

Chapter Thirty Four

Toivo and the others in the half-finished trench recoiled from the barrage of artillery grenades exploding around them—battering them around mercilessly in a cyclone of unrelenting, powerful blasts. The shelling was beyond awe-inspiring, beyond imaginable hell—this was Apocalypse Now; this was the Soviet Union unleashing all its might to eradicate an obstinate neighbor.

Pennanen's men winced as soil and shrapnel, splintered trees and boulders, body parts and unidentified matter showered down on them; they had no option but to lie there—there was no safe place to go. Some curled up in fetal positions, their memory of the womb instinctively reactivated in attempt to regain pre-natal safety—some whimpered; others refused to, clamping their jaws shut even tighter.

A green rocket shot up into the air and glowed brightly against the morning sky. It was November 30, 1939. Although the Soviet Union had not formally declared war, The Finnish-Russian Winter War had been set in motion.

More green rockets shot up into the sky that was darkening with grenades; more artillery and mortar

grenades landed among Pennanen's Home Guard Unit, which along with two others had been positioned to provide support for the border guards in the trenches closest to the border.

Some of the men no longer winced—they were already hardened veterans after a few minutes of shelling. Survival instinct propelled some to look beyond the present moment; they reached deep inside and discovered qualities they did not know they possessed.

“Look at those rockets!” Timo hung on with all his might to his black fedora that contorted from the blasts of explosions. “Must be Stalin’s birthday!”

They winced from the shelling, braved the shrapnel and flying debris, peered over the bank of the trench—and saw hundreds of Red Army conscripts emerge from the Soviet forest.

Some of the conscripts carried pitchforks and shovels, others hammers and sickles. Some had paintings and photos of Stalin, others red flags with communist slogans in Cyrillic; still others had bouquets of flowers or loaves of bread in their hands.

Behind the conscripts was a uniformed brass band. A *politruk* gave the band a signal; the band struck up '*The Internationale*'—the communist party's unification song.

Another *politruk* gave the conscripts a signal; they joined hands and began to sing, continuing onward toward the border—just as they were about to enter the minefields, the *politruk* returned to the safety of the trees.

Pennanen’s unit was provided slight relief when Soviet artillery and mortar spotters inexplicably

changed their aim; the shells began to fall farther from the border, some even landing among the reservists from the city.

Pennanen noted that the hoard of Red Army conscripts kept advancing and would soon be in the Soviet minefields. He pulled the slide back on his *Suomi* submachine-gun and muttered: “Mines don’t discriminate against their makers.”

Pennanen was an amateur historian with knowledge of past military follies, and he understood the situation. Stalin had virtually unlimited resources; Pennanen could easily imagine Stalin’s resolve.

“This is it, men! Be ready to fire! And conserve your ammunition! Make sure every bullet counts!”

His men reached for their rifles.

“Maybe they are bluffing!” yelled the millwright, who always carried a rabbit’s foot and a crucifix—even though he was Lutheran and at night rubbed garlic on his chest. “It could be just a test.”

“This is not a test!” Pennanen had already counted seven dead around him, as well as many others who were seriously wounded.

His men peered over the tops of their trenches; saw the horde approaching and quickly calculated that the five rounds of ammunition they each had been issued would not be enough.

“This isn’t Poland!” Reijo yelled at the advancing Russians. “You’re going to have to fight to take Finland!”

Reijo’s defiance of the odds they faced gave others strength. They burst out in guttural agreement—a battle cry of sorts; the kind that instills

strength in those who utter it more so than fear in those who hear it.

“But look at how many they are!” Jussi lamented. “How will we bury them all?”

Stray grenades continued to explode around them. While some of the men remained in fetal positions, as if that would protect them, others no longer bothered to duck; they had noticed it made little difference—there was no hiding from what came from above. Men continued to be torn apart; they shrieked; they whimpered; they died.

The postmistress’ son, who was a machine-gun loader, turned to his gunner, the butcher’s helper.

“Are you sure it won't happen to us?” He had to yell to be heard over the shelling.

“Yes, God is on my side!” The butcher’s helper took the safety off his machine-gun.

For Toivo it was surreal, reminding him of experimental Parisian paintings, especially those of Salvador Dali—time and all else was that warped. He looked at the unsightly wide gash that had been slashed through the land and was called a border—and questioned whether it was worth fighting over or dying for.

He reached into his rucksack for his sketchpad and charcoal; he did not want to be One with the carnage—he wanted to control what he saw.

He found a clean page and began to sketch his beloved Kerttu.

Hand-in-hand, the first wave of Red Army conscripts entered the minefields on the Soviet side of the border. Mines exploded; human shapes disintegrated into unrecognizable forms. As the first

wave of Red Army conscripts blew apart, *politruks* ordered the second wave out from the forest.

The conscripts had heard the grenades hum as they passed overhead before exploding in the distance. When they had worried aloud, *politruks* had convinced them that the Finns were their friends and would not fire. They were told to hand over the bread, the tools, the flowers, or whatever they were carrying to any Finn they encountered; to sing when ordered, and to continue walking until they reached the Baltic—which many conscripts knew was hundreds of kilometers away.

When the second wave of conscripts emerged from the forest and saw the piles of dead and heard the screams of the wounded, they hesitated and turned back to the *politruks* for guidance, only to find them safely ensconced among the trees, aiming Soviet-made machineguns at them.

The conscripts accepted their fate with resignation. They knew tyranny; they understood that resistance was futile. They resolutely began to sing, and they forged on hand-in-hand toward the Baltic—it lay right there, just the other side of their dying comrades, the minefields, the black-and-white border markers, and the Finns with their determination and guns.

A shell exploded near Toivo and showered him with earthen debris. He shook the dirt off his sketch pad, looked up, and saw the post mistress's son and the butcher's helper—the machine-gunner who knew that God was on his side—lying smashed and torn, dead from a direct grenade hit; God was surely on their side now.

He peered over the top of the trench.

The conscripts kept advancing; their lips were moving, but all that could be heard was the thundering of the shelling.

As the remains of the first wave of conscripts passed the border markers and entered Finland, the second wave entered the minefields. Mines exploded. More Soviet conscripts died on Soviet soil; they died grotesquely, their mouths agape in screams that were eternally frozen. Other conscripts kept advancing; some even kept on singing.

“They are coming closer!” Timo yanked his fedora tighter on his head.

“Really?! They are getting closer?! No shit they are getting closer!!! You’re officer material!” Reijo wet his thumb with saliva and rubbed it on the front sight of his rifle.

As the first line of Soviets came into range, the other Finnish home guard units and the border guards on their flanks opened fire. Pennanen stood up and walked erect among his men, braving the flying shrapnel and debris.

“Hold your fire! Wait for my command!”

Now they could now hear the Soviet conscripts singing.

“But they are *singing!*” someone yelled.

“They are Russian!” Pennanen responded. “Open fire!”

Most of his men fired their weapons on Pennanen’s command; others, who had not overcome their reluctance to harm those who had yet not harmed them, did not.

Scores of conscripts fell, torn apart by bullets; those who were not harmed were terrified. With their faces smudged from the smoke of exploded mines, shells, and gunpowder, they continued past the border markers toward the Finnish trenches; at their side, still in a formation, albeit ragged, were the remnants of the Red Army brass orchestra.

One of the few from the first wave who had survived the minefield was Nicholas Habarov, his birthmark dark against his ashen skin. Tears streaked his cheeks.

... I don't want to die... my life should not yet be over...

Nicholas Habarov stumbled past a border marker, holding the rifle that he had been given—it was not fully assembled and lacked a bolt; thus it could not fire.

“It’s merely for show,” the *politruk* had said when the rifle was handed to him. “The Finns will not shoot you. They are our comrades, proletariat like us. The rifle is just so you will look military.”

Nicholas shook his head, as if that would blank out the horror around him, as if that would raise the dead and heal the wounded. Enraged and embittered, he pointed his useless rifle at the distant Finns and yelled: “Bang!”

Another grenade landed close to Toivo and exploded. He flinched; the charcoal broke in his hand. He looked out over the top of the trench; hundreds of Russian conscripts were still advancing—they were no more than one hundred meters away.

“Shoot, dammit, Toivo! Shoot! ” Reijo squeezed off another round.

All sound faded for Toivo as he dropped his sketchpad and reached for his rifle; the metal was cold, the wood cool and smooth.

“Shoot, God damn it! Shoot!” Reijo pounded Toivo on the shoulder with a hard fist.

Toivo reluctantly, dazedly, lifted his rifle to his cheek. He saw something in his sight—pulled the trigger—fired.

Nicholas did not feel the bullet that hit him above the left eye. For an instant he heard a dreadful sound, then an explosion of white slammed him into—nothing.

His soul hesitated, then left; only his body hit the ground. Near it lay an impotent, not yet fully assembled, bolt-less Russian-made rifle.

“Don’t just fire! Aim!” Reijo yelled at Toivo, who dazedly pulled the bolt back on his rifle, ejected the spent cartridge, and fed another into the chamber.

Toivo was not aware of killing anyone; the war was still young, as was his mind—its resilience was not yet diminished.

He nevertheless felt the loss of something sacred.

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