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A RUSSIAN SPRING

"If there is anything worse than the Russian winter, it is the Russian Spring," grumbled Otto as he squelched his way from the tank to the mess area. "Here, Klaus, let me give you a hand with that." Ahead of him, their young replacement radio operator was struggling with his heavy gear. Otto eyed the slight youngster with worry. Klaus was one of the newest additions to the crew. Despite a period of training with the crew, the youngster was still struggling to prove himself. "You don't always have to carry the heaviest box or the largest pack, you know. You need to grow into your strength."

"No, really, Otto, thank you, I can manage." The boy's face reddened. I'm not a baby, he thought. As he turned to speak to Otto, he tripped, and would have fallen had not Otto stretched out a steadying arm.

Otto took hold of the strap of the heavy ammunition box. "In this crew, we do things together, Junge." His tone was severe, but he was smiling. "Come on, let's dump this stuff and get something to eat. Rumor has it that the cook found a few "roof rabbits" to add to the stew!"

Klaus looked sick. "Thanks, Otto, I guess I'm not very hungry

after all." "Roof rabbit" was soldier slang for cat.

Otto repented. "Sorry, Klaus, I was just teasing. It's canned beef, really. Some we 'borrowed' from the Wehrmacht at the last station."

Klaus looked a bit dubious, but allowed himself to be persuaded into the chow line. They were almost the last in line. He looked back just in time to see Kurt and Markus, commander of the battle group, walk up. He stepped back to allow the commanders to step in front of him. Kurt smiled and shook his head. Otto took his arm brusquely and pushed him forward. "Junge, in this outfit, the commanders are always the last in line for food. Keeps the cooks honest." Klaus looked embarrassed. Will I never learn? Seems every time I do anything, some one tells me that 'in this unit we do it differently.' He sighed, then straightened his shoulders resolutely. I'm going to do better. He was still in awe of the crew and the commander.

The bored cook ladled a generous helping of the fragrant stew into Klaus' mug and stuck a piece of fresh baked dark bread on top. Klaus eyed the stew dubiously, but it smelled delicious, and he was suddenly starving hungry. He plodded after Otto, trying to avoid the worst of the slimy mud. The rest of the crew were already eating. Karl-Heinz scrunched over to make room for the newcomers on the fallen log he had appropriated.

The men ate in companionable silence, broken by desultory remarks about the weather and the mud. Finally, Otto wiped the last of the stew from his tin mug with the last of the bread. Stretching, he stood for a moment. "I'm going to check the

tracking mechanism of the 8,8. It seemed a bit rough to me. Karl-Heinz, if you've finished..."

"Be right with you, Otto." Karl-Heinz took a last swallow from his canteen, and stood.

"Can I help, Scharführer?" asked Klaus hopefully.

"No, thanks, stay and finish your dinner. There's not room for more than two of us at the gun." Otto hesitated. Klaus looked as crestfallen as a whipped puppy. "Really, Junge, after we get through with the alignment, I'll need you to help me with the fine adjustments, but for now, stay and finish your dinner. Come along in about fifteen minutes, and you can calibrate for me."

Klaus ate slowly. The men were kind to him, but he still felt like a child at a grown-up dinner party. He fumed. After all, he was an adult, an SS Sturmmann! I'll be seventeen next month!, he thought rebelliously, It's not as if I were a child! He looked at his watch. Ten minutes. He took out his notebook. No one around, I want to get this next impression down before I forget it. Klaus would rather have been shot than admit to his fellow crew members that he wrote poetry, but something inside him burned until he was able to write out the thoughts that blazed in his mind. He looked at the broken tree opposite the small encampment. It was an aged apple tree, broken, whether by war or age, but beginning to flower despite its tormented shape. The white blossoms had already started to drift softly in the pale sunshine of the warm spring day. He watched as they fell on the sparse grass, making a softness on the harsh ground.

He struggled to phrase his idea of contrast of the aged tree and the promise of the new fruit, of the pure white blossoms and the filthy mud, of the tranquility of the old tree and the stentorian rush of war, of the moment of peace amidst the preparations for the next battle.... Klaus took a deep breath. 'They drift, lost on the warm breeze, these pure petals. Mud will cover them, but will not their essence change. Life they have had briefly, Death they will have long. Lived they did, to brighten the moment, die they will, but to a greater purpose. Form changes, spirit endures. Brief beauty, to entice the soul, all to a purpose, all for the whole.' He glanced at his watch and shoved his notebook and pencil into his shirt pocket. Time to go. I think that should be 'live they did' not 'lived they did'. I'll have to remember to change that line. It all needs work. Klaus set off at a dog trot for the waiting tank.

All through the unseasonably warm day the men labored over the minor repairs their Panzer needed. The Tigers were fine tanks, but needed more maintenance than their predecessors. The men used the fine weather and the lull in the bitter fighting to catch up on small repairs and needed housekeeping chores.

Klaus finished tightening the last bolt on the tread segment he was repairing. He stood and tried to work the cramps out of his legs. He looked around, not seeing the rest of the crew. They're probably down by the stream, getting cleaned up. Boy, could I use a wash! He walked to the back of the tank, pausing only to add his tools to the pile of belongings he had stacked on his jacket. He

hesitated, then pulled out his shirt. It was filthy. I'll rinse it out in the stream. It should be dry by morning, and it really stinks. Klaus slung the offending garment over his shoulder. He started for the stream, whistling a snatch of a folk song from his childhood. He strolled along, not paying too much attention to the path. The golden light streamed over the sparse vegetation of the Steppe, and he found another image forming in his mind, of green and gold... Suddenly he realized he had taken a wrong turn somewhere. Where was the stream? He should have been there by now. He paused, trying to get his bearings. Nothing looked familiar. He heard a rustle behind him, and turned, starting to smile. His smile of welcome turned to horror as he glimpsed the sneering, gloating face of the shaggy Russian partisan just before the raised rifle butt struck him on the side of the head, and he fell headlong into darkness.

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Alarm, Alarm! Wir rollen! Otto slid feet first into the tank, following Willi, who had grabbed the men's belongings off the deck of the tank and stuffed them into the empty space where the spare shells would have been, had they had any. Otto slithered quickly into his seat behind the gun, making room for Kurt. Kurt vaulted through the hatch, swearing as he skinned his knuckles for the umpteenth time on a rough projection on the commander's back rest.

Karl-Heinz had started the engine, and was starting to engage

the first gears. "Otto, where the hell is the radio operator?"

Otto swore, looking around the small space. The radio operator's station was empty. "I'll have that kid's hide for this! Daydreaming again, I suppose. When I get my hands on him, he'll know what it means to miss an alarm call!" He handed Willi the head-set. "You'll have to double as the radio operator."

The heavy Tiger shuddered and ground its way up the next slope, stopping just behind the crest of the hill. Kurt peered through the binocular periscope, then carefully opened the hatch wider. He stood in the cupola. He could just see the entrenched Soviets across a hay field. They were dug in just before a small village, by a rank of large straw stacks. Two more Tigers edged into position. Kurt stood higher on the cupola. He surveyed the site with his powerful field glasses. There seemed to be some activity around the nearest straw stack, but he couldn't quite make out what they were doing. They waited for the order to attack.

"Kurt!" Markus' voice, even over the radio sounded urgent. His tank had moved well forward of Kurt's, taking up a position in a rolling declivity, giving him a better view and a more favorable gun position. "Kurt, get over here, quickly. Just you, not the tank. It's a 12-12" 12-12 was the code for information that could not be broadcast.

Otto stifled a protest as Kurt vaulted from the cupola, jumped down behind the tank and headed for Markus' Tiger in a low, crouching run. He found Sturmbannführer Marcus and two of his crew standing behind Markus' Tiger. Peter, Markus' gunner, was holding

a shabby looking Soviet soldier at gunpoint. The Russian had a large piece of white cloth still clenched in his right hand.

Wordlessly, Markus handed Kurt two things; a notebook and a message on a sheet of paper obviously torn from it. The message read in understandable but ungrammatical German: " Look at big strawstack. Surrender in ten minutes or we set on fire." Kurt looked up, puzzled.

Grimly, Markus handed him his field glasses. Kurt wormed his way up to the top of the rise and focused on the nearest strawstack, the largest of the lot. An icy shock spread over his body. He rubbed his eyes unbelievably, then focused again on the strawstack. A man in German uniform was tied spreadeagled on the forward face of the strawstack. Kurt could not quite make out his face. He looked again at the notebook, opening the cover. His horror grew as he read the title page. "Reflections... Even in War There is Beauty. Klaus Kramer." Nausea nearly overwhelmed him, he swallowed hard, and raised stricken eyes to Markus' deadly pale face. "No," he gasped, "No, they can't... He's just a boy...Oh, dear God!" He sagged against the tread of the massive tank, trying to get hold of himself. Markus watched him grimly.

"Kurt, I'm sorry. There's no way we will surrender, but he's your crewman, and I thought you should know. There's nothing we can do, really. I tried to send a message to the Russians, but they shot at my messenger, and this fellow won't carry any return message other than total surrender."

Kurt stood stiffly, his face suddenly expressionless. "How

long do we have?" His voice was flat, without intonation.

"No time! No time!" The Russian cackled in excreable German. "Look! Roast Nymetzy!" He laughed hysterically. "Roast German!" he repeated. Peter looked up and cried out in horror. He lowered the rifle and before his commander could stop him, fired five shots in rapid succession into the sneering Russian.

Kurt grabbed the field glasses and looked again at the strawstack which was now flaming. He saw the boy writhe in agony as his clothes started to burn. Kurt snatched the rifle from Peter, jammed in five rounds, adjusted the sight for the distance and took careful aim, braced against the front tread of the tank. His first shot ended Klaus' torment. His second and third shots brought down the two Russian officers who had thought themselves safely out of range. The fourth and fifth shots also found targets in the milling horde. He tossed the empty 98K toward Peter, turned, and ran back to his tank.

Grabbing Otto's hand, he pulled himself up on the deck, and followed Otto into the turret. "Fire! Anti-personnel shells! Use the Phossies if we still have them." Willi looked up in shock. Kurt had never allowed him to load the six phosphorous shells they carried. He reached for one, steadied it on the wooden roller, and as soon as the gun recoiled, flung open the breach and shoved the red striped shell into the 8,8. Kurt gave the order for sustained fire. The 8,8 spoke again and again, sending shell after shell into the Russian positions. Plumes of black and white smoke marked the points of impact.

The Russian troops came boiling out of the flaming inferno that the incendiary shells had made of their positions, some running away, more charging into the oncoming tanks. German Panzergrenadiers ran alongside the tanks, firing at the oncoming Russians. Kurt stood in the open turret, firing the heavy machine guns, coughing and gasping from the fumes and the stench of hot metal. He reached for another belt, jammed it in and fired until the gun jammed. He grabbed one of the sub-machine guns every tank carried, the so called "burp gun" and emptied it at the nearest Russians. Hastily he shoved another clip into the gun. It wasn't very accurate, but against a mass of men, it was highly effective. Kurt held it sideways, spraying shots indiscriminately. The Schmiesser had a tendency to rise as it fired, holding it sideways caused it to sweep across the enemy, rather than over their heads.

Kurt was in a killing rage. When the burp gun jammed, he drew his pistol and coldly selected his targets, timing his shots just after the recoil of the 8,8. He did not miss, despite the extreme range. Finally, as the few remaining Russians started to break and run away, he threw the two stick grenades he was carrying after them in a futile gesture.

His head phones crackled. "Break off, Kurt! Stop! You'll overrun our own infantry!" Markus' voice sounded urgent. Not waiting for Kurt's order, Karl-Heinz slowed the massive Tiger, then came to a halt a few meters in front of the former Russian position.

A few bedraggled Russian soldiers came towards them, hands

raised high over their heads. Kurt fought back his anger, pressing his lips together hard. He wanted to scream "Fire! Kill them! Take no prisoners!" but knew he could not. A burst of machine gun fire from somewhere behind the tank saved him the decision. He looked around. Wordlessly, a massive sergeant of the accompanying Panzergrenadiers gestured with his weapon at the burnt out strawstack, and the pitiful lump of charred flesh still attached to it.

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"...die they will, but to a greater purpose. Form changes, spirit endures. Brief beauty, to entice the soul, all to a purpose, all for the whole." Quietly Kurt closed the notebook. The men stood in the early morning drizzle, silent before the new grave of their comrade. More than rain wet the faces of the war weary soldiers. Kurt's crew gathered around him, and silently they walked back to their tank.