehicle shapes. Thirty meters through the trees.

Plinnikov dropped into the turret, not bothering to close the hatch behind himself. He took control of the turret, forehead pressed against his optics.

"See them? Fire, damn you. *Fire."*

The automatic cannon began to recoil.

"There. To the right."

"I have him."

"Driver, don't stop. Go."

The vehicle pulled level with a small clearing in the forest where two enemy command tracks stood positioned with their drop ramps facing each other. Two light command cars were parked to one side.

A third track that had been hidden from view began to move for the trail.

"Hit the mover, *hit the mover."*

The automatic cannon spit several bursts at the track, which stopped in a shower of sparks.

"Driver, front to the enemy."

Plinnikov swung the turret again.

The enemy fired back with small arms, although one man stood still, helmetless, in amazement, as though he had never in his life expected such a thing to happen.

The automatic cannon and the machine gun raked the sides of the enemy tracks. All good, clean flank shots, punching through the armor. The track that had made a run for the trail burned now. The driver's hatch popped up, and Plinnikov cut the man across the shoulders with the on-board machine gun.

The man who had stood so long in such amazement slowly raised his hands. Plinnikov turned the machine gun on him.

Plinnikov was afraid he would miss one of the dismounted soldiers, and he left the on-board weaponry to Belonov, standing behind the shield of his hatch with his assault rifle.

Just in time, he saw an enemy soldier kneeling with a small tube on his shoulder. He emptied his entire magazine into the man, just as Belonov brought the machine gun around to catch him as well.

Plinnikov pulled a grenade from his harness, then another. As quickly as his shaking fingers allowed, he primed one and tossed it toward the enemy vehicles, then followed it with the second grenade. He dropped back inside of his vehicle.

The explosions sounded flat, almost inconsequential, after the artillery barrage. Plinnikov realized that his hearing was probably going.

"Sweep the vehicles one more time with the machine gun. *Driver.* To the rear, ten meters."

"I can't see."

"Just back up, damn it. *Now."*

The gears crunched, and the vehicle's tracks threw mud toward the dead and the dying.

"Driver, halt. Belonov, I'm going out. You cover me."

He felt as though he would have given anything imaginable to have his authorized dismount scouts now. If there was a price to pay for the system's failure, he'd have to pay it. The idea did not appeal to him. He felt as though he were going very, very fast, as though he had the energy to vault over trees, but his hand shook as he grasped the automatic rifle. He didn't bother to unfold the stock. It was challenging enough to snap in a fresh magazine.

It felt as though it took an unusually long time to work his way out of the turret. He was conscious every second of how fully he was exposed. As soon as he could, he swung his legs high and to the side, sliding down over the side of the low turret, catching his rump sharply on the edge of the vehicle's deck.

He hit the mud and crouched beside the vehicle. Great clots of earth hung from the track and road wheels.

He checked to his rear.

Nothing. Forest. The empty trail.

To his front, the little command cars blazed, one with a driver still behind the wheel, a shadow in the flames. Between his vehicle and the devastated enemy tracks, Plinnikov could see three enemy soldiers on the ground. One of them moved in little jerks and twists. None of them made any sounds. Another body lay sprawled face down on the ramp of one of the command tracks, while yet another—the antitank grenadier—had been kicked back against a tree by the machine gun. The grenadier hardly resembled a human being now.

The vehicle that had tried to escape burned with a searing glow on its metal. The type and markings made it Dutch. Plinnikov kept well away from it as he worked his way forward.

One of the command vehicles had its engine running. Both of the command tracks bore West German markings, and most of the uniforms were West German. Plinnikov skirted the front of the running vehicle, taking cover in the brush. As methodically as his nerves would permit, he maneuvered his way around to the enemy's rear.

He halted along the wet metal sidewall of the running vehicle, feeling its vibrations. Above the idling engine, he could hear the razzle of a radio call in a strange language. He wondered if it was a call for the station that had just perished.

Someone moaned, almost as if he was snoring. Then it was quiet again.

Plinnikov breathed in deeply. He felt terribly afraid. He could not understand why he was doing this. It seemed as though he was meant to be anyplace but here. He looked at the grenadier's contorted remains. Somehow, it had all seemed a game, a daring game of driving through the artillery. And if he had been caught, he would have been removed from the game. But the man slopped against the tree was out of the game forever. For a length of time he could not measure, Plinnikov simply stared at the tiny black, red, and gold flag on the rear fender of the far vehicle, as if it could provide answers.

He took a last deep breath, fighting his stomach. He pulled his weapon in tight against his side and threw himself around the corner of the vehicle onto the drop ramp.

He had forgotten the dead man on the ramp. He tripped over the corpse, flopping over the body and smashing his elbow. He landed with his mouth close to the dead man's ear, and, in an instant of paralysis, he felt the lifelike warmth of the body thiough the battle dress and sogging rain. The dead man had fine white hairs mixed in with the close-cropped black on the rear of his skull, and Plinnikov saw the red pores on the back of the man's neck with superhuman clarity.

As soon as he could, Plinnikov pushed off of the corpse and twisted so that he could fire his weapon into the interior of the vehicle. But he knew that if anyone still had been capable of shooting, he would be dead already.

The running vehicle bore a stew of bodies in its belly. The accidents of dying had thrown several men together as though they had been dancing and had fallen drunkenly. The inside of the cluttered compartment was streaked and splashed with wetness, and uniforms had torn open to spill filth and splinters of bone. Plinnikov realized that some of the rounds that had penetrated the near side of the vehicle had not had the force to punch out the other side and had expended themselves in rattling back and forth inside the vehicle, chopping the occupants.

In the track parked opposite, a lone radio operator sat sprawled over his notepads, microphone hanging limply from a coil cord. On the radio, a foreign voice called the dead.

Plinnikov was sick. He tried to make it to the trees, out of some elementary human instinct, but he stumbled over the dead man on the

ramp for a second time and vomited on the corpse's back. As he looked down at his mess Plinnikov panicked to see blood smeared over his own chest before realizing that it had come from his embrace of the middle-aged corpse.

Plinnikov felt empty, his belly burning with acid and his heart vacantly sick. He stared at the slow progress of his vomit down the angled ramp. He wanted to be home, safe, and never to see war or anything military ever again.

He wiped the strands from his lips, wondering if his crew had watched his little performance. The taste in his mouth made him feel sick again. He realized, belatedly, that the amazed man with his hands up had been trying to surrender, and that it had been wrong to gun him down. But during the fighting, it had never occurred to him to do anything but shoot at everything in front of him.

The voice on the radio called again. Plinnikov imagined that he could detect a pleading tone.

Suddenly, he braced himself. He stared at the silver ornaments on the epaulets of the corpse on the ramp. This was a command post. There would be documents. Maps. Radio communications data.

Stomach twisting, Plinnikov turned to his task.

Senior Lieutenant Filov failed to grasp what was happening until it was too late. He brought his company of tanks on line behind the smokescreen, moving at combat speed toward the enemy, maintaining reasonable order despite his spiky nervousness. Then the tanks began to sink in what had appeared to be a normal field.

Reconnaissance had not reported any difficulties. Now his command tank stood mired to the deck, and none of his vehicles succeeded in backing out. Their efforts only worked them deeper into the marshy soil. His entire company had ground to a halt in a tattered cartoon of their battle formation.

Filov attempted to call back through the battalion for more smoke and for recovery vehicles. But the smokescreen began to dissipate noticeably before he could establish radio contact. The nets were cluttered with strange voices.

"Prepare to engage, prepare to engage," he shouted into his microphone. When his platoon commanders failed to respond, he realized with a feeling of near-panic that he had been speaking only through the intercom. He switched channels, fingers clumsy on the control mechanism, and repeated his orders.

"Misha, I'm stuck," one of his platoon commanders responded.

"We're *all* stuck. Use your call sign. And mine. And use your head."

Filov tried to raise battalion again. Without more smoke, they'd be dead. Filov was sure the enemy had trapped them, that this was a clever ambush, and that enemy antitank gunners were waiting to destroy them.

The smoke continued to thin.

Nothing on the battalion net. It was as though battalion had vanished from the earth. Filov's gunner, a Muslim from Uzbekistan, was praying. Filov slapped him hard on the side of his headset.

"God won't help, you bastard. Get on your gunsight."

Flares popped hot bright through the last meager smoke. From the angle of their arc, Filov could tell that none of his people had fired them. In any case, the use of flares was inappropriate. Even with the rain and smoke, there was still plenty of light. Probably a distress signal, Filov thought. But he had no idea who could have fired.

He tried the battalion net again, begging the electronics to respond. The gun tube of his tank was so low to the ground that it barely cleared the wild grasses.

Filov wondered if they could dig themselves out. He knew how to recover tanks in a classroom, when the problem allowed nearby trees. But now they were stuck dead center in a meadow. He was about to order all of his vehicles to begin erecting their camouflage nets and to send one of his lieutenants back on foot to locate the rest of the battalion when the last smoke blew off.

The battlefield showed its secrets with painful clarity, the light rain and mist offering no real protection. Less than five hundred meters from his line of tanks, set at an angle, Filov saw five enemy tanks. The enemy vehicles were also bogged down almost to the turrets.

"Fire," Filov screamed, paying no attention to which channel he was riding, forgetting all fire discipline and procedures. His gunner dutifully sent off a round in the general direction of the enemy. Filov tried to remember the proper sequence of fire commands. He began to turn the turret without making a decision on which enemy vehicle to engage.

The enemy fired back. Filov's entire line fired, in booming disorder. Nobody seemed to hit anything.

Filov settled on a target. "Loading sabot. Range, four-fifty."

The automatic loader slammed the round into the breech.

"Correct to four hundred."

"Ready."

"Fire."

The round went wide, despite the ridiculously short distance to the target. But another one of the enemy vehicles disappeared in a bloom of

sparks, flame, and smoke under the massed fires of Filov's right flank platoon. Filov's headset shrieked with broken transmissions.

"I've lost one. I've lost one."

"Range, five hundred."

"Wrong net, you sonofabitch."

The enemy tanks fired as swiftly as they could, their rounds skimming through the marshy grasses. Filov could not understand why he could not hit his targets. He had always fired top scores on the range, perfect fives. He tried to slow down and behave as though he were back on a local gunnery range.

Filov's gunner sent another round toward the enemy tank. This time it struck home.

The enemy tank failed to explode. After a bright flash, the big angular turret was still there, settling back down as though its sleep had been disturbed. But the vehicle's crew began to clamber out through the hatches, clumsy in their haste.

Out of the corner of his field of vision, Filov saw the turret of one of his own tanks fly high into the air, as though it were no heavier than a soccer ball. Then another enemy tank flared up in a fuel-tank fire.

It was too much. Filov opened his hatch and scrambled out. This was insane. Murder. All of his visions collapsed inward. His headset jerked at his neck, and he tore it off. He stumbled down over the slippery deck of his tank, then abandoned his last caution and jumped for the grass. He saw other men running across the field in the distance.

It was senseless to stay. For what? They'd all die. Just shoot until they all killed each other. What would it accomplish?

The *whisk* and thunder of the tank battle continued behind him, punctuated occasionally by the metallic ring and blast of a round meeting its target. The sopping marshland clutched at Filov's boots. In his panic, he began smashing at his legs, as if he could slap them into cooperation, as if he could beat the earth from underfoot. He ran without looking back.

Plinnikov stood up in his hatch, fumbling to ready the smoke grenade. He heard the helicopter before he saw it. The weather had an odd effect on the sound, diffusing it against the background of the artillery barrage, so that it was difficult to identify the exact azimuth of the aircraft's approach. All at once, just offset from Plinnikov's line of sight, the small helicopter emerged from the mist, a quick blur that swiftly grew larger and began to define itself. Plinnikov tossed the smoke canister so that the wind would lead the colored fog away from his vehicle. He could tell

immediately that the pilot was one of the Afgantsy, a real veteran, by the way he came in fast and very low, despite the rain and reduced visibility.

The pilot never really powered down. His copilot leapt from the settling aircraft and raced through the drizzle, bareheaded. Plinnikov jumped from his track, clutching the rolled maps and documents. The maps and some of the papers were stained with blood and the spillage of ripped bodies, and Plinnikov was anxious to be rid of them. He held them out to the aviator like a bouquet.

"Anything else?" the copilot shouted. The wash off the rotors half submerged his voice.

Plinnikov shook his head.

The smoke spread out in a shredded carpet across the green field. The enemy would see it, too, and there was no time to waste.

The copilot raced back to his helicopter. He hurriedly tossed the captured materials behind his seat, and the pilot began to lift off even before his partner was properly seated. The aircraft rose just enough to clear the trees, then shot off in a dogleg from its approach direction.

Plinnikov vaulted onto the deck of his vehicle, almost losing his balance on the slippery metal. He dropped into the turret.

"Let's move. Back into the woods."

The vehicle whined into life, rocking out across the furrows of the field until it could turn and nose back into the trail between the trees. Plinnikov studied his map again, searching for a good route deeper into the enemy's rear. No obvious routes suggested themselves, and his calculations began to seem hopelessly complicated to him. In irritation, he ordered the driver to double back onto the trail that had proven so lucrative earlier, hoping a course would be easier to develop while working through the actual landscape than it was on the map.

At a trail crossing, he turned to the map for reference. It was a very high-quality map, with extensive military detail. But it almost seemed as though the trails in the German woods created themselves out of nothing, as though the forest were haunted.

He chose the trail that seemed to head west. At first, it was a fair dirt track. Then the forest began to close in. Plinnikov found himself pushing wet branches away from the vehicle. His uniform was already soaking and uncomfortable, and his spirits dropped suddenly, as though someone had pulled a cork.

"Depress the gun tube. It's catching the branches. Driver, go slowly."

Then Plinnikov's fortunes seemed to change. The trees thinned again, and the terrain began to show slight undulations. A hollow off to his right discharged a small stream that then flowed parallel to the track. He

checked his map again, hoping the feature and the trail, side by side, would allow him to orient himself. But he could not identify his location; the only possibilities on the map didn't really seem to make sense in terms of the distance he estimated they had traveled. He needed a clear landmark, or an open view.

Through all of his trials, Plinnikov tried not to think of the dead enemy, to hold their creeping, insistent reality at a distance. He sought harmless thoughts, gleaning his memories of the military academy and the seemingly endless dilemmas of the lieutenancy that followed graduation. But all of the forced images faded into the vivid sights, sounds, and smells of the recent combat. He could not help refighting the action over and over again, scrutinizing his failures. The dead men died again and again, their reality already changing slightly, as though warping and mutating in his overheated memory.

Unexpectedly, the forest ended. The vehicle lay fully exposed where Plinnikov ordered it to halt. He shook off the last of his daydreams. A church spire rose above a copse of trees, dark against the low gray sky. He wiped the back of his fingers across his nose and reached down for his map.

He neither saw nor heard the round that killed him. It tore into the hull of the vehicle below the turret, ripping off his lower legs and mincing his hands as it exploded. The quick secondary blast shot his torso up through the commander's hatch, breaking his neck against the hatch rim and shattering his back as the pressure compressed his body through the circular opening and blew it into the sky like a bundle of rags.

FIVE

Captain Kryshinin had never faced such a frustrating problem. As commander of the forward security element, it was his job to move fast, to locate the enemy and overrun him, if possible, or, otherwise, to fix the enemy until the advance guard came up, meanwhile searching for a bypass around the enemy position. Textbook stuff. Yet here the enemy had already pulled back. And his element was blocked by nothing more than a mined road crater and an unknown number of mines in the surrounding meadows.

He had no idea where the combat reconnaissance patrol had gone, or how they had gotten through. They should have warned him of this situation. Now Kryshinin was stuck. His engineers had become separated from his element in the confusion of initial contact and penetration of the enemy's covering troops. He had no mine-clearing capability without them.

He judged that the advance guard was no more than twenty minutes behind, unless they had gotten bogged down in more fighting. Leading the Second Guards Tank Army attack, the division's lead regiments had struck the thin enemy deployments so hard that it had been surprisingly easy to force a gap. Kryshinin had not lost a single vehicle in combat. He was only missing the wandering engineers. Until the lead infantry

fighting vehicle attempted to work around the road crater. A mine had torn out its belly and butchered the crew.

Now Kryshinin's element was static. Thirteen infantry fighting vehicles, three tanks, a battery of 122mm self-propelled guns, and over a dozen specialized vehicles with ground-to-air radios, artillery communications, antitank missiles, and light surface-to-air missiles were backed up along a single country road. It was a tough little combat package, well-suited to the mission and the terrain. But now, without engineers, it was helpless.

Kryshinin dismounted and began walking swiftly forward along the bunched column. But before he reached its head, he saw one of his lieutenants flush all of the soldiers out of their fighting vehicle. The lieutenant got into the driver's compartment and, after a jerking start, edged slowly toward the blasted vehicle.

The lieutenant guided his vehicle behind the hulk and began pushing it. Kryshinin stood still for a moment in surprise. Then he began to shout at the motorized rifle troops who were standing around watching as casually as if this was a training demonstration. He came back to life now, as if awakening, stirred by his lieutenant's example. He ordered the vehicles into a more tactical posture. He was suddenly ashamed of himself. He had allowed them all to back up on the road like perfect targets while he had waited for inspiration.

The lieutenant had not been able to push the destroyed vehicle in a straight line. Finally, he just edged it out of the way, crunching and grinding metal. The mine-struck vehicle had peeled off a track, and the hulk curled off to the left as its naked road wheels bit into the turf and sank.

The lieutenant drove slowly forward, seeking a safe path to the roadway on the far side of the crater. He was a new officer, and Kryshinin had had little sense of him. Another lieutenant. Now the boy had taken the lead when his superior had failed.

Kryshinin stood in the disheartening German rain, painfully conscious of his inadequacy. He regretted all of the opportunities he had let slip to better train himself and his officers, to get to know his lieutenants a little better.

The infantry fighting vehicle's engine had a girlish sort of whine, even grinding forward in the lowest gear. Kryshinin watched, fists clenched, as the vehicle neared its destination.

The left side of the vehicle suddenly lifted into the air, lofted on a pillow of fire.

Kryshinin instinctively ducked against the nearest vehicle. When he looked up, the lieutenant's vehicle stood in flames.

Without looking around, Kryshinin could feel the crushing disappointment in all of the soldiers. They had been united in their hopes for the lieutenant. Now expectation collapsed into a desolate emptiness.

As Kryshinin stood helplessly again a young sergeant ordered all of his soldiers out of their vehicle. And the sergeant drove slowly in the lieutenant's traces until the prow of his track crunched against the flaming rear doors of the newly stricken vehicle. Then he applied power.

Before the sergeant finished working the burning vehicle out of the way, a tank pulled out of the column and carefully worked its way up along the shoulder of the road, ready to take its turn in case another probe vehicle was needed.

Kryshinin knew it was all right then. They would get through. He began to shout encouragement. Following his lead, his soldiers began to shout as well.

The flaming wreck veered out of the way, and the sergeant aimed at the roadway beyond the crater.

Kryshinin felt as though he could win the war with just a handful of men such as these. He was suddenly eager to get back on the move, to find the enemy.

"Could it be a deception?" Trimenko said, asking the question more of himself than of his audience. He reached into the leather tobacco pouch in which he carried his pistachios. Eating them was a habit he had picked up during his years in the Transcaucasus Military District. In Germany, his staff went to great lengths to keep him supplied. Often, he hardly tasted the nuts, but he found that peeling away the shells had a soothing influence on him, draining away nervousness the way worry beads worked for a Muslim.

"The documents appear to be genuine," the army's deputy chief of staff for operations said. "They were reportedly taken from a command post that was completely destroyed."

"Have you seen the documents? Has anyone here seen them?"

"They're on their way up from the division. We only know what the chief of reconnaissance reported from his initial exploitation. But it makes sense," the operations chief said, pointing at the map. "It puts their corps boundary here, not far from where we had assessed it."

"Far enough, though," Trimenko said. "It makes a difference. We need to execute the option shifting Malyshev's division onto the central

tactical direction with Khrenov. The combat power has to converge." He slipped the bared pistachio between his lips.

"Comrade Army Commander, that may slow the seizure of Lueneburg."

At the mention of Lueneburg, Trimenko's temper quickened. But his facial expression gave no indication of any change. He still chafed at the thought of the Lueneburg operation. He had not been allowed to explain its purpose to anyone else; as far as his staff knew, it was a serious undertaking with a military purpose. But it irritated Trimenko that none of them seemed to question it. To him, it was obviously a stupid diversion of combat power. Yet his officers accepted it without a murmur. He looked at his operations chief. The man's mind was too slow; he was always too ready to state the self-evident. Trimenko felt disgustedly that he could think at least twice as fast and several times more clearly than any of his subordinates. He reached for another pistachio.

"If we rupture their corps boundary," Trimenko said in a voice that was clearly unwilling to accept further discussion, "we'll turn Lueneburg from the south at our convenience." He felt as though he were lecturing cadets at one of the second-rate academies. "I'm going to split them like a melon under a cleaver." He turned to his chief of staff. "Babryshkin, order Malyshev and Khrenov to execute the center option. Adjust the boundary accordingly." Suddenly, he stood up, unwilling to trust the staff to work incisively and swiftly enough to meet the demands of the situation. "Put the boundary here. Just offset from Route 71. Get Malyshev moving. If he hasn't made his preparations properly, I'll relieve him. Has Khrenov reported on the status of his crossing?"

"Comrade Army Commander, the divisional crossing operation is underway at this time."

Trimenko sensed that his operations officer didn't know any further details. He almost lashed out at the officer but managed to control himself. His fingernails worked at the pistachio shell. "All right. Everyone get started. Babryshkin, get me the front commander on the line. If he's not available, I'll talk to General Chibisov. And get my helicopter ready. I'm going forward. Make sure my pilot has a good fix on Khrenov's forward command post. If Khrenov isn't there, I'll take over his division myself."

Trimenko felt a familiar fury. He could not make them move at the pace he believed appropriate to the occasion. But he realized that if he drove them any harder now, they would only grow sloppy in their haste. He kept his hand on the throttle of the staff, striving for the maximum

effective control of his officers, for the highest possible levels of performance and efficiency. And when he paused to reflect, he realized that his was a good staff, as staffs went. But the human animal was simply too slow, too inconsistent for him. You had to drive it with a lash, applying pain skillfully so that it spurred the animal onward but did not cause permanent injury. Occasionally an animal was too weak, and it failed and had to be destroyed. Other animals learned to respond to the very sound. But the requirement for the lash never disappeared, although the form taken by the instrument might change.

Trimenko was determined to fulfill the front plan so well that Malinsky would be forced to change it, cutting back Starukhin's role. He believed he would have an ally in Chibisov, Malinsky's clever little Jew, whom he took pains to cultivate. Trimenko regarded Starukhin as grossly overrated, a holdover from another, more slovenly era. Trimenko didn't believe modern war was for cossacks. Not at the operational level. Now it was for computers. And until they had better computers—computers that could replace the weaker type of men—war belonged to the men who were as much like computers as possible: exact, devoid of sentiment, and very, very fast.

Captain Kryshinin finally heard from the missing combat reconnaissance patrol. They had run into enemy opposition and had slipped off further to the south of Bad Bevensen. On Kryshinin's map, the patrol had moved outside of the unit's assigned boundary. But the good news was that they had seized a crossing site on the Elbe-Seiten Canal.

Kryshinin had gotten his forward security element on the move again, and the minefield and the lieutenant's sacrifice lay several kilometers to the rear. Kryshinin felt as though he would need to perform very well now to make up for his earlier lapse. He wondered what his other officers thought of him now.

He tried to reach division on the radio, and, when that failed, he attempted to reach the advance guard that was somewhere on his trail. He needed someone in a position of authority to make a decision on further violation of the unit boundary. But his element's route led through low ground now, and all he could hear was static and faint strains of music. He was not sure whether his radio was being jammed or if the nets had simply gotten out of control. Earlier, foreign-language voices had come up on his internal net, having a conversation.

Kryshinin desperately wanted to report the seizure of the crossing site. He suspected that, under the circumstances, division would order him to hurry to the support of the tiny patrol, despite the boundary problem.

The lieutenant who led the patrol reported that they had come up on an east-west underpass, wide enough for tanks, where the elevated canal passed over a farm road. The tunnel had been guarded only by a few Dutch soldiers with small arms, and the patrol surprised them. Now the lieutenant was crying out for support.

Kryshinin tried both stations again.

Nothing.

He halted his column, then called for his senior artillery officer and the air force forward air controller who had been detailed to accompany the forward element to meet him by the air force officer's easily recognizable vehicle, a modified personnel carrier. The forward air controller was positioned closely behind Kryshinin, but the artilleryman was to the rear, leading the guns but prepared to come up to join the commander as soon as they were deployed. Kryshinin stood in the slow rain, waving for the artillery captain to hurry.

"Can either of you talk with your higher?"

The artillery captain shrugged. "I'm monitoring all right. I haven't tried to talk."

"I have a link back to division main and army central," Captain Bylov, the air force officer, stated, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Listen," Kryshinin said, "I want both of you to raise any stations you can. Then give my call sign and tell them my direct links aren't working. Listen carefully." Kryshinin unfolded his map, trying to protect it as much as possible against the fine drizzle that refused to come to an end. "We're changing our route of advance. We're going further south. To right there. The combat reconnaissance patrol has a crossing, but they won't be able to hold it for five minutes once they get hit."

The artillery captain, Likidze, looked at Kryshinin as though the element commander was crazy. "That's out of our sector. I won't be able to call up any fire support."

"That's what your battery's for. Look, our mission is to find a passage to the west. We've gotten this far, and it seems as if the enemy's covering plan has come apart. But the hardest part is getting across that damned canal. And now we have a crossing. I'm not going to pass it up just because it's a few kilometers out of sector. But you have to call back and tell higher what we're doing."

"What *you're* doing," the artilleryman said. "You have no authorization to cross a sector boundary. That site may even be one of the targets scheduled in our neighbor's fire plan."

Kryshinin wanted to shake the artilleryman, who had articulated

Kryshinin's own doubts and fears. He realized that no one would share this responsibility with him. But he thought again of his earlier failure to act when confronted with the minefield, and of the lieutenant who had been so much braver and clearer-thinking than his commander. Now there was another lieutenant waiting for help who had managed to find a way across the canal. Kryshinin looked at the artilleryman in disgust, seeing himself and a hundred other officers he knew.

"Correct," Kryshinin said. "It's on my shoulders. Now let's get moving."

Time pressed harder on Kryshinin's mind than it ever had before. The patrol commander reported incoming artillery on his position. Kryshinin realized that he might well get away with his decision as long as he proved successful in holding onto the crossing site. After all, that conformed to the essential mission. But if he had taken the wrong decision, and if the crossing site was lost and he had no results, he would pay.

He lost radio contact with the patrol.

Kryshinin spurred his element on as fast as it could go. He felt oddly lucky now that he had lost his engineers, since the big tank-launched bridge would never have been able to keep up with the increased speed of the march column. When one of his vehicles broke down, he left it for the advance guard to collect. The tanks set the pace, gripping the wet road with their whirring tracks.

At a crossroads, they raced by a bewildered enemy military policeman. The soldier emptied his machine pistol in the direction of the flying column, then ran for the trees. A bit further along, a medical clearing station had been set up in the courtyard of a farm, obviously intended to support the enemy's covering troops. Kryshinin's element left the site undisturbed in their muddy wake. Kryshinin sensed that the enemy had lost control of his forward battle now, and that his own location was not known to them. He wondered if, perhaps, his element had already penetrated the enemy's main defenses. It was impossible to tell. Unlike the exercises to which Kryshinin was accustomed, where you knew generally how it was all laid out and usually received tip-off information so the unit would look good, real war seemed ridiculously confusing. Kryshinin had expected battle to have more formality to it, for combat to be more structured and to make better sense.

When an enemy field artillery battery appeared under drooping camouflage nets at the edge of an orchard, Kryshinin ordered his column to shoot it up from the march without deploying. He did not want to get

bogged down. It was critical to maintain a single focus, and to act with speed.

The column crested a low hill, and Kryshinin saw the monumental line of the canal running north and south. He could not understand why the low ground had not been inundated. In a marvelous piece of engineering, the canal passed smoothly over a local farm trail, built up like a medieval fortress wall with a great open gate. Under the stout concrete tunnel, a single Soviet infantry fighting vehicle covered the near bank.

Kryshinin could not understand why the enemy had not blown the overpass immediately. He hastily got on his radio and ordered the artillery to deploy in the open hollow off to the left on the near bank. One platoon of motorized rifle troops would secure the near side of the crossing and protect the guns. Everyone else was to follow Kryshinin to the far side of the canal.

As he finished his transmissions the enemy artillery came again. The rounds exploded along the ridge on the far bank that paralleled the canal. The patrol's vehicles had been well-concealed, and it appeared as though the enemy was simply delivering area fires, attempting to flush the Soviet scouts into the open. A stout, walled farm complex, just to the right of the road as it wove up onto the crest of the ridge, provided an obvious focus for the efforts of both sides.

Kryshinin pulled his vehicle out of the line and personally took the lead. He raced down into the low ground, skidding to a stop beside the guardian vehicle at the mouth of the tunnel. In the watery field beside the road, the bodies of four enemy soldiers had been laid in a row. A senior sergeant greeted Kryshinin, wincing at the still-distant artillery blasts.

"Comrade Captain," he shouted, "the lieutenant's up in those farm buildings."

Kryshinin contracted back into his vehicle. "Move out," he ordered the driver. "Up the road. To the farmyard."

On the far side of the tunnel, a blasted enemy fighting vehicle lay like an animal carcass where it had been taken by surprise. Kryshinin spit into his mike. "Tank platoon to the treeline straddling the crest. Second rifle platoon, north of the road. Third platoon, cover the south side. Establish a hasty defense. Antitank platoon, disperse to cover the entire perimeter. All other vehicles shelter behind the farm buildings. Quickly. End."

Through the random eruptions of incoming enemy artillery, Kryshinin could now see two fighting vehicles drawn up on a small plateau beside the farmyard walls. One had tucked in behind a fertilizer mound, and the other had found a sunken position between two apple trees.

Kryshinin told his driver to halt fifty meters to the rear of the vehicles, in a low section of the road. As he dismounted a soldier waved him into the cluster of buildings. Kryshinin ran, carrying his soggy map and his assault rifle. He could feel the wash of the artillery rounds as the enemy gunners reached toward the canal itself.

Inside the neat little courtyard, a rifleman lowered his weapon at Kryshinin, then suddenly pulled it away.

"In here, Comrade Captain. Up the stairs."

Kryshinin vaulted through the doorway. The hallway of the house was littered with glass and smashed potted plants, the aftermath of the nearby artillery strikes. He jumped the stairs two at a time.

A lieutenant knelt low behind a broken-out window on a landing just below the second floor. He gazed through a pair of binoculars, man-packed radio at his side with the antenna angled out through the window frame. He looked around suddenly.

"Comrade Captain, you're here!"

The boy's voice sounded as though he had just experienced the relief of Leningrad. Loaded with complex emotions and thoughts, Kryshinin sensed that his arrival, in the lieutenant's mind, had meant salvation, an end to all troubles. Yet Kryshinin could only feel how little combat power he had brought to the scene. Now they would need to hold out until the advance guard of the division arrived. If they were coming.

"Look," the lieutenant said. "You can see them across the valley, by those woods. Orient on the lone house. They're getting ready to come at us." He held the binoculars out to Kryshinin.

One quick look. Tanks. Big, modern, Western tanks. Approximately thirty-five hundred meters off.

The artillery came back, shaking the farmhouse.

"They spotted us maybe twenty minutes ago," the lieutenant shouted. "They came marching up the road like they were on parade. We had to open up to keep them away from the tunnel. A few minutes after that, the artillery started."

Kryshinin looked at the baby-faced lieutenant. Somebody's sweetheart. He touched the boy on the shoulder. "Good work. Good work, Lieutenant. Now let me see what I can do about those tanks."

The concussion of a nearby artillery blast almost knocked him off his feet. Someone screamed.

"In the barn," the lieutenant said. "The Germans. The family. They were still here, hiding. I didn't know what to do."

It had never really come home to Kryshinin before that warfare could

have such complex dimensions. He thought for a long moment. The screaming clearly came from a female throat.

"They can take care of themselves," Kryshinin said, turning away to organize his battle.

Kryshinin called the artillery battery commander, ordering him to either come up and act as a forward observer the way he was supposed to, or send someone else. He was prepared for another argument, but the artillery officer's attitude had undergone a distinct change. He was excited now, too. He had contacted division, reporting that Kryshinin's element had reached the crossing site. The chief of missile troops and artillery had personally informed the division commander. He had approved Kryshinin's decision, and the advance guard from Kryshinin's regiment was on the way.

"How far back?" Kryshinin asked.

"Didn't say."

"Find out. We have enemy tanks coming for a visit. They want us out of here." He passed the grid where the enemy tanks were forming up. Then he hastened to the air force officer's control vehicle. The hatches were sealed, and Kryshinin had to bang on the metal with the stock of his assault rifle.

Bylov, the forward air controller, opened the hatch one-handed, holding an open rations tin in the other.

"Taking a break," he told Kryshinin.

Kryshinin almost gave up. At the same time he realized, jealously, that he had eaten nothing since the previous night. But there would be time, he consoled himself. Later. If they were still alive.

"Have you informed your control post of our situation?" Kryshinin demanded.

The air force officer nodded, forking up a hunk of potted meat so strong-smelling that its aroma penetrated the garlic-and-onions stink of the artillery blasts.

"Listen," Kryshinin said, "we're going to need air support. If you want to be alive at suppertime, you'd better get some ground-attack boys or some gunships in here. The valley just beyond the ridge is filled with enemy tanks."

Bylov finished chewing and swallowed. "I'll see what I can do. But if they can't give me something that's going up now, it won't help."

"Try. And get out where you can see what's going on. Up there by the apple trees. Anywhere."

Kryshinin jumped back down off the vehicle, splashing in the mud. His camouflage uniform had been soaking wet since before dawn, and his trousers had been chafing his crotch. But the discomfort had disappeared in his current excitement. He raced for the tank platoon, instinctively running low, even though the enemy artillery had lifted for the moment.

The tank platoon had a problem. The platoon commander could not find any suitable firing positions along the ridgeline. In order to sufficiently decline their gun tubes to engage an approaching enemy, they would need to expose themselves to observation and fires.

"All right," Kryshinin said. "I have a better idea. Pull back onto that low hill over there, just north of the road we took to come up here. There. See it? Hide where you can watch the approaches to the tunnel. Counterattack any enemy armor that gets through. Don't wait for orders. Just hit them. We'll try to hold around the farm buildings. Do your best."

The lieutenant of tank troops saluted and immediately began talking into his microphone. The tanks belched into readiness.

Kryshinin hurried back toward his own vehicle. But before he was halfway, the sounds of combat came back, changed.

His infantry fighting vehicles and wheeled antitank vehicles were engaging. The enemy was on the way.

Kryshinin looked back across the canal. Still no sign of movement. Kryshinin cursed the artillery officer, wondering what was keeping him. He needed someone to call fires. Otherwise, they would be overrun before the guns did any good.

His tank platoon rolled powerfully down across a saddle and veered toward their new position. Kryshinin felt confident that they would do their job. The lieutenant had had a crisp professionalism about him.

One of the antitank vehicles had profiled too high on the ridgeline. Now it caught a round in the bow and lifted over on its back, throwing scraps of metal upward and outward in a fountain. Kryshinin felt a sting on his shoulder, as though he had been bitten by an oversized insect. He almost tripped but managed to keep running.

The nearest platoon of motorized riflemen had dismounted,- but their officer had not properly positioned them. They were simply lying in a close line with their machine guns, assault rifles, and antitank grenade launchers, protected only by the small irregularities of the ground.

Kryshinin shouted at the officer in charge. "Are you *crazy?* Get these men into the buildings. It's too late to do anything else now. *Hurry."*

The lieutenant stared at him as though he understood nothing at all. Suddenly, Kryshinin went cold inside at the thought of what the situation

was probably like in the platoon that had lost its lieutenant in the minefield. He felt overwhelmed by the need to do everything himself. He ignored the lieutenant now, grabbing the first soldier he could reach, a machine gunner.

"You. Get inside the buildings. Take your pals. Fight from there."

Kryshinin ran along the line. Where the lieutenant had positioned the men, they would have been not only hopelessly vulnerable, but useless. They had no fields of fire. Kryshinin could not believe he had failed so thoroughly to train his officers and soldiers. He had complied with every regulation, and his training sessions usually had gone well, with the company receiving mostly fours and fives. Now it all seemed meaningless, as though they had all merely been going through the motions, without really learning. And now it was too late. They would have to fight in the state in which war had found them.

"All of you. *Get up,"* he shouted, rasping to be heard above the chaotic battle noise. One of the machine gunners had opened fire, and firing began to spread along the line, although some soldiers simply lay still on the ground. "Stop it. *Stop.* They're still out of range." Even on his feet, Kryshinin could not see the enemy from the position of the firing soldiers. "Get into the buildings and get ready to fight. This isn't a country outing. *Stop your firing."*

Then he saw the helicopters. Approaching from the wrong side.

"Come on, "he shouted, voice already cracking. He ran for the cover of the buildings, with the motorized riflemen all around him. Behind them, an infantry fighting vehicle positioned in the orchard sent off an antitank guided missile.

"Where's the air defense team?" Kryshinin wondered out loud.

The helicopters throbbed over the trees, ugly, bulbous creatures with dark weaponry on their mounts and German crosses on the fuselages. The markings confused Kryshinin, who was sure he was still in the Dutch sector. He stopped to fire his assault rifle at the aircraft, and a few others fired as well.

The helicopters, four of them, churned overhead without firing. Kryshinin felt relief at their passing. But a moment later, he heard the hiss of missiles coming off launch rails.

The artillery, Kryshinin remembered. The battery was sitting out in the open. Kryshinin watched helplessly as the enemy attack helicopters banked playfully above the landscape, teasing the desperate gunners on the ground, destroying the self-propelled pieces one after the other.

Why didn't the air defense troops fire? Kryshinin wondered.

In less than a minute, the helicopters peeled off to the south, leaving the wrecked battery in a veil of smoke pierced now and then by the flash of secondary explosions.

Kryshinin made a hurried stop at his own vehicle. It had moved nearer to the crest, and its main gun fired into the distance. He leaned into the turret, grabbing the gunner by the sleeve, shouting to be heard.

"Back into the courtyard. Get her behind the walls. I need the radios."

The gunner stared up at him. "Comrade Captain. You're bleeding." Kryshinin followed the gunner's eyes down to his shoulder, then over his chest and sleeve. Much of the uniform was shockingly dark, much darker than the rain alone could have made it. At the sight, Kryshinin felt a momentary faintness.

"Hurry up," he said, almost gagging. "Get into the courtyard." But he suddenly felt weaker, as if his realizing that he had been wounded had unleashed the wound's effect. He remembered the little sting. It seemed impossible that it could have done this. He was not even aware of any pain.

He trotted beside his vehicle, guiding it through the gates as the direct-fire battle increased in intensity. But the forward air-control vehicle had blocked the courtyard, taking up more than its share of the space. Kryshinin ran to make the air force officer move out of the way just as the artillery came thumping back.

The barn roof collapsed. The concussion of the blast knocked several of the men in the courtyard to the ground. One soldier had blood draining from his ears, and Kryshinin felt deafened. But he still had enough hearing to recognize the sound of a tank gun closer than expected. In the misery of the courtyard, soldiers screamed for aid and choked on the dust of the smashed barn. Then the rain abruptly increased in intensity, as if the enemy controlled that, too.

"Everybody into the buildings," Kryshinin shouted. "Don't just stand around." But the soldiers were hesitant. After watching the roof of the barn cave in, Kryshinin could hardly blame them. Nonetheless, the remaining buildings provided better protection than the open courtyard. And it was impossible for all of the men to fight effectively from the courtyard. *"Move,* damn you."

But they were already scrambling to obey him. It was only that they had been stunned into a slowed reaction by the confusion that seemed to worsen with every minute. Now those who didn't understand Kryshinin's Russian simply followed their peers.

The sounds of moving tanks crowded in with the noises of missile back-blasts and automatic weapons. Kryshinin bounded back into the

house and up the stairs, crunching glass underfoot. The lieutenant remained at his post. But he didn't need his binoculars anymore.

"Those tanks," he told Kryshinin, "at least a company. Working up along the treelines. We got two of them."

A round smashed into the wall of the house, shaking it to its foundation. But the building was old and strong, built of masonry.

The lieutenant noticed Kryshinin's bloody tunic.

Kryshinin held up his hand. "No real damage done," he said, hoping he was correct. He couldn't understand where the pain was hiding. The arm still worked, if stiffly.

"One of the officers went up on the roof with a radio," the lieutenant said. "He looked like an air force guy."

"Where is he?"

"On the roof. There's an attic stairway back there. The roof has dormer windows."

The enemy tanks had closed to within a thousand meters. Kryshinin watched them for a moment, catching a glimpse of dark metal now and then through the local smokescreens the enemy vehicles laid down with their smoke grenades. Their movement struck him as very clever, very disciplined, but slow. They seemed to move in cautious bounds. Kryshinin watched one of his own antitank missiles stream toward the enemy tanks, then spring out of control, soaring briefly into the empty sky, then plunging into a meadow. He turned away in disgust.

He followed the directions toward the attic. He felt unusually light, almost as though he were floating, yet it was a hard climb going up the narrow stairs. He began to feel as though his torso could fly but his feet were weighted down with irons. When he reached the attic, he found it cluttered with forgotten property, stinking with mildew. The trash of generations troubled his course, barring his feet with old framed pictures and antique household machinery, all strewn with ragged fabric.

The roof windows had been shattered. Kryshinin leaned out through the nearest, which opened toward the canal.

Bylov lay sprawled on his belly on the roof tiles, talking into a radio set, with a satchel of gear open beside him.

Kryshinin could not understand a single word the air force officer said. The level of noise was incredible, maddening. It seemed to give the air a tangible thickness, as though you could stir it with your hand.

Kryshinin tugged at Bylov's leg.

The air force officer held up a finger. Wait. He rolled onto his back, scanning the gray sky.

Kryshinin followed Bylov's line of sight but could see nothing.

Nonetheless, Bylov reached into his satchel, retrieving a flare pistol and two explosive canisters of colored smoke. He spoke once into his microphone, then rose to his knees on the slick tile, just high enough to peer over the roofbeam.

With a sure motion, Bylov threw a smoke canister to the right, then quickly hurled another to the left, marking the line of friendly troops. He fumbled briefly at the flare pistol, then fired two green flares in succession in the direction of the enemy.

Bylov threw his satchel at Kryshinin, knocking him back into the attic. The air force officer followed the bag, quick as a cat, dragging his radio after him. Without a look at Kryshinin, Bylov flattened onto the floor, hands over his ears.

Kryshinin swiftly imitated him.

A powerful rush of jet engines seemed to pass right through the room, shaking the floor even more powerfully than had the artillery blasts. The passage was closely followed by small blasts, then by enormous booms that seemed to tear several seconds out of their lives. The air itself drew tighter.

"Fuel air explosives," Bylov shouted. "Great stuff."

"Good work," Kryshinin shouted back.

"Count on the air force," Bylov told him. "We serve the Motherland and all that."

"How did you get the sorties?"

Bylov looked at him in honest surprise. "We've got top priority. I've got more on the way."

Bylov methodically began to gather his spilled tools, checking his radio, a technician of the sky. In his own little world of airplanes, Bylov had not noticed—or, at any rate, had said nothing about—Kryshinin's wound. But Kryshinin felt changes coming over his body now. He was losing strength fast. He needed to have a look at the wound, yet he was afraid that the sight of his damaged flesh, of his own blood on his own skin, might paralyze him. And he was determined to hang on, no matter what happened.

Kryshinin slowly raised himself and worked his way back down the stairs to the lieutenant's observation post. The lieutenant's torso lay smashed against a wall, head and limbs twisted out of any skeletal sense, eyes bulging. From behind another wall, a machine gun fired.

Kryshinin peered out of the battered window frame. The valley had filled with black smoke.

Then he saw the first enemy tank in close. The airplanes had missed at

least a platoon. Four enemy tanks came over the crest, one after another. One tank trailed fire off its deck, resembling a mythical dragon. They drove beside the farm complex, leaving Kryshinin's field of vision.

He hurried back down the stairs to the accompaniment of blasts and rapid fires. Men shouted in a contest of complaints and commands.

From the doorway, the farmyard appeared chaotic. Kryshinin watched as his own vehicle attempted to pull off, only to explode in the entrance gateway. The heat of the blast reached into the foyer of the house, rinsing Kryshinin with a wave of unnatural warmth.

Above the billows of smoke, he saw two more helicopters appear. But these were from his side, "bumblebees," loaded with weaponry. They flew an orientation pass. Kryshinin wanted to get into the fight, to insure that his tank platoon had moved to intercept the enemy tanks that had broken through. But flames blocked the gateway.

He searched hurriedly through the ground floor of the house, hunting for a side door. Nothing in the building seemed to be left whole. In the kitchen, he found two soldiers casually sitting against a cupboard, as though they were on an authorized rest period.

"Come with me," Kryshinin shouted, heading for the open space where a door had been ripped from its hinges.

Outside, the black smoke covered the landscape between the farm buildings and the original positions of the enemy tanks. The amount of firing that continued seemed incredible, first because it seemed as though all of the ammunition should have been used up already, and, second, because it was hard to believe so many survivors remained. But Kryshinin felt reassured that so many of his men continued to engage the enemy.

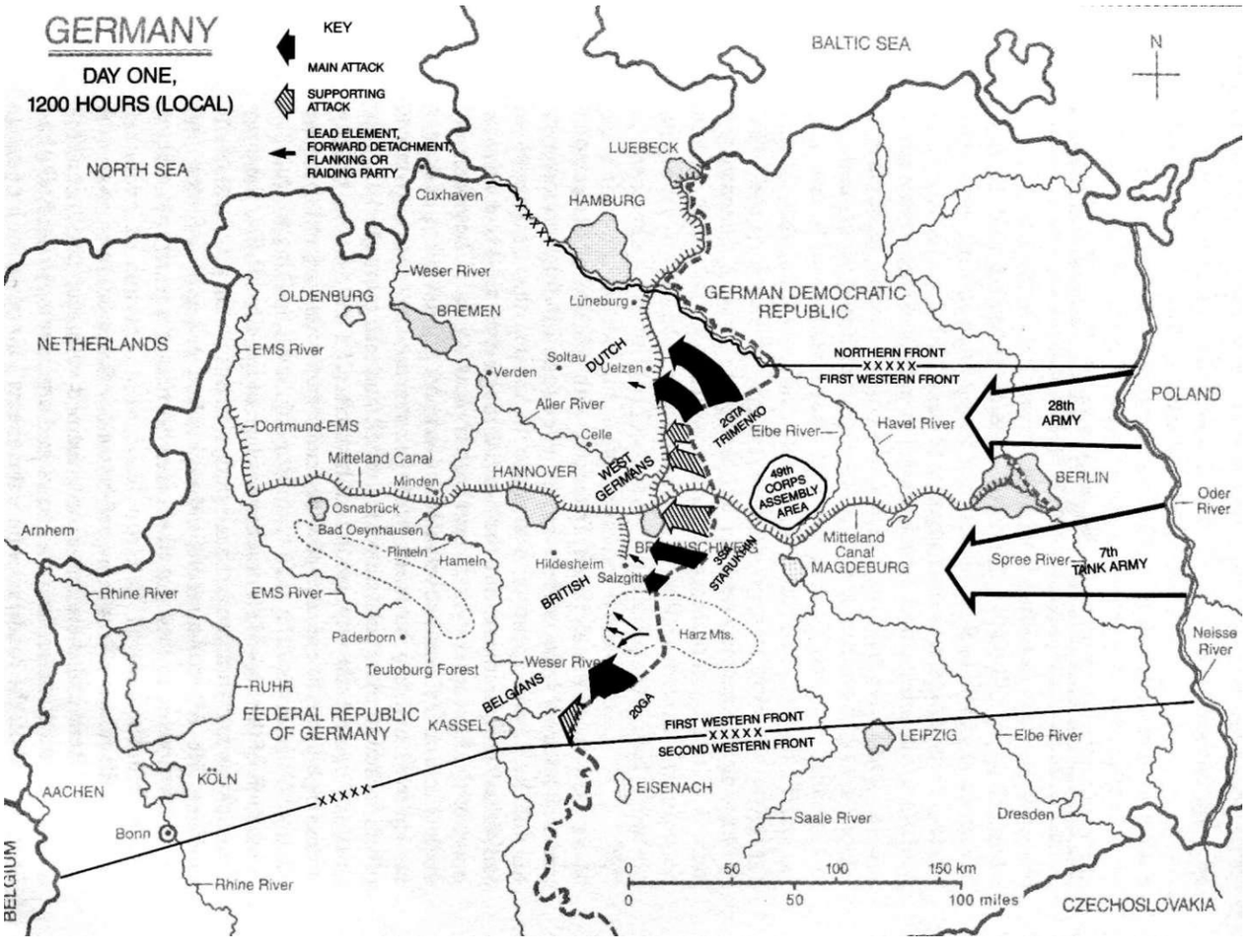
He heard the beat of the Soviet gunships returning. And the battle noises clearly revealed a tank fight going on down toward the canal.

The two riflemen followed Kryshinin obediently, simply waiting for his instructions. Kryshinin hustled around a corner. One of his infantry fighting vehicles sat in perfect condition, scanning for targets, even as the battle had passed it by. Kryshinin let it stand as a sentinel. Growing weaker and dizzy almost to nausea, he worked along the wall of the ruined barn, weapon ready, seeking a view back toward the canal. He came up behind a rain barrel, and, taking a chance, he raised his head.

The finest, most welcome sight of his life awaited him. The twin ridgeline on the eastern side of the canal streamed with Soviet vehicles. Air-defense elements raced across the high fields to find correctly spaced

positions, and self-propelled guns bristled their tubes at the sky. In the valley bottom, the enemy tanks that had penetrated Kryshinin's thin line burned away like lamps to light the rainy day. Soviet tanks roared through the tunnel, blooming out into a long, beautiful line and heading straight for Kryshinin's position.

Kryshinin collapsed against the wall of the barn, letting go at last.


GERMANY
DAY ONE,
1200 HOURS (LOCAL)
KEY
MAIN ATTACK
SUPPORTING ATTACK
LEAD ELEMENT, FORWARD DETACHMENT, FLANKING OR RAIDING PARTY
BALTIC SEA
N
NORTH SEA
LUEBECK
Cuxhaven
HAMBURG
Weser River
OLDENBURG
BREMEN
Lüneburg
GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
NETHERLANDS
EMS River
Soltau
Verden
DUTCH
Uelzen
NORTHERN FRONT
FIRST WESTERN FRONT
POLAND
Aller River
Dortmund-EMS
Celle
2GTA TRIMENKO
Elbe River
Havel River
28th ARMY
Mittelland Canal
Minden
HANNOVER
WEST GERMANS
49th CORPS ASSEMBLY AREA
BERLIN
Oder River
Osnabrück
Arnhem
Bad Oeynhausen
Mittelland Canal
MAGDEBURG
Spree River
7th TANK ARMY
Plinteln
Hameln
Hildesheim
Salzgitter
BRITISH
3SS STARUKHIN
Rhine River
EMS River
Paderborn
Harz Mts.
Neisse River
Teutoburg Forest
Weser River
RUHR
BELGIANS
20GA
FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY
KASSEL
FIRST WESTERN FRONT
SECOND WESTERN FRONT
LEIPZIG
Elbe River
AACHEN
KÖLN
EISENACH
Saale River
Dresden
Bonn
BELGIUM
Rhine River
0 50 100 150 km
0 50 100 miles
CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Six

The view from the air filled Trimenko with a sense of his personal power. The army commander was not given to self-indulgent emotions; his life had been spent in a struggle to master the weaknesses of individual temperament, but the sight through the rain-speckled windows of the helicopter excited him with a pleasant awe. These were *his* endless columns of combat vehicles and support units, *his* tens of dozens of deployed artillery batteries, with the rearmost hurrying to move, others locked in close column on the roads, and still more executing fire missions against the stone-colored horizon. *His* air-defense systems lurked on hilltops like great metal cats, radar ears twitching and spinning. Trimenko's pilot flew the road trace, staying low, unwilling to trust the protection of the big red star on the fuselage of the aircraft. But the army commander had transcended such petty worries in the greatness of the moment. He felt consumed by the growling enormity of men and machines flowing to the west like a steel torrent, absorbed into a being greater than the self.

In detail, it was a far-from-perfect vision. Some columns were at a standstill. Here and there, crossroads teemed with such confusion that Trimenko could almost hear the curses and arguments. Soviet hulks had been shoved off the roadways where the enemy's air power or long-range

artillery fires had caught them. Incredible panoramas opened up, then closed again beneath the speeding helicopter.

Trimenko realized that, to those on the ground, waiting nervously for a column to move or for an order to come, the war probably seemed like a colossal mess on the edge of disaster. But from the sky, from the god's-eye view, the columns moved well enough. For every march serial that had bogged down, two or three others rushed along parallel routes. And the flow carried them all in the right general direction. Trimenko knew that one division already had pushed its lead elements across the canal a bit to the north, even as a major assault crossing operation was being conducted in another divisional sector. Some units had penetrated to a depth in excess of thirty kilometers from their start lines, and one reconnaissance patrol had reported in from a location fifty-two kilometers west of the border. Meanwhile, the enemy's power to strike out to halt the flow of Soviet forces had proven surprisingly weak. Trimenko had already heard the fearful casualty reports from the morning's engagements. Kept in perspective, the numbers were acceptable—and he had no doubt that they were somewhat exaggerated in the heat of combat and in the process of hastily relaying data up the echelons. The prospect of inaccurate data for his forecasting calculations troubled Trimenko more than did the thought of the casualties themselves.

Jet aircraft, invisible in the haze, passed nearby, and the sound slammed into the helicopter. Trimenko thought that Malinsky had been absolutely correct to support the air offensive so heavily. With the low number and limited range of the surface-to-surface missiles available to the enemy now, air power had been the great enemy threat. In his private, less-assured moments, Trimenko had worried that NATO would catch them right at the border-crossing sites, where the engineers had opened gaps in the frontier barriers. But the threat had not materialized. NATO's ground attacks with aircraft were deadly, but haphazard, and Trimenko suspected that many of NATO's aircraft had, indeed, been caught on the ground. Starukhin had been an ass to press the issue of initial close air support with Malinsky, and the present obviousness of it pleased Trimenko. Starukhin, he mused, was the sort of Russian officer he himself most despised, and a type still far too common—the man who raged and stamped and shouted to announce his own power and grandeur, to convince a skeptical world of how much he mattered. Trimenko, no less concerned with his own importance, found tantrums inefficient and primitive. He believed that the times called for a more sophisticated approach to the exploitation of resources, whether material or human.

Trimenko stared out over his army as it marched deeper into West Germany. The spectacle offered nothing but confusion to the man with a narrow, low-level perspective, he realized, but it revealed its hidden power, incredible power in an irresistible flood, to the man who could look down.

"Afterburners now."

"Fifty-eight, I'm still in the capture zone. I'm hot."

"Open it up, Fifty-nine. Flares away. Get out of the kitchen."

"He's on me. *He's on me."*

"Turning now. *Go."*

The junior pilot in the wing aircraft fired his flares and banked, engines flushing a burst of power.

"More angle, little brother. *Pull it around."*

Pilot First Class Captain Sobelev watched as an enemy air-defense missile miraculously passed beside his wingman's aircraft and carried about five hundred feet before exploding. Sobelev felt his own aircraft buck like a wild horse at the blast.

"Steady now. Keep her steady, Fifty-nine."

The planes had come out two and two, but the trailing pair had been shot down before they even reached the Weser River. Now, deep in the enemy's rear, the air defenses had thinned. But it was still nightmarish flying. It was not at all like Afghanistan. Flying in and out of Kabul and good old Bagram had been bad enough. With the eternal haze over Kabul, filthy dust on the hot wind, and later the horribly accurate American Stinger missiles. But all of that had been child's play compared to this.

"Fifty-eight, my artificial horizon's out."

Shit, Sobelev thought. "Just stay with me," he answered. "We're going to do just fine."

Sobelev sympathized with the lieutenant's nervousness. It was their second combat mission of the day, and today was the lieutenant's first taste of war. If Afghanistan had been this bad, Sobelev thought, I might have quit flying.

"Stay with me, little brother. Talk to me."

"I'm with you, Fifty-eight."

"Good boy. Target heading, thirty degrees."

"Roger."

"Keep those wings level now . . . final reference point in sight... go to attack altitude . . . *talk* to me, Fifty-nine."

"I have the reference point."

"Executing version one."

"Correcting to follow your approach."

"On the combat course . . . *now* . . . hold on, it's going to be hot."

"Roger."

"Target. . . ten kilometers . . . steady . . . I have visual."

Sobelev saw the airfield coming up at them like a table spread for dinner. Enemy aircraft continued to land and take off.

"Hit the apron. I've got the main runway."

"Roger."

Air-defense artillery suddenly came to life in their path, drilling the sky with points of light.

"Let's do this clean . . . hold it . . . *hold straight. . . straighten your wings."*

In Afghanistan, you flew high and tossed outdated ordnance at the *kishlaks* with their mud buildings that had not changed for a thousand years. The bombs changed them in an instant.

Sobelev was determined to bring his wingman out. Wingboy, he thought, children at war, already forgetting how young he had been on his first tour of duty in Afghanistan.

Sobelev led them right into the general flight paths of the NATO aircraft taking off, making it impossible for the air-defense guns to follow them.

"Now."

The lieutenant shouted into the radio in childish elation. The two planes lifted away from the enemy airfield, and, as they banked, Sobelev caught a glimpse of the heavy damage that already had been dealt to the base by previous sorties. Black burned patches and craters on the hardstand. Smoking ruins in the support area. Emergency vehicles raced through corridors of fire. Sobelev heard his flight's payload detonate, adding to the destruction.

"Let's go home, little brother . . . heading . . . one . . . six . . . five."

An enemy plane suddenly shot straight up in front of Sobelev. He recognized a NATO F-16. As the plane twisted into the sky, disappearing from view in the grayness, Sobelev's mouth opened behind his face mask. He had never seen a plane . . . a pilot. . . maneuver like that. It shocked him.

After a long, long few seconds, he spoke. "Hostiles, Fifty-nine . . . do what I do . . . do *exactly* what I do . . . do you understand?"

"Roger." But the exuberance was gone from the lieutenant's voice. He,

too, had seen the enemy fighter's acrobatic climb. Now they both wondered where the enemy aircraft had gone. Sobelev looked at his radar screen. It was a mess. Busy sky.

"Follow me *now*, Fifty-nine," Sobelev commanded. And hope I know what I'm doing.

Major Astanbegyan leaned over the operator's shoulder, watching the scanning line circle the radar display.

"Does *anyone* respond to query?" the major asked.

"Comrade Major," the specialist sergeant said, with weary exasperation in his voice, "I register responses. But it's all so cluttered that they intermingle before I can sort targets. Then the jamming starts again."

Astanbegyan told the boy to keep on trying. He was beginning to feel like a unit political officer in his struggle to maintain a positive collective outlook in the control staff. He had begun the morning by shouting when things went wrong, but he had soon shouted himself out. There were so many unanticipated problems that he quickly realized he was only making the work harder. Now he simply did what he could to keep the entire air-defense sector from collapsing into anarchy.

He turned away from the boy at the console. He knew the sergeant was trying, that he sincerely wanted to do what was right. The officers manning scopes and target allocation systems were doing no better. The NATO aircraft were using the same penetration corridor in sector as those of the Warsaw Pact, and it was a hopeless muddle. Out on the ground, the batteries were operating primarily on visual identification.

The battle management computers were a disappointment as well. So far, they were handling systems location and logistics data fairly well—or seemed to be, since there was no way of knowing how accurate all of the inputs and outputs were at this point. But the sorting and assigning of targets was going badly. Astanbegyan had no doubt that aircraft were being knocked out of the sky. He had over a dozen reported kills. But he was less certain about who was being shot down.

"Comrade Major," a communications specialist called to him. "The commander of Number Five Battery wishes to report."

"Take his report, then."

"He wishes to report to you personally, Comrade Major."

Astanbegyan stepped over to the communications area and took the receiver from the specialist.

"Six-Four-Zero. Go ahead."

"This is Six-Four-Five. I have two systems down. Enemy air-to-surface missiles, antiradiation, I think. We got the bastard, though."

"All right," Astanbegyan said, although he was far from happy with the news. What could you do, order your subordinates to go back and start from the beginning and not lose the systems next time? "How are you receiving your encoded instructions?"

There was a momentary silence on the other end.

"This is Six-Four-Five," the voice returned. "I haven't received any for the last hour."

Astanbegyan felt his self-control drain away. "Damn it, man, this isn't an exercise. We've been sending constantly. Check your battery console."

"Checking it now."

"And next time don't wait until you have to call me and tell me you've lost the rest of your battery."

"Understood." But the voice shook. "Listen, Comrade Major . . . we're running low on missiles."

"You can't possibly have fired everything on your transporters."

"Comrade Maj—I mean, Six-Four-Zero, I haven't seen the trucks all day. The technical services officer became separated from the unit. You wouldn't believe what the roads are like out here."

"You find those damned trucks. If you have to walk to Poland. Better yet—*you* walk *forward.* Send somebody else to the rear. What the hell good are you without missiles? You ought to be court-martialed."

"You don't know what it's like out here."

"Comrade Major," a radar-tracking specialist shouted, interrupting. "Multiple hostiles, subsector seven, moving to four."

Immediately, the shriek of jets flying low penetrated the walls of the van complex, shaking the maps and charts on the walls, and drawing loud curses from electronics operators whose equipment flickered or failed.

"Where did they come from?" Astanbegyan screamed, giving up his last attempt at composure.

"They were ours, Comrade Major."

Astanbegyan ran his hand back over his scalp, soothing himself. A good thing, too, he thought.

SEVEN

Colonel Tkachenko, the Second Guards Tank Army's chief of engineers, watched the assault crossing operation from the lead regiment's combat observation post. Intermittently, he could see as far as the canal line through the periscope. He had studied this canal for a long time, and he knew it well. There were sectors where it was elevated above the landscape, with tunnels passing beneath it, and other sectors, like this one, where the waterway was only a flat, dull trace along the valley floor. This sector had been carefully chosen, partly because of its suitability for an assault crossing, but largely because it was a point at which the enemy would not expect a major crossing effort, since the connectivity to the high-speed roads was marginal. Surprise was the most important single factor in such an operation, and the local trails and farm roads would be good enough to allow them to punch out and roll up the enemy. Then there would be better sites, with better connectivity, at a much lower cost. Tkachenko refocused the optics, looking at the sole bridge where it lay broken-backed in the water. A few hundred meters beyond, the smokescreen blotted out the horizon. Under its cover, the air assault troops had gone in by helicopter to secure the far bank, and now the assault engineers on the near bank appeared as tiny toys rushing forward with their rafts and demolitions. Beyond the smoke-cordoned arena, the

fires of dozens of batteries of artillery blocked the far approaches to any enemy reserves.

A flight of helicopters shuttled additional security troops, with portable antitank weapons, to the far bank. Yet the action appeared very different now than it looked in the demonstration exercises in the training area crossing sites. The only order seemed to be in the overall direction of the activity, and the noise level, even from a distance, cut painfully into the ears. There was no well-rehearsed feel to this crossing, only the desperation of men hurrying to accomplish dangerous tasks, with random death teasing them. The banks of the canal were steep and reinforced with steel. There were no easy points of entry for amphibious vehicles. Everything had to be prepared. Ingress, egress. With the enemy's searching fires crashing down.

The enemy artillery shot blindly at the banks of the canal. The Soviet smokescreen had been fired in along a ten-kilometer-long stretch of the waterway, and the enemy gunners were forced to guess the exact location of the crossing activities. Despite the difficulties, occasional shells found their mark, shredding tiny figures, hurling them about on waves of mud, and setting unlucky vehicles ablaze.

A flight of two Soviet gunships passed overhead, flying echelon right. Another pair followed the first, then a third couple came by. They flew heavily across a sky the color of dishwater, then disappeared into the smoke.

Gutsy pilots, Tkachenko thought. Not a good day to be an aviator.

Along the canal line, a ragged series of demolitions began. The explosions on the near bank were soon followed by blasts from the western bank. Tkachenko tried to keep count. At least eight points of entry.

More low blasts punctuated the horizon.

Tkachenko felt pride in the courage of the engineers down on the water. At New Year's, 1814, bridging trains from the Imperial Russian Army had supported the Prussian crossing of the Rhine. Only the Russian engineers had had the equipment and the skill to force the great river. Now Tkachenko intended to repeat the earlier event, and he wondered how many days it would take to fight all the way to the Rhine. The engineers would have plenty of practice on the way, given the dense drainage pattern of northern Germany.

Tkachenko turned to the motorized rifle regiment commander, a major.

"You can get a company of infantry fighting vehicles across now. No

promises on the quality of the egress cuts, but we'll winch them out if we have to. As soon as you get your first wave across, we'll put in the assault bridges."

The enemy artillery barrage intensified again, as if they sensed the progress along the canal. The blasts and smoke made it difficult to see. But Tkachenko soon made out a column of infantry fighting vehicles, prepared for swimming. They emerged from a hide position several hundred meters back from the bank, then began to deploy on line, searching for their markers and guides.

Tkachenko left the periscope. Time to go forward. He waved his hand at the commander of the engineer assault bridging battalion.

"It's time. Let's get them in the water."

Together, the two engineers slogged through the mud, past the local security troops with their machine guns and shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles. Tkachenko began to climb laboriously into the younger commander's control vehicle.

"Comrade Colonel?"

Tkachenko looked around at the handsome young Estonian. Fit. The new breed. Tkachenko knew he was getting too old for all of this. It was time for a good teaching position, where you slept in a soft, warm bed every night and there were no real risks to be taken.

"I'm going with you," Tkachenko told the younger man. "You don't begrudge a grandfather a little fun, do you?"

The younger officer looked confused. Tkachenko continued to work his bulky way into the cramped armored vehicle. Of course, the battalion commander would not particularly want the chief of engineers looking over his shoulder. But that was just too bad, Tkachenko told himself. He didn't want to miss the actual crossing. All of his military career, he had been waiting to use his skills for a serious purpose. Now it was his duty to be down there with them all, putting in the bridges and running the ferries.

The Estonian battalion commander yanked the hatch shut behind them and tugged on his headset. Tkachenko relaxed as best he could in the cramped interior, hunkering against a shelf of radios. It was up to the younger man to deliver them to the crossing site. Tkachenko figured there was nothing he could do to protect them from bad luck or to deflect an enemy round. Content, he sat and waited.

Once before, he had thought that he was to have an opportunity to put his skills to practical use. He had been selected for a posting as an adviser to the Angolans. The assignment had brought him the greatest disillu-

sionment of his life. He had hated the Angolans. They were greedy and subhuman to him. Filthy. Inhuman to each other. And the Cubans, in their clever, degenerate way, had been worse. None of them had even once shown the appropriate level of respect for the Soviet Union or for Soviet officers. It was all lip service, meaningless agreement, and lies. He had spent most of his tour drinking Western liquor and building barracks and bridges to house and carry the future of the developing world. He had even gone into combat once, when the situation in the south had deteriorated to the point that the Soviets themselves had been required to stabilize the front. Yet how could you call those worthless grasslands or the deadly junglelike forests a front? It was a place where men scarcely dignified by ragtag uniforms murdered each other in horrible ways, torturing prisoners gleefully, like children tormenting small animals just to hear them scream. It wasn't even really a matter of interrogation. They flayed men alive. Or cut them up a piece at a time. And there were no particular efforts to spare the women. They were all counterrevolutionaries, of course. Africa, Tkachenko thought, with the same sort of disgust another man might feel at the word syphilis. It was a pit of disease, bad water, and poisonous creatures, all wrong for a Russian.

Tkachenko chuckled at a turn in his memories. Wrapped in his headset, eyes fixed to his optics, the younger officer had no sense of the old colonel behind him. Tkachenko remembered that he had had visions of tropical cities in the moonlight, of native women who were somehow clean and cheaply willing, and of serving a worthy cause as well. His illusions had not lasted one week in-country. They had hardly lasted a day.

In an odd way, the cumulative effect of the system of bribery had been even worse than the violence, against which Tkachenko had normally been shielded. It had been a never-ending frustration, and not a matter of little gifts to get your name moved up on the waiting list for a television set like back home. The Angolan officials looked for big bribes before they would allow you to do things for their people. Tkachenko often suspected the Cubans and Angolans of collusion to milk every last drop from the Soviet cow. A Soviet officer could not touch certain Soviet materiel that had been off-loaded at Luanda. A gift from the Soviet people, the materiel had become Angolan property. The Soviets in the military assistance group then had to barter to obtain key supplies in order to accomplish their assigned tasks in support of the Angolans, who controlled the materiel. And the whoring Cubans had been in the middle of it all. Tkachenko had watched the Cubans go to pieces in Angola.

Perhaps there had been a few good ones, a few believers. But most of them had exploited the situation to their own advantage in every possible respect. Tkachenko himself had returned from Angola with a bad liver, a persistent skin disease, and a hatred for everything that was not Soviet from west of the Urals, everything that was not Greater Russian. In Luanda, Western businessmen had commanded more respect and courtesy than a Soviet officer. That wasn't socialism. Africa was a swamp of insatiable greed and corruption. The corruption of the spirit and of the flesh. Tkachenko had come home convinced that the Soviet Union had nothing to gain in Africa.

Nearby blasts rocked the vehicle, snapping Tkachenko back to the present. The vehicle turned off the road and bumped across broken ground. Tkachenko gripped at a metal brace, holding on. He told himself again that he was getting too old for this.

The Estonian ripped off his headset and grabbed his helmet.

"We're here."

The bridgehead appeared hopelessly confused at first. A column of tanks had come up too soon, and the big truck-launched bridge sections had to be worked around them. Vehicles backed antitank guns toward temporary positions, and a ditcher bit at the muck, beginning to prepare bridgehead fortifications. Engineers and commandant service troops, whose mission it was to control traffic, waved arms and flags, and another wave of amphibious infantry fighting vehicles skidded down through blasted mud into the water of the canal. The vehicles began swimming awkwardly, struggling to gain control, like limbless ducks. As Tkachenko watched, one vehicle took a chance direct hit, exploding into the water, resurfacing in shreds, then sinking finally beneath the surface, carrying its occupants down with it. Another vehicle hit trouble at the far bank, unable to find enough purchase to haul itself out of the water.

A huge blast clubbed Tkachenko's ears, and he threw himself on the ground. Only the presence of one of the misdirected tanks saved him from the flying debris. Men screamed in agony, or in the fear of agony, and other voices called for medical orderlies.

The Estonian battalion commander shouted orders and waved his arms, reminding Tkachenko of an old joke which insisted that whenever engineers were at a loss, they started waving their arms as though signaling something important.

Tkachenko reset his helmet and scraped the worst of the mud off the front of his uniform with his hands. He headed for the canal on foot, puffing resolutely along. At the edge, he took over the supervision of the

first bridging column, irritated by the slowness now and secretly glad to be able to take charge. He even guided individual trucks as they angled back to release their cargoes of pontoons into the water.

Tkachenko didn't mind the splashing. He was already soaked. When the first half dozen bridging sections were floating in the canal, he leapt out onto a bridge deck where engineer troops strained at stabilizing the sections and linking them to one another.

"Down."

Tkachenko fell flat on the bobbing deck as a flight of jets tore overhead. Antiaircraft guns opened fire, and missiles hissed skyward. Then came the blast of the aircraft-delivered ordnance.

"Work," Tkachenko shouted, "unless you want to die right here, you bastards." He seized a tool from one of the clumsier soldiers.

Down along the canal, more entry points underwent preparation, and more and more bridging sections slithered into the water from the backs of their trucks. The battalion commander had already gotten two tactical ferries into operation, and the first tanks crossed the water obstacle on their decks. Tkachenko, studying the engineering plans on the canal, had insisted adamantly that no tanks should attempt snorkeling. The banks were much too steep, and he doubted the tankers could find their points of egress once submerged. He suspected the tankers had been relieved by the recommendation.

Power boats half circled out into the canal. The engineers on the pontoons shoved the long bridge off from the bank with staves, allowing the boats to work in along the side. Shrapnel plunked in the dirty water like especially large raindrops. Tkachenko stood upright on the deck, wiping the broth of sweat and rain from his forehead.

The bridge slowly turned perpendicular to the near bank, buoying out into the waterway, reaching across the canal under the guidance of the power boats. Tkachenko watched more ferry sections maneuvering in the water, readying themselves for heavy cargo. The first ferries headed back to load more tanks.

Half an hour, Tkachenko thought. If they don't counterattack hard with ground forces, with tanks, in half an hour, it'll be too late. They'll never close the bridgehead on us. He listened carefully to the dueling artillery. It sounded as though the Soviet guns dominated the exchange. Attacking the enemy batteries, and throwing a protective curtain of steel down between the bridgehead and the enemy.

The end of the pontoon bridge found the far bank, sending a shock along the deck and through Tkachenko's knees. The ramp slapped into

the mud. They were going to need matting, Tkachenko thought. And the guides had to go up. He began shouting again, happy as a child.

Leonid worried about drowning. It seemed absurd to him to be in the middle of a battle, trapped inside a bobbing steel box. The infantry fighting vehicle's propulsion system seemed to have no thrust at all. Leonid felt as though they were trying to cross an ocean. His head ached from the exhaust fumes, and the view out of the troop periscopes along the side of the vehicle only confirmed that the water level was perilously close to the vehicle's deck. More than anything, Leonid just wanted to push open the roof hatch and see the sky.

But he was afraid. Afraid of being punished. Afraid of swamping the vehicle. Afraid of the artillery fire. Driblets and thin trickles of water snaked through the vehicle's seals. And when the gunner fired at some distant, unseen target, the vehicle rocked as though it was bound to capsize.

Leonid prayed. He did not know if he believed in a god or in much of anything. But his mother had never given up her little peasant shrine and her timid, warbling prayers. Leonid clutched his rifle tightly against himself and closed his eyes. He prayed as best he could, trying to imagine what kind of approach you would need to take to convince a neglected god you were really sincere at the moment. It seemed a little like coaxing a solemn, avoided teacher to believe that you had honestly intended to do your homework.

The vehicle thunked against something solid, knocking the crammed soldiers against one another. The engine whined and strained. The spinning of the tracks buzzed through the metal walls.

Suddenly, miraculously, the vehicle found enough traction to surge up onto the bank. The solid, jouncing throb of tracks on gravel seemed like a blessed event without precedent in Leonid's life.

The vehicle leveled out and changed gears, rushing forward. Leonid could hear thundering noises around them now, and the main gun pumped out rounds, filling the poorly vented troop compartment with gases. The broken terrain tossed the soldiers about, smacking them against one another or drawing them toward the sharpest bits of metal in the vehicle's structure. The soldiers complained and cursed one another, but it felt as though their souls were not present in the voices, as though every man had retreated into a private world of anticipation.

The order came to lay down suppressive fire through the firing ports. Leonid twisted around and did as he had been told, glad to have

something to do, to occupy his hands. He couldn't see any targets through the clouded periscope, but he quickly emptied magazine after magazine, adding to the acidic stink inside the troop compartment.

The vehicle jerked, almost stopped, then cruised forward slowly.

"Dismount," the squad leader, Junior Sergeant Kassabian, yelled.

The vehicle's rear doors swung open. The soldiers tumbled out in a clumsy imitation of their endlessly repeated drill. Leonid's legs cramped, but he forced them to go. He banged his shoulder in his haste to exit the vehicle, and he stumbled, almost falling over Seryosha, catching a strong vinegar smell on the machine gunner. Seryosha didn't appear to feel the impact, or to be aware of anything at all. He moved like a very fast sleepwalker.

"This way, *this* way."

The air clotted gray and thick, twinkling with quick points of color, like red and yellow holiday lights. The noise engulfed Leonid's body, a physical presence. He ran laterally through the rain, trying to find his position in the dismounted line.

Ali ran by him, screaming unintelligibly, wielding his antitank grenade launcher over his shoulder like a spear. There were no targets in sight, only a close line—much closer than in the rehearsed battle drills—of Soviet combat vehicles, peppering away into the smoke.

Leonid trotted forward, vaguely conscious of Seryosha off to his left. Seryosha's muscular presence, trotting forward with the machine gun, seemed protective. Leonid shouted as loud as he could, letting the sounds come randomly. He squeezed the trigger on his assault rifle, firing into the vacant grayness ahead of him, frantic to effect something, to gain some sort of control over his fate. He quickly ran out of rounds in the first magazine and slowed to change it.

He dropped the full magazine. As he bent to retrieve it from the mud an infantry fighting vehicle almost ran over him. It seemed to be out of line with the others. But glancing around, Leonid realized he was no longer certain exactly how the line faced. Hot lights teased out of the smoke, then disappeared. All around him, the small-arms fire continued without a discernible focus.

Another vehicle snorted past him. Leonid followed in its wake, mud sucking at his boots. He had no idea where his squad mates had gone so quickly.

He saw his first casualty. A strange Russian boy, pawing at the sky as though reaching for the bottom rungs of a ladder hanging just beyond his reach. The boy strained his arms, calling for his mother through a bloody

hole of a mouth, a bloody face under bloody blond hair. The boy gargled the single word, "Mother," over and over again, clawing at the sky and slapping the back of his head in the mud.

Leonid rushed by in horror. He fired his weapon in the general direction of his progress, clearing his own way, hopelessly disoriented.

An infantry fighting vehicle exploded off to the side, shooting brilliant colorations through the murk. Leonid found himself sitting down, baffled by how he had left his feet.

Where was the enemy? He couldn't see anything except running shadows and huge black vehicles that grumbled unexpectedly out of the smoke only to disappear again. If he was going to die . . . if he was going to die . . . he realized he did not even know what country he was in. They had driven so long. Was this still the German Democratic Republic? Or had they counterattacked to the west? Who was winning? How could you ever tell?

A ripple of artillery shells nearly deafened him, their force tearing at his uniform like a brazen girl. He kept his footing and trotted vacantly forward, out of tune with the danger of the exploding rounds. He passed a vividly burning vehicle around which blackened bodies lay. A voice barked in an Asiatic language, and a collection of small arms rattled in the mist.

Leonid discovered a machine gunner lying behind a low mound. For a moment, he lit with hope: Seryosha!

No. It was a stranger. Leonid flopped down beside him anyway, glad for any companionship. He began to fire his weapon in the same direction as the machine gunner.

An officer appeared, shrieking at them for their stupidity. The wild, red-faced captain waved his pistol and ordered them to go forward. Leonid and his companion lifted themselves off the wet grass and moved cautiously in the direction the officer had indicated.

Dead men. Dead men. Uniforms peeled back. Blood and bone and the strewn offal of slaughtered pigs. Vehicle bonfires. And still no sight of the enemy.

Vehicle engines screamed at the side of a hill. Leonid tried to follow the sound. Then he heard tank guns, quite near, easily recognizable to anyone who had ever camped on a training range.

Trees. Leonid headed for the dark trunks, still keeping pace with his anonymous companion, neither of them consciously leading the way. Leonid wanted to get out of the paths of the careening vehicles.

Small-arms fire erupted close by. Leonid stood, out of breath, remaining upright for several seconds before he realized that the muzzle flashes

were aimed in his direction. His companion had already dropped behind a log, sweeping the wet woods with his squad machine gun, drawing magazines mechanically from a pouch.

"Over there," he shouted to Leonid. *"In the brush."*

Leonid tried to fire, but he had let his magazine go empty again. He hurried to change it, fingers refusing to behave with any discipline. He could not understand how anyone could tell friend from enemy. Perhaps everyone was simply shooting at everyone else. Leonid fired into the maze of trees.

Light. Heat. Painful noise. Leonid saw the machine gunner's body coming up from the side of his field of vision. The boy rose off the ground as though jolted by electricity, then his body seemed to hover for an instant before coming apart. He was a lifeless ruin as he flopped onto Leonid, covering him with waste.

Leonid screamed. He pushed and slapped at the body, trying to drive it away. He did not want to touch it. Yet he frantically wanted to scour the mess off of himself.

Dark figures bounded through the mist. Leonid pawed at his weapon, hands greased with another man's death. But the figures vanished like phantoms.

Leonid crawled in close behind a pile of weathered stones and matted leaves. Time had gotten out of control; the rhythm was all skewed. From beyond the edge of the trees, he heard a rising shout from many voices, a middle pitch between the high notes of rounds in flight and the bass of armor at war. He struggled to his feet, relieved to find his own body intact. As fast as he could run, he went toward the sounds of battle. He did not think even briefly of rejoining the fight. He simply wanted to be close to other living men.

EIGHT

Lieutenant Colonel Shilko stepped outside of his battalion control post and had a smoke under the tarpaulin. Each time a nearby battery let go a volley, the tarpaulin shivered water onto the ground. The rain had picked up again. It was miserable weather for a war.

Shilko wished he knew what was happening up front, in the direct-fire war. So far, he had received no updates on the situation, only an overload of fire missions. The targets moved deeper and deeper into the enemy's territory, which was a positive sign. On the other hand, his battalion deputy for technical affairs, in the process of trying to locate spare parts, had heard a rumor that the regimental- and divisional-level artillery units positioned closer to the forces in contact were taking severe punishment from enemy counterfire. His uncertainty left Shilko in limbo. Personally, he found the war thus far not much different from a training exercise, except that far more ordnance had been expended and operations had an especially frantic air about them. But no enemy rounds had landed anywhere near his batteries, and the occasional planes overhead merely screamed by on their way to other rendezvous.

The battalion's greatest problems at the moment were a hopeless backlog of missions and a rate of ammunition expenditure already running over twice as high as had been projected. Plenty of ammunition

had been dumped on the ground by the guns for the initial fires in support of the plan, but Shilko faced the problem of dealing with a supply system in the division he supported that was totally unused to handling rounds in the appropriate caliber. He did not trust that system to dependably feed his guns once the battlefield really began to move. The system was supposed to push the correct ammunition forward to him from higher-echelon ammunition depots, but Shilko worried that his orphaned battalion might too easily be forgotten.

In order to remind the division rear services and the artillery technical support staff of his existence, Shilko had ordered half of his resupply trucks to dump their cargoes by the guns. Then he had sent the trucks off to draw more ammunition under the guidance of his deputy commander for political affairs. One thing Shilko trusted about the battalion's political officer was the man's ability to play the system within the system to acquire whatever the battalion really needed. If the rear services officer made no progress, the political officer could work through his own counterpart to move the system. If the rounds were anywhere to be had, Shilko knew his requisition would be satisfied—as long as the trucks could make their way on the jammed-up roads.

The difficulty with the lagging missions required a different sort of improvisation. The division's targeteers continued to send Shilko's guns more missions than they could possibly fire, whether the ammunition held out or not. First Romilinsky, the battalion's chief of staff, then Shilko himself had tried to explain the situation to division. But the missions continued to queue. Everyone wanted support from the big long-range guns. Finally, Shilko gave up on formal processes. He had been an artilleryman long enough to recognize what kind of missions were not worth firing after too long a delay, and he quietly took it upon himself to periodically purge the target schedule without notifying anyone outside of the battalion. Shilko always considered himself a conscientious officer. But he also recognized the need to be a practical one.

Shilko tossed the butt of his cigarette into the mud. One thing that he could say now that he was technically a veteran was that war was a noisy business, even by an artilleryman's standards. The earth lay under a constant low thunder. He remembered what he had been doing when he received the alert order. He had been at his desk, working with Romilinsky on the endless paperwork necessary to requisition materials to build a unit smokehouse. The unit's gardening and animal-raising efforts had been going extraordinarily well, and they were endeavors in

which Shilko took great pride. In the weeks just before the order to prepare for war, the smokehouse question had seemed like one of the most important matters in the world to him. Now the project appeared trivial to the point of hilarity. Yet there was a part of Shilko that could not quite get used to the idea of being at war even now.

Captain Romilinsky stepped out of the busy vehicle complex and ducked under the tarpaulin with Shilko.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, Davidov's complaining about his ammunition situation again."

Shilko smiled, as much at the company of his chief of staff as at the thought of Davidov's endless entreaties. Shilko did not like to be alone, and he especially liked to be surrounded by his officers. But in the midst of the urgent efforts of his officers and men, he had suddenly experienced a sense of his own futility, a budding suspicion that he had only gone through the motions of his professional life for years, and he had felt the unaccustomed impulse to step outside and stand alone for a bit. Now Romilinsky offered relief from the unwelcome prospect of further solitude.

"Davidov always complains," Shilko said. "He complains until he tires me out and I give him what he wants." Shilko offered Romilinsky a cigarette, then drew another for himself. "But today he'll have to wait like the others." Romilinsky offered a light, and Shilko bent over the younger man's unspoiled staff officer's hands. In comparison, Shilko's hands looked like big knuckles of smoked pork. "Besides, Davidov's a clever one. He always has more than he admits to having. He knows how to play the system. He'd make a good factory manager, our David Sergeyevitch. Or better yet, a farmer." Shilko chuckled at the thought of his battery commander swearing convincingly to the authorities that they had assigned his state farm totally unreasonable production quotas. "Well," Shilko concluded, "he'll come through. It's just his way."

Romilinsky nodded. He looked tired. They had been waiting or moving or setting up since the afternoon before, and they had all begun the war as tired men. Now, since the fighting had begun, it felt as though every hour counted for three or four in exhausting a man.

"Davidov's right, in a sense," Romilinsky said, temporarily putting aside his rivalry with the other officer. "Matching the number of missions assigned against the allocation of rounds prescribed by the effects norms, you can see that someone isn't thinking very far ahead."

Shilko suspected that Romilinsky was right, that the officers responsible for targeting were so overcome by the excitement of the moment that they were acting more on impulse than rigorous calculation. But he did

not want to discourage the younger man, and he settled on a milder response.

"When you think about it," Shilko said, "it appears that the norms to achieve desired effects were developed by artillerymen like us, who wanted to make damned sure that the mission's objective was achieved, while our allocation of units of fire was designed by rear services officers out to make equally certain that we damned artillerymen don't get too carried away with ourselves. It's the way the system has of coming up with a compromise."

"Until now," Romilinsky said, "I always thought the units of fire were rather generous."

Shilko shrugged. "In some ways . . . it's a very generous system. The art lies in knowing when to be satisfied."

To Shilko, his chief of staff, standing unshaven and with dark circles ringing the moving targets of his eyes, looked exactly as an artillery officer should look. Shilko realized that he himself was far from the dashing type. But Romilinsky looked quietly heroic to him. Shilko was proud of the younger man, and he liked him. He liked all of his officers, although it was easier to feel affection for some than for others. They were good boys, his gunners. Russian gunners had outshot the cannoneers of Frederick the Great. Why not the Bundeswehr as well?

Another volley tore into the sky, and thin smoke rose over the treeline a few hundred meters away.

"How would you like to be on the other end of that?" Shilko asked. The power of the guns continued to amaze him, even after twenty-odd years and long-ruined eardrums.

Romilinsky had positioned himself poorly, and the cascade of water from the tarpaulin caught him between the collar and his neck. He jumped as though touched by fire.

"Direct hit," Shilko said, grinning.

A lieutenant thrust his face out of the control post. "Comrade Battalion Commander. Orders. Our forces are across the Elbe-Seiten canal, and we're to prepare to displace."

"Now?" Shilko said, thinking of the rounds piled on the ground and of his trucks that had not yet returned.

"We're to be prepared for movement within two hours."

Shilko relaxed. Two hours was a long time. "Have they assigned us new fire positions?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "Division says things are moving very fast. Fire positions will be designated when we receive the order to execute movement."

"All right," Shilko said. According to the manuals, his batteries already should have displaced several times to avoid discovery by the enemy. But there was no place to go on the overcrowded terrain. "Good. Vassili Rodionovitch, call down to the batteries and tell them we're going to fire everything we can't lift." He looked back at the lieutenant. "Son, get me the current gift list, and we'll see what presents we can send the enemy."

The lieutenant pulled his head back into the tentage like a turtle returning to its shell.

"Standard movement drill?" Romilinsky asked.

"No," Shilko said, suddenly adamant, thinking of the possibility of losing control of his battalion on the hectic roads. It was as bitter as the thought of abandoning his children. "The rules are off, Vassili Rodionovitch. We'll all move together. Or we won't see our batteries again until the war's over."

"But if we receive interim missions? And no one's in position to fire?"

"We can always say we ran out of ammunition," Shilko said, determined to maintain control of his unit, and delighted at the prospect of engrossing activities that would, at least temporarily, drown his self-doubts.

Another huge ripple of fire punched the sky. This time, the spillage off the tarpaulin caught Shilko. The water was cold and unwelcome. But Shilko shrugged it off.

"Direct hit," he said.

Major General Khrenov's divisional forward command post had been hastily composed around a liberated country inn. In the parking lot, communications vans hid halfheartedly under sagging camouflage nets, and command vehicles lurked under dripping trees. Windows had been smashed out of the building to admit cables, and handyman soldiers spliced and taped and carried boxes of staff clutter up the steps to the building's main entrance. Bad-tempered warrant officers supervised the physical activities, monitored, in turn, by staff officers who occasionally ventured out into the damp air to find out why everything was taking so long.

The scene was instantly familiar to Trimenko, and he didn't like it. This was a souring conclusion to the elation of seeing his army on the march from the vantage point of the helicopter. He wanted Khrenov on the move, not setting himself up to hold court. But the army commander decided to hear what the division commander had to say before letting the hammer fall.

"Comrade Army Commander," Khrenov greeted him, smiling, clearly quite pleased with himself, "I hope you had a good flight."

Trimenko made a noise at the back of his throat, noncommittal. He strode beside Khrenov from the meadow that served as a helipad to the building. The rain-rinsed air felt unseasonably cold.

"Comrade Army Commander," Khrenov tried again, "you no doubt have been informed that we have secured our bridgehead, and that we are expanding it at this time. It's a solid bridgehead. We already have forward detachments out."

Trimenko had not known. The information must have missed him in flight. What in the world was Tkachenko, his chief of engineers, doing? He was supposed to keep his army commander informed on the crossing situation. Trimenko wondered what else had happened of which he was unaware, what other events had occurred in the army's sector of which his staff had failed to properly inform him. He had only known that a forward element had seized a good crossing site in the vicinity of Bad Bevensen almost by accident and that Khrenov's crossing operation was underway. But this was rapid success, if Khrenov was accurately reporting his situation.

"I need the details, not generalities, Khrenov," Trimenko said, as though none of the division commander's revelations had surprised him.

Their boots slapped up the cement steps. Inside, staff maps and remote communications gear had been set up in a public dining room. The appointments were far too comfortable for Trimenko's image of a division's forward command post in wartime.

"You're carrying a lot of your staff forward with you, Khrenov," he said.

Khrenov looked at him in mild surprise. "The bastards hit my main command post with a fire strike. Around noon. I thought you knew. Over fifty percent destruction. I'm running everything but rear services and traffic control from here until we get the alternate running hot."

Trimenko was furious now, although he carefully held his temper inside the mental box he had fashioned for it over the years. He realized that so much was happening so swiftly that it was impossible to know it all. But his staff had the mission of sorting out those details that were truly vital and keeping the army commander informed. These gaps in his knowledge only convinced him more fully of the inability of average men to cope under the conditions of modern war. The machine was superior to the man.

"I'm sorry, Khrenov. I didn't know that." For a moment, Trimenko framed the problem in terms of the officers lost, undoubtedly some very

good men. But he quickly rejected any sentimentality. "The important thing is not to lose control now. We must keep close control of the troops. Confusion is the enemy now. Confusion and time."

Khrenov nodded. "Comrade Army Commander, if you'll have a seat at the map, I'll brief you myself."

Really pleased with himself, Trimenko thought. Otherwise, he'd have one of his staff officers brief me. Trimenko took a seat beside a table, fronting on a map that had been unfolded and tacked to the wall. A staff officer slipped a packet of looted cigarettes, matches, and a cup of tea onto the table, then nimbly disappeared. Trimenko ignored the little gifts, reaching into his tunic pocket for his tobacco pouch of pistachio nuts. He scattered a few on the tabletop and told Khrenov to go ahead.

"The overall situation in the sector of the Twenty-first Motorized Rifle Division is quite favorable at this time. We have firmly established a divisional bridgehead . . . here . . . following a successful assault crossing against the canal line. At this time, forward elements have penetrated the line of Highway 4, and the division's right flank regiment, following a tactical turning maneuver north from the bridgehead, is fighting on the southern outskirts of Uelzen."

"Don't get bogged down in a city fight," Trimenko interrupted. "Just get the roads. Let the follow-on forces deal with any pockets. Don't divert any more forces to deal with them than absolutely necessary to provide security."

"Comrade Army Commander, our only interest is in securing the Highway 71 axis. Our forces are only engaged in the Uelzen area to firmly establish control of the local road network. A forward detachment detailed from that regiment has already passed into the enemy's rear, and its last reported location puts it in light contact eighteen kilometers west of Uelzen along the supporting network corollary to Highway 71 in the Soltau-Verden direction. The division's mission of the day should be accomplished within one to two hours."

The reported locations were almost stunning to Trimenko. But he adamantly refused to show it in his facial expression. He slowly peeled another nut, slipped it between his lips, and stared at the map. Khrenov had reason to be pleased with himself. This was splendid. The enemy had lost control in the sector. Now it was time to hit them even harder.

"Are you in contact with the Two Hundred and Seventh Division on your southern flank?"

Khrenov's face fell. "Yes, Comrade Army Commander. Dalyev reports that both of his initial crossing attempts have failed. The Germans . . . appear to be giving him a bad time."

Trimenko nodded. "Dalyev's got a lot of frontage. Too much to expect real results. He's paying the price for you to succeed in your own little area, Khrenov."

Khrenov bent forward, as though Trimenko had dropped a physical weight onto his shoulders. It was evident that the division commander was anxious to turn the briefing back to his own successes.

"I don't mind so much," Trimenko said. "Somebody always has to pay the price. I just want Dalyev to keep the Germans so busy up front that they miss what's happening on their flanks. I *want* the Germans to perceive success. But I want to keep enough pressure on them so that they worry, too. So that they stay put. Dalyev's taken severe losses, Khrenov. While your forward detachment's heading for Soltau, perhaps even the Weser itself, waving at the girls and singing the 'Internationale,' no doubt. But let me pose a problem for you. Suppose Dalyev can't keep the Germans occupied long enough. We've already had reports of German antitank helicopters working the Dutch sector, trying to brace up the front. Really, it's only a matter of time until they hit you with a brigade, maybe more. How are you going to hold the southern shoulder of the penetration?"

"Comrade Army Commander, defensive positions are being prepared at the bridgehead itself. Otherwise, in a fluid, breakthrough situation, I must be prepared to accept open flanks . . . to a degree . . ."

"Oh, don't recite your academy notes to me, Khrenov. Neither do I want you to slow down. If anything, I think you're lagging a bit just now," Trimenko lied. "But you do need to get your antitank battalion and some mobile obstacle detachments up. And detail an armored reserve. Start your antitank defenses somewhere around that wishbone on Highway 4. Right about there, oriented to the south. And keep laying them in as fast as you can while you move west. Be generous with the antitank mines."

"Comrade Army Commander, I don't have the routes. Not yet. You must have seen what the roads are like. I've loaded my assault forces forward, the bridgehead's packed, and everybody's screaming for more ammunition. In any case, one antitank battalion can't cover even the flank we've got now, and I need'them on the bridgehead. I can't even get my casualties out," Khrenov said, in his bitterest tone of the day, "and they're heavy."

Trimenko dropped a flame-shaped pistachio back onto the table and waved his hand. "And you'll have worse difficulties yet. The war has hardly begun. I'm giving you a full antitank regiment. And an additional battalion of engineers to tuck them in and lay minefields along your flank. But getting them here is your problem."

Khrenov caught the signal. He was doing well. He was being reinforced. The army commander counted his efforts a solid success.

"Now tell me," Trimenko continued, "about support issues. What are the real problems?"

Khrenov sighed. It was almost a womanish gesture. In the background, plates rattled. Soldiers fooling around in the kitchen, eating when they needed to be working. Trimenko let it pass for the moment.

"Comrade Army Commander," Khrenov began. It was almost a litany, the way he said it, and it annoyed Trimenko. "I have too many reports of excessive tank main gun and artillery ammunition consumption to ignore. If it were one unit, or two, I'd assume they were overreacting, or just getting greedy, trying to stock up. But I have several reports of tanks shooting up their entire on-board units of fire in their first engagements. And the artillery is loaded down with calls for fire. It was all right as long as we were on the phased fire plan, but now, even with the battle-management computers, we can't really tell exactly who is in firing position or who's still on the road, who's low on ammunition or who's just sitting around with his elbow up his ass. My chief of missile troops and artillery is out on the ground trying to sort it out personally."

Trimenko thought for a moment.

"But no fuel problems?" he asked.

Khrenov shook his head. "Not a whisper."

"Of course not," Trimenko said. "But get me better details on the ammunition problems. Not just generalities. Numbers. And burn this into your brain, Khrenov. I don't want any unit stopping just because it runs out of ammunition. They can just go on a sightseeing ride to the Rhine. We're on the edge of cracking those bastards now. You can feel it, Khrenov. The battlefield's gotten away from them. And a tank with nothing but a few belts of machine-gun ammunition is still a tremendous weapon if it's deep in the enemy's rear." Trimenko sat back and smiled one of his thin, rare smiles. "Think of it. If you were a fat rear-area soldier and you woke up to find enemy tanks all over your comfortable little domain, would you stop to ask yourself whether or not they had ammunition on board?" Trimenko tossed a shell toward the map. Then he locked his facial muscles once again.

"Make sure you maintain good communications with Malyshev as he comes up. Cooperate, and no nonsense. I want his division's tanks across the autobahn tonight. I expect you to ensure personally that all control measures for his forward passage have been worked out and fully agreed upon. There must be no pauses, no letting up. Hit them, Khrenov. Get them down on their backs, and drive your tanks and fighting vehicles

right over them." Trimenko paused at the power of his mental vision. "Let me know when the first vehicle crosses the autobahn line. That triggers the deep air assaults on the Weser crossing sites." Trimenko stared at Khrenov, measuring this man who had already accomplished so much this day. "You have the opportunity to do great things, my little major general. Great things. But first you need to stop building yourself a headquarters palace here. I find this sort of indulgence totally inappropriate. Commanders should be farther forward. I can hardly hear the guns from here," Trimenko exaggerated. "You need to get moving, Khrenov."

"What's your hurry, you little bastard? You're going the wrong way, anyway. You think this is a retreat?"

In response, Captain of Transport Troops Belinsky looked up fiercely at the tall major of motorized rifle troops. Around them, their vehicles—Belinsky's cargo trucks and the major's battalion of combat vehicles—had intermingled with smashed headlamps, shouts, curses, and confusion. No traffic controllers had been posted at the intersection. Now the combat troops were in a self-righteous rage, furious that a lowly transport unit had muddled their progress.

"First of all, Comrade Major," Belinsky said calmly, "you're on a support route. This is not a combat artery."

"You're the one who's on the wrong road, you snot. Now you can get those trucks off out of my way, or I'll drive right over them."

"Major, this is my road, and I'm carrying important cargo."

"To the *rear?"* The tall major laughed. He pawed his foot at the ground like a prancing stallion, head thrown back in mocking hilarity.

Belinsky glowered up into the other man's eyes. Bully's eyes, beneath a dripping helmet rim. Belinsky was already unhappy with his unexpected mission, but he was determined to carry it out.

"Come with me, Comrade Major. Just for a moment. You need to have a look at my cargo." And he turned his back on the man, drawing the motorized rifle officer along behind him by the magnetism of his insolence.

The major followed Belinsky down the crumbling, rain-slicked road, cursing as though the outcome of the war depended on his vulgarity. Belinsky casually slipped off his glasses and dropped them into the pocket of his tunic. He felt no need to inspect his cargo in detail yet again.

The tall major did not even have to stretch to see into the bed of the first cargo truck. As Belinsky drew back the tarpaulin, admitting the smoky daylight, the sounds of raw human misery greeted the two officers.

Belinsky watched the major's face change expression. And it kept changing, unable to settle on an appropriate mask.

Abruptly, the major slapped down the canvas and stalked off. Belinsky hurried along beside him. "This motorized rifle battalion," Belinsky said coldly, "is *returning* from the front, Comrade Major. The complement of ambulances was a bit short, as were the stretchers."

But the major wasn't listening. He simply shouted orders in multiple directions, telling his men to edge to the side of the road and let the damned trucks pass.

NINE

Guards Colonel Anton Mikhailovitch Malinsky sat in his command car, eyes lowered to his map, thinking about Chopin. His fingers tapped and touched delicately at the milky plastic map bag, forming chords and absentminded arpeggios across the routes and rivers, cities and towns of central Germany. Remembering a favorite passage, a quick flourish into melody, he closed his eyes, the better to hear the vibrating strings and wires of memory. He loved Chopin. Perhaps, he thought to himself, it was the Polish blood that had poured heatedly into the Malinsky lines back in the days of hussars with ornamental wings rising from their armored backs.

Anton regretted the war, although his formation had not even been introduced into combat as yet. He regretted his spectacular rise to the command of a premier maneuver brigade at a jealousy-inspiring age. He regretted all of the things his father had never been able to see clearly. The old man made such a fuss about accepting no patronage for Malinskys. Yet, Anton thought, were it not for his position, it's unlikely I would be more than a middling major. Were it not for the name, the name and its iron burden of traditions, I would hardly be a soldier. Colonel of the Guards. Guards colonel. It sounded marvelously romance, the stuff of operettas and oversized epaulets. Strauss might have had a

grand time with such a character. Or Lehar. Better yet, a more common touch. Romberg. Well, you could not dismiss light music so easily. There was a need for more lightness in the world.

Anton peered out at the grim German sky beyond the camouflage net. He was alone now, his officers attending to their endless chores. He had sent his driver splashing off through the mud in search of something warm to drink. His driver was a good boy, not really cut out to be a soldier either. Quite frightened of the great, brooding colonel, son of one of the most powerful officers in the Soviet military establishment. Anton remembered how the sickly colored mud had grabbed the boy's ill-fitting boots. A lean Russian boy in a dismal training area in the Germanies, waiting for orders. Waiting for orders like all of them.

Anton had heard that the war was going very fast up front, even faster than the plan had called for in some sectors. The combination of modern killing technologies and the barely controllable mobility of contemporary armored vehicles and aircraft had torn the orderliness of situation maps apart with a rapidity alarming even to the side enjoying success. Anton remembered the baffled faces at the corps briefing he had attended earlier in the afternoon. Everyone had expected a tougher initial fight. But the fairy-tale endings of countless dreary exercises had suddenly come true. Even the careful Tartar eyes of Anseev, the corps commander, had revealed an odd disorientation, unsettled by the velocity of events.

In his heart, Anton felt that the war could not go too slowly for him. He recalled the detritus of enemy bombings on the approaches to the Elbe River crossing site north of Magdeburg. The long lines of burned-out trucks and the hapless rows of burned bodies had not even made it into the war in the traditional sense. Hours away from the border and the stew of combat, death had come without warning. If war had ever had any glamour, Anton thought, it was surely gone now. //"war had ever had any glamour. Now complex, inhuman systems flew overhead, or perhaps just somewhere in the middle distance, beyond the reach of the human eye, and computers told the machines what to do and when to do it, and the earth erupted with hellfire. Anton had counted thirty-seven wrecks in one area, over fifty in another. The crossing sites themselves were little more than vehicle graveyards, the riverbanks blackened. His brigade had lost several vehicles during the Elbe River crossing, including precious air-defense systems. Now the survivors sat hidden in an assembly area in the Letzlinger Heide, topped off with fuel, organized into combat march serials, ready to move on the last, most difficult leg of their journey into battle. The corps commander projected a resumption of the march within twelve to eighteen hours, and a rapid movement to commitment,