

CHAPTER ONE

Corporal Fischer was sitting on the driver's box of a ration wagon, with the driver crouched beside him, reins in hand. The wheels of the cart creaked protestingly as they ground their way through the sand. In the wooden body of the cart behind the two men several metal food containers clanged against each other with the lurching movements of the vehicle. They contained soup and ersatz coffee, which slopped about as the horses ambled along, their heads bent low.

Smoky shadows of clouds drifted across the face of the pallid moon, their outlines strengthened by the glare from hundreds of shell-bursts. The heavy, rumbling breath of the front-line was like that of some gigantic animal, the rattle of shots providing a background conversation to its nocturnal wheezing.

Rrat. . . rrrat . . . rat . . . rat . . .

Tak . . . tak-tak . . . tak-tak-tak-tak . . .

The nightly chatter of Russian and German machine-guns was in full swing, an exchange that would go on without ceasing until dawn.

"Stupid animal!" The driver's long whip whistled viciously through the air and cracked onto the rump of the nearside horse. "He's always playing me up."

Snorting and neighing, the horse was pulling against the traces, shying from the outlines of the ruins of what had once been a village - Michailovsk.¹

A soft wind soughed gently through some tall poplar trees that stood guard like black, threatening giants over the dead village. A feral cat, startled by the approach of the cart, streaked across the road, narrowly missing the wheels as they jounced over the scattered bricks.

The night had grown chill and a shiver ran through the young corporal as he sat hunched over on the open seat. His teeth chattered and he pulled up the collar of his tunic, then thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets.

Still the horses plodded on until the ruins of the village were behind them and the road began to climb gently, winding like a nebulous gray ribbon through the thick darkness of the surrounding fields.

Corporal Fischer was nineteen, but his eyes told another story. His eyes were drained and feint, evidence of the aging effects of war on the Russian front. With his lower lip thrust pensively out and his brows raised, wrinkling his sun-tanned forehead, Fischer was thinking about the leave he had just had. His thoughts rambled here and there, remembering incidents, shuttling them back and forth in his mind, illogically, chaotically, like bits of driftwood caught up in a flood.

It had all begun when he had called at Lance Corporal Vogel's house to collect a parcel, from his wife. Innocent enough, but that wasn't all. He had stayed at Vogel's flat for fourteen days and - he smiled as he thought about it - fourteen nights. Fourteen nights . . . Christ, he thought, what a leave!

"Like a drop of schnapps, corporal?" The driver's voice brought him back from his reverie.

¹ An important fishing village in Latvia along the Baltic Sea.

"Would, I!" Fischer took the water-bottle from the driver and tilted back his head, feeling the fiery spirit course its way down to his stomach. He passed the bottle back. "Thanks."

Without turning his head, the driver spoke. "I'll be off in a couple of months."

"Leave?"

"You bet."

Fischer didn't feel like continuing the conversation, nor did the driver show any signs of wanting to do so. Once again Fischer resumed his hunched-over pose and allowed the swaying, gently lurching progress of the wagon to lull him back to his thoughts again.

A very nice piece of homework Vogel had found himself. All a man could wish for . . . Fischer stretched uncomfortably at the thought of her, and the planks of the seat creaked as he eased into another, more tolerable position. Those thighs, those breasts, those legs . . . and how she made love! Fischer breathed deeply, sensuously through his nostrils as he remembered each one of those nights . . .

They had reached a muddy section of the road and the horses, finding themselves fetlock-deep in slush, lowered their heads and strained, while the wheels ploughed stickily through the dragging mire. Now there were willows at the side of the road, their branches like ghostly fingers, rustling in the slight breeze.

The rutted cart-track led to a treeless plain. In daytime this was in full view of the enemy, the front-line trenches being on the other side of it. Now streams of tracers curved lazily across the night.

Fischer hawked and spat noisily over the side of the wagon, still thinking of his leave. What a bloody nuisance that Frau Bauer woman had seen him coming out of Vogel's flat. There he was, standing close to Vogel's wife, when the fat, ugly crone had come down the stairs.

"Frau Bauer, it would have to be her, damn it," he had heard Vogel's wife hiss angrily through compressed lips, to him as she had whispered urgently, "Pretend you haven't seen her." So he made out he hadn't.

Suddenly the screeching whine of an approaching shell broke into Fischer's thoughts. He jumped to his feet, tearing his hands from his pockets.

"Artillery!" yelled the driver, his fingers gripping the reins convulsively.

Whoom! With a belch of flame the shell crumpled onto the plain less than a hundred yards in front of them. As the flash of the explosion flared for a moment the horses bolted. The woodwork of the cart groaned, the leather harness creaked, and the soup containers clattered as the beasts galloped madly along the road. Then clods of clay and jagged, red-hot fragments of shell hissed and thudded around them.

"Whoa!" The driver heaved back on the reins. "Whoa!" His free hand groped for the brake lever. "Hold on there, you spavined, flea-ridden bastards. Whoa!" The wagon slithered to a standstill at the side of the road, near to the last of the willows.

There was another gun-flash from behind the Russian lines, followed by the deep, rushing growl of the oncoming projectile.

Fischer and the driver ducked, crouching over the seat with their heads tucked down.

Whoom! The second shell exploded some thirty yards from their willow clump and once again the air sang with the whine of shrapnel. There were swishing and plopping sounds as pieces of metal buried themselves in the muddy ground.

The horses tugged against their bits, rearing up and neighing frantically. Fischer leapt down from the wagon and grabbed for the bridle of the near-side horse with both hands.

"Down!" He flung all his weight onto the headstall. "Down! Steady, feller; down, I say down!"

"Take off the brake and let's get out of here!" Fischer shouted to the driver as more flashes flickered in the eastern sky, an ominous warning of more shells to come.

The driver coaxed the terrified horses out onto the open plain, but before he had gone more than a few yards another shell screamed towards them, louder . . . louder . . . The full force of the blast caught Fischer in the small of the back and flung him forward, so that only his grip on the harness prevented him from being thrown to the ground. Shell-splinters buzzed and rattled around him, sounding like a tropical rainstorm on a tin roof. The metal containers in the wagon received their share of the hail of steel, and this added to the din.

Fischer looked anxiously up at the driving-box and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that his companion was still apparently unhurt. He was about to call out to him, when the driver suddenly began laying about the horses with his whip, yelling like a madman. The wagon lurched forward, with Fischer running along at the head of the horses. At a cross-road, where a whitewashed sign pointed the way to Battalion HQ, they turned off and clattered away in the direction indicated.

Shells continued to fall behind and around them, and at every explosion Fischer felt the animal warmth of the horse as it bucked against his restraining hand.

The sides of a water-course yawned before them in the moonlight, which also showed a steep runway that had been cut down one of the banks. With brakes groaning and the soup and coffee containers jangling and sliding forward against the back of the driving-box, the wagon lumbered through the darkness and eventually reached the comparative safety of the bed of a gully.

The horses picked their way along the trickle of stream that annually became a raging torrent when the snows melted in the spring. The horses' hides gleamed wetly; on either side the bare, sandy walls of the gully rose bleakly above them.

"Whoa!" There was no need for the driver to repeat the order this time. Obediently, with flanks heaving, the horses allowed themselves to be maneuvered into the protection of an empty embanked site where a heavy-mortar battery had been situated before Fischer's leave.

"Christ, that was a near thing," the driver said, clambering down from the driving-box, dragging a filthy handkerchief from his pocket, and mopping his brow. He walked stiffly towards Fischer, flexing his cramped legs, and fumbled the handkerchief back in his pocket.

"Smoke?" Wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, Fischer held out a packet of Stamboul cigarettes.

A match flared briefly and both men, with the ingrained habit of old campaigners, cupped the glowing tips of their cigarettes in the palms of their hands.

"Better down here, isn't it?" Fischer inclined his head appreciatively towards the deep, protecting sides of the gully.

"Too damn true, mate," said the driver, pulling the broken peak of his battered forage-cap still lower over his eyes. "They seem to know exactly when the supply wagons are coming. I wouldn't mind betting we are in for a hell of a time of it down here. If you ask me, the Ivans are brewing up for an offensive. I tell you, when you -" He broke off and turned towards the wagon. "What the hell's that dripping?" He hurried round to the back of the cart.

"Damn! All the coffee has run out. And there's a bloody great hole in the soup can, too!"

Fischer peered at the wreckage. The hail of shell-splinters had found their marks in several places. There was no more than a gallon of coffee left, but fortunately only a little of the thicker vegetable-filled soup had trickled out. Both men ripped open their field-dressings and used the lint pads to plug the holes in the soup tin. There was nothing they could do about the coffee.

As Fischer walked back to the head of the wagon again, he ran his hand over the sweat-soaked hide of one of the horses. "Say, why don't you sling a blanket over your animals?"

"Blanket!" The driver pushed the bandaged food-container back against the others, irritably. "Why should I? No one pampers me like that."

"Sod your luck!" Fischer tossed his cigarette into the stream and climbed back onto the driving-box. "Come on, let's get cracking."

The wagon rattled on.

