

Retribution without Repose

Hauptmann's Notes

*Taylon Ritter, Hauptmann
Fifth Panzer Army
Panzerkampfwagen Tiger 432 (DIA)
Leaving France
5:15a.m. August 30th, 1944*

Sven, I miss you so much. I never once thought that I'd survive you and now I know. I know how selfish it was of me to assume you'd be fine should I give my life to protect all of your own. You would, like myself, be living in a nightmare. Haunted by the what-if's and maybes. My embrace would always be just out of reach, and my voice would be like the call of a siren of old, drawing you away from your duty, and leading to disaster.

I promise someday I'll bury you and the monsters who took you from me.

German Occupying Forces 7:12p.m. September 2nd, 1944

The downstairs dining room of the inn was just as quiet as when its occupants' commander had left. Around their table the four panzer crewman sat, their outsides warmed by the roaring fire in the hearth opposite them, and their insides from the food left by the innkeeper. The bernard, fox, shepherd, and husky sat around, mostly quietly. Every few seconds one of them made a relaxed sigh, adjusting grunt, or tired yawn in Eckart's case. Erwin idly nursed at his wound, hands exploring the bandages wrapped tightly around his arm. It had been an awkward, calm silence since the Hauptmann had left, not one of the men really feeling the need to say anything. They were all so very tired, and surely only to grow more tired unless they got back to bed. Nicholas pined over the thought, only breaking himself from it when he remembered his mattress was now a tattered mess of bullet holes and feathers.

He shrugged his shoulders and mused to himself out loud. "Eh, it's still a bed."

Nicholas' comrades all looked towards him in reaction, the newest member of their team speaking up first. "What was that Nicholas?"

"I said, 'It's still a bed.' I was talking about my bed, bullet holes or no."

"Ah" The husky acknowledged, rotating his head back around to watch the fire. "Do you think that's where the Hauptmann went? Back to bed I mean."

Serge cut off Nicholas before he could respond. "I doubt it, I bet he's up there smoking if anything."

Erwin cocked his head. "Smoking? I didn't know he smoked."

Serge chuckled heartily and deeply. "Well, you have only known him for a day. Which, by the way, good job on. You've been with us less than 24 hours and somebody's already tried to kill you, welcome to the team."

"Thanks, I guess."

Serge smiled and shuffled in his seat. "Trust me, it's a compliment. Anyway, I haven't seen him smoke since we left the Eastern front, he used to smoke like a chimney back over there before his promotion."

"Not true." Interrupted Nicholas. "I saw him smoking the night Sven died."

"Yeah, but that's what I mean. He's probably up there smoking away the stress of someone trying to assassinate him. I'm surprised we aren't all joining him."

The large Saint Bernard shot Nicholas a “you know we don’t talk about that” glare as he finished speaking. The topic was about to halt there when the sound of yelling reached the collective ears downstairs. All four of the men looked up towards the ceiling above and behind their heads. It was clearly the weird, fast-paced language of their English captive, four groans filled the dining room as they all assumed the commando had slipped his gag.

Patiently they all waited, listening to the small dog ramble on before finally Serge sighed heavily and pushed his chair back from the table. “Alright, I’ll go take care of it.”

A second voice joined the chorus of yelling, definitely the commanding German of their Hauptmann. They all focused their eyes and ears once more.

Eckart laughed languidly in response. “I don’t think he’s smoking. It sounds like he’s actually having a talk with our ‘friend’ up there.”

Erwin’s ears twitched and faced themselves up in the direction of the sound. “Yeah, that sounds about right. What’re they talking about?”

“I think... I just heard him say monster.” Nicholas answered back, the shepherd’s ears also already swiveled to face the sound.

Eckart turned back around to face the fire, bringing his concentration back to relaxing. “Let them have their shouting match. I’m sure it’ll be good for him, maybe even therapeutic.”

Serge’s hearty bass filled the room again. “Hah. Maybe.”

The assembled men all started to spin back around again, focusing their minds on the fire and the, now-slightly-less quiet of the inn. Again there was shouting from their commander, Erwin and Serge smiled at the accusing and soul-shattering fury of it. Serge had just pulled his seat back under the table when the relative silence was broken. Five quick, fast, and successive gunshots rang out from upstairs. In an instant all of their hearts skipped a beat, hair stood on end, adrenaline rushed into their veins, and the four men shot up in their chairs. Erwin was the first to shout and reach for his sidearm, hand pulling the handgun from its holster. Serge followed suit and the two started to race towards the staircase, both of their chairs toppling in unison with the inn’s front door as it slammed open and the two guards from outside rushed in, automatic weapons held ready at their hips. Serge and Erwin were both roughly off by the yelling, dashing guards, the foremost guard shouldered Erwin out of the way and nearly knocked Serge on his ass, sending the Bernard stumbling. The other soldier followed his leader up the spiral stairs, jack-boots clacking and slamming up the steps as they ran.

“Stay downstairs!” he yelled down to the panzer crew as he disappeared past the wall of the upstairs hallway.

“Fuck that.” Serge bellowed, immediately disobeying the order and thudding up the stairs with heavy footfalls.

Erwin followed suit and ran after his comrade, shadowing the far larger dog up the stairs in quick two-step bounds up the staircase. Behind him Nicholas was also climbing while drawing his pistol, Eckart in tow behind him, all four men creaking the stairs loudly as their combined weight charged up the spiral steps. With a final clap of his feet Serge entered the upstairs hallway and stopped, spotting the second guard looking into his bedroom with a grimace on his face.

“What happened?!” Serge yelled as he resumed his sprint for the doorway.

“I thought I told you to stay downstairs!” The guard’s grimace shifted to anger at the advent of his order being ignored.

“What happened, is Ritter alive?”

The guard put his hand up and stopped the train of canids in their tracks. “Yes, he was the one doing the shooting.”

“What? Is he alright?” Nicholas chimed in from behind the snow-white of Erwin.

The Doberman guarding the door sighed. “Yes, yes he’s fine.” He paused and looked back in the room. “But I can’t say the same about the guy tied up in here.”

“Shit...” Eckart mumbled from the back of the line.

“He killed him?” Nicholas queried again, stepping out of and dissolving the line the crew had been standing in.

In response to the shepherd’s question a black-furred hand gripped the doorframe and helped guide its owner carefully out of Serge’s bedroom over the chunks of wood and debris that still littered the portal. The wolf came to a stop and straightened his shirt, a few barely noticeable specks of blood splatter dotted the garment. The Hauptmann looked to his men and tugged at the shoulder of his shirt, straightening it. There he stood, still and unmoving, as he looked over the group of his subordinates, finalizing the prepping of his image with a tug at the collar of his uniform.

The wolf’s lips parted and quietly he vocalized yet another rash decision as he started to move once more. “He deserved it.”

That was the only explanation given as he walked past his men towards the stairs. Behind him the guards stood in Serge’s doorway watching the black of the Hauptmann disappear down the spiral stairs in a calm, steady motion. Dumbstruck, Serge, Eckart, Erwin, and Nicholas

looked on as well, minds unsure of what to say or do. True to his nature though, Nicholas was the first to break the collective upstairs silence, albeit in a purposefully reserved whisper.

German Occupying Forces 8:02p.m. September 2nd, 1944

The inn hadn't changed much in the last hour, it was still a quiet, quaint shack of a home. The hush that had been such a nice feature of the building's inside was now more of a baleful silence. The five men assembled around the fire were all hunched forward taking in its warmth. All but four of them displayed a defeated posture in their shoulders, having gotten nothing out of their commander other than the explanation that their prisoner "had to die" and the realization that the reason they hadn't handed him over was so their commander could act out whatever confrontation that had ended in the Englishman's demise. The topic had hit a dead end, with the wolf refusing to acknowledge anything more than the fact that he had done it, and had done it with a sure conviction. The only thing they had learned was that an SS Oberst was on his way to talk with them about their hiding and subsequent murder of a prisoner of war.

"Hauptmann, sir. You have to tell us what happened, we can corroborate and help you." Serge pleaded a weak, and final time.

The wolf two seats down from the Bernard grinned, another tally added to the impressive count of smiles the wolf had cracked while his men had done their best to help, understand, maybe even save their commander.

"Do you really think they'll court martial me Serge?" The wolf looked over to his gunner with a sure smile. "We've all heard the stories. One mouthy Tommy is a drop in the bucket compared to what the SS has done all across Europe and Russia."

"But sir!" Serge protested, a bit of determination entering his voice again.

"It is just formality, men. He'll walk in that door, talk with us for five minutes, and then tell us to" The wolf raised his hands in a mocking gesture of the statement about to leave his lips.

"Never do it again."

Eckart looked up from his lap towards the attempted humor of the wolf. "But... Sir, you shot a prisoner in cold blood."

All of the energy left the Hauptmann and his posture stiffened back into the set composure of an officer. "I know what I did, Eckart. It had to be done, and I probably saved many German lives putting at least one of those snakes down."

The fox smiled and started to brim with pride at the oratory conviction, logic, and selflessness of his commander. "When you put it that way, they did try to kill us in our sleep."

“Right.” The Hauptmann nodded slightly and smiled, the infectious sureness spreading out amongst his crew.

“And we all know how much you love to sleep.” Serge quipped, grinning and giving the fox a joking punch on the shoulder.

Eckart laughed, as did everyone else. “At least I can wake up without having Nicholas hold my hand.”

They all chuckled again and looked towards the gunner who was now ironically in the crosshairs of someone else. “Hey, coffee is a God given right for any soldier.”

Eckart snickered and sat up in his chair, his comrades were all doing the same, breaking the gloom. “Sure, but do you think Nicholas enjoys having to bring it to your naked, ugly ass every morning?”

Nicholas yelled out, interrupting the back and forth. “Eckart! Knock it off.” The Shepherd paused and everyone disarmed just a bit at his tone, grins starting to fade. “I think Serge’s a high seven, at least.”

The men all burst into laughter and smiled, the reality of the body upstairs and the upcoming inquisition lost in a myriad of jeers, chuckles, and Serge’s mocking attempts at beauty pushing his chest together while puckering his lips. The war, their war, seemed so far off while they were gathered around a fire with drinks and each other’s company.

The Hauptmann stood up, taking hold of three of steins crammed on the tiny end table between them all. “I’ll fill us up another round.”

Clumsily the wolf hoisted the tankards, cradling them to his chest as he turned and strolled for the bar and the barrels below it, he’d have to leave the innkeeper a hefty sum to pay for such a courtesy. He placed one of the gunmetal-grey steins under the tap of the right-most post, rested the other two on the counter to his left, and pulled forward on the tap’s handle. The Hauptmann smiled to himself, drinking in the scent of the fine ale he was pouring and the cheer of his men behind him. Slowly he eased off the lever and exchanged the dangerously full mug with an empty one from the counter, pulling the handle once more and letting the amber liquid waterfall once more. As he finished topping off the second drink the rumble of an engine pulled up outside the inn and a pair of headlights switched off. The Hauptmann’s smile faded, falling back into a neutral, accepting state as he swapped the third tankard under the dripping tap. He pulled the finely hewn handle towards himself a final time as footsteps clopped up to the door and the handle rotated open.

The light of the inn and its fire spilled out into the streets as its front door swung open, illuminating three figures standing in the welcoming archway. At the forefront of the group was a pit bull of solid grey color. The dog’s jowls were raised up in a sardonic smile as he stepped

through the portal step after purposeful step. From behind the bar Ritter's gaze followed the starkly black dog and his lackeys, and from their seats opposite the fire all of his men did the same. With a commanding gait the SS Oberst strolled towards the bar waving behind himself with his right hand, one of the Dobermans that followed him closed the door with a slam and took up position with his twin at each side of it. The room was voiceless as the pit bull strolled through it, looking here and there, taking in the sights even as his target finished filling the last stein. The Hauptmann took hold of two of the steins and started to pull them from the counter, stopped only by the SS officer's raised hand

"Hauptmann Ritter, please, before you away with those drinks, could you fetch me the bottle the owner of this establishment put aside for me." The dog stood on his toes and pointed between the rack of hanging mugs and a few bottles of wine. "A bottle of brandy tucked away right there in the back, if you would."

Again the dog smiled sardonically, very obviously and purposefully implying his higher rank in the words he chose. Slowly the wolf opposite him rested the drinks he held and went about looking for the bottle among the various glass-trapped liquids. As the Hauptmann rummaged the SS Oberst turned around to face the men watching from the fire.

"Ah, gentlemen! Good evening, I hope I'm not interrupting anything!" The dog spread his arms wide but stopped mid-swing, bringing one hand back up to his lips in an "oops" gesture.

"Where are my manners, this war is slowly debasing me." The dog stuck out his hand into the air in the gesture of a hand-shake. "Otto Heidrich, at your service."

Eckart, Erwin, Serge, and Nicholas all responded in various, orderly bouts of introduction. The pit bull listened raptly as they all said hello and gave their names, making sure to nod and smile at each one as he finished. Last to go, uncharacteristically, was Nicholas; as he finished, the pit bull's attention was spun back around by a comment from the Hauptmann.

"Here's your brandy, Otto." The wolf politely said as he offered up the bottle.

"Oberst Heidrich" he purposely and slowly sounded out to the wolf behind the counter as he graciously accepted the bottle and took it in one hand

The Hauptmann felt a twitch of ire raise in him, but he kept any shred of it from showing.

"Apologies, Oberst Heidrich."

"No worries my friend." The pit bull smiled and spun back around to face the Hauptmann's crew. "Would you all mind stepping outside to give your commander and me some time alone? Don't worry, my men outside will keep you safe. I even heard that some are on the trail of your would-be assassins."

Erwin raised his hand into the air like an inquisitive school boy. "Excuse me Herr Oberst, but aren't you here to interview all of us?"

The pit bull smiled at the husky posing the question as he took off his hat and set in on the bar behind him. "Over this silly little incident? I hardly need to talk to all of you to confirm the death of one man. Your commander will suffice, I just need to set the record straight." He looked to his lackeys standing on opposite sides of the door. "Hanz, Deinhard, please see the Hauptmann's men out, and make sure they're safe."

"Jawohl." The two Dobermans sounded off in unison. One opened the door and the other gestured with his hands for the crewman to leave.

Though there was a bit of hesitation in their rising and steps, Erwin, Serge, Eckart, and Nicholas all filed out of the inn, into the darkness, and watched the door shut tight behind them.

Back inside the inn it was quiet once more, only the Hauptmann, Otto, and his men remained. At the doorway Otto's guards stood stiff and silent, eyes peering out from under their stalhelm's to watch the Hauptmann's every action, he stared back, looking over the men and their hair-trigger stances.

"Please, please, join me for a drink Hauptmann." Otto beckoned as he roughly let his rear fall down into one of the beautifully carved chairs and slid it under the closest table to the bar.

The Hauptmann abstained, coming out from behind the bar with his hands devoid of any drink. He watched the Dobermans out of the corner of his eye, their own never leaving him for a second. With a smooth gesture the wolf pulled the seat opposite the pit bull out from under the table and placed himself squarely down in it.

"Oberst Heidrich, could you--"

The pit bull raised his hand, interrupting the officer. "Please, call me Otto."

Again the wolf's ire twitched within him but he kept it in check. "Otto" the wolf stressed, "could you please make this quick, my men and I have to be up early tomorrow."

"In good time my friend." The dog dismissively looked down to the table as he freed the top off of the bottle of brandy. "Deinhard, please hand me a glass."

The Doberman obeyed and stepped from his post, Hanz tensing up just a bit more in reaction as the dog went to grab a glass from behind the counter. In a quicker manner than the Hauptmann's search for a bottle the Doberman was at his commanding officer's side, placing the glass gently down on the table before backing up into his post on the right side of the door.

“Thank you, Deinhard.” The pit bull raised the glass in the Doberman’s direction before putting it back on the table and pouring the bottle of brandy into it with his other hand. “So, tell me about this prisoner of yours.”

“There isn’t much to tell.” The wolf leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “He was an assassin that my gunner knocked out while we were fighting for our lives. He was a dishonorable snake and I decided that many German lives would be saved if I killed him.”

“I see.” The pit bull took a sip from his glass, rolling his tongue and the strong liquid around inside his jaws. “But couldn’t the same be said of any prisoner of war?”

The wolf paused, thinking over the statement, scanning for any traps the Oberst might be leading him into. There was definitely one, he’d play into it and spin it around on the dog. “Yes, I believe so. But those normal soldiers are not crafty killers. They would never escape a camp, and if they did, hardly be as effective as a trained assassin.”

Again the dog sipped at his glass, drinking down the exquisite liquid. “Crafty killers, a good choice of words, Hauptmann. I suppose you have a point, there is nothing more dangerous than someone who kills up close and will continue to get away with it if not dealt with permanently.”

The Hauptmann smiled slightly, but grinned from ear to ear in his mind. “That was my thinking, and why I didn’t hand him over to be taken to a camp. If he ever escaped, the blood he’d spill would be on my hands.”

“A smart choice, my friend.” Otto sipped at his drink calmly once more. “There is already so much on them, more would be a shame.”

Ritter’s demeanor balked and he was caught off guard by the statement. The wolf looked down and fumbled in his mind for a response, catching one quickly. “All of us do, Otto. My men and I have taken countless lives.”

The pit bull smiled and looked down at his glass as he swirled it around in his hand. “This isn’t the first time you’ve executed a man, is it Taylon, may I call you Taylon?”

The air in the room thickened with unavoidable tension as yet again this man was playing games with names and rank. “Hauptmann Ritter, if you’d please. And what exactly are you implying, Otto?”

“I apologize, Hauptmann. I did not mean to be rude.” The Dog idly swirled his glass and took a sip of the brandy.

“You have not heard of the Generalfeldmarschall assassinated in Reims? He was shot in the chest multiple times by a German pistol, just like your dead snake upstairs.” He paused to shake

his glass. "The Generalfeldmarschall's second in command said French resistance fighters stormed the room while everyone was celebrating your first defense of the town."

"I had heard of this, yes, a shame."

"It is. But why would the French kill only him, and not you? You are just as big a prize."

The wolf kept his cool, but in his head he knew he was suspect and that this meeting was about far more than Lee Hurn's death. "Pardon?"

"The Generalfeldmarschall was very meticulous about his planning and records. He had a meeting with you and-" The dog pulled a couple papers from his coat and flattened them against the table. He looked down to the pages and pulled one up closer to read. "-a Charlemagne division soldier, a fellow by the name of 'Montbert.' Were you two not there at this meeting at the time he was killed?"

"No, we had a quick meeting about crew changes beforehand. We left minutes before he was killed and we could finalize any changes."

"Changes to what crew?"

The wolf's ire twitched within him again, this Oberst already knew which one and was playing more games. "Mine."

The dog put down his glass on the table. He eyed it for a few quiet seconds then idly flicked the thick cup onto its side. The glass clacked loudly against the table and spilled its contents onto the table and floor.

"Changes to your crew? Oh my, the Generalfeldmarschall was playing with fire, was he not?"

The Hauptmann's features remained cold and neutral. "I don't follow."

"You have quite a reputation, Hauptmann. There are a lot of important people who've made comments about your refusal to adapt to a more 'uniform' crew. And that trail follows you from the Eastern Front all the way to here."

"My men and I are as fine a crew as Germany could hope for. I won't change that, even for any genetically superior candidates."

The dog laughed. "Haha, genetically superior, now that's something I never expected to hear from the legendary Hauptmann Ritter. You're appealing to my beliefs now? You, who has

routinely been reported not believing in the same ideals. You who has so many requests to be reprimanded about that same topic that I'm surprised you're still so well liked among the higher ranks of command."

The Hauptmann sat up straighter, fixing his eyes straight towards and locked onto the eyes opposite him. "I believe in everything Germany stands for, and many believe in me."

"But you don't believe in allowing others to, what was it?" The dog looked down to his papers and pulled the second one out from under the topmost." 'Fuck with your men', was it?"

Ritter's heart skipped a beat remembering the words he had uttered after killing his superior officer back in Reims to the other horrified officer in the corner. The wolf's ire and conviction rose. "No, they are my men, my brothers. And I won't allow any ideals of racial superiority to interfere with our skill as a fighting unit or tear us apart."

The SS officer grinned a malicious smile, righted his glass, and pulled it close once more. He slowly reached to the bottle of brandy and took it in hand, pouring another quick splash into the glass. With a drawn out sip he drained a quarter of the drink, placed the bottle back on the table, sighed contently, and licked his lips.

"Even if that means murdering a ranking officer who demanded just such a thing and gave you no other choice?"

The Hauptmann instantly knew he was blown now, there was sureness in the dog's voice, not question. In a blur of motion the wolf rose to the challenge. His hands flew to the table, claws digging into the wood; in tandem his face curled back in a fang-baring snarl and the wolf shot up from his chair. In response the two Dobermans at the door raised their weapons and leveled them on the wolf across the room.

Ignoring the guns pointed at him the wolf spat venom. "Just what are you implying Oberst Heidrich?!"

Across from the Hauptmann the pit bull was sitting as comfortably and calmly as ever. "Please, just Otto my frie--"

"Enough of your fucking games!" The wolf screamed as he cut the Oberst off, his hand swung outwards like lightning and sent the bottle of brandy rocketing off to shatter against the adjacent table.

Otto merely applauded the wolf's efforts slowly, and quietly. "There's that magnificent temper I've been hearing about lately. Are you sure there's more man than beast in you?"

The Hauptmann growled loudly and continued to stare down at the pit-bull.

“I suppose there’s no civil way of ending this evening.” The SS officer looked to the bottle fragments and expensive liquid dashed all over the floor, chairs, and table a few feet way. “You did just destroy my birthday present after all.”

The Hauptmann looked to his right, eyeing the barrels and keen eyes of the twin-uniformed guards ready to end him as soon as his hand went to his waist. Across from him the pit bull stood up and walked as he talked.

“My immediate superiors and I can’t prove it with the confession of only one Generaloberst, but we know you’re behind the death of the Generalfeldmarschall in Reims. We believe the same with the death of Oberst Nadel in January, and Major Ziegler in February.”

The wolf breathed heavily and his body tensed more with each revelation of acts he’d thought himself safely escaped from. Behind him the SS officer reached for the counter and took hold of his hat. In a manner similar to the Hauptmann himself he squarely put it on his head, adjusting it to fit just right.

Otto tugged at the shoulder of his coat, straightening it. “You’re a dangerous man, Hauptmann Ritter. That you’re still alive is because you are such a bane of our foes. Your life, and that of your men, only lasts so long as you’re of use to Germany.”

The dog shook his hips and straightened out the waist of his coat. “This incident with the Tommy assassin, it brings undue attention to you from within Germany’s ranks. A few above me whisper that you’re out of control. For your sake, and your men’s, I suggest you keep the enemy afraid of you, and not those that would court martial you out of worry for themselves.”

Otto gestured to his men and they lowered their guns as he strolled over to them, still talking over his shoulder to the wolf still gripped white-knuckled on the same table. “You and your crew are officially members of the Waffen SS as of tomorrow morning. Don’t worry, we won’t take that fox away from you, we prefer you an incurable pox upon our enemies.”

Otto turned around and curtly bowed to the wolf eyeing him from across the room. “That said. You’ll bark at the end of our leash, or be put down along with your men.”

1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, Reaper Detachment
3:00p.m. September 19th, 1944

The town of Nijmegen was a hotbed of activity today. Since the start of the Allied Operation: Market Garden, it had always been a target. Fate, and German resolve, had slowed the combined gains of the Allies' advancement up through the Netherlands, but today they were finally on the edge of a major prize, Nijmegen Bridge. The quaintly settled city was itself of little import, but the bridge leading to Arnhem across one of the Rhine River's tendrils was of immense importance to Market Garden's success. With the bulk of the British Thirtieth Corp advancing on the town, both sides knew the conflict would be bloody. The defenders were organized well, and supplied just as sufficiently. Opposite them the combined arms of Thirtieth Corp and the 82nd Airborne were overextended from the main body of their supplies and strength, but not in any dangerous way.

In the center of the city, just beyond the bridge so critical to the Allie's plans, the marshaling grounds for Nijmegen's resistance were nearly empty. A few wayward artillery pieces were just now being hooked up to their half-track charges, men ran down every street covered in belts, clips, and bandoliers of ammunition. Below the awning of the deli on the square's right side a few light panzers were sitting, derelict. The antique Panzer II's and III's had been stripped of all the metal that they could be. Tracks, non-welded plates, hatches, anything removable was gone. The three wrecks stood in a quiet, disheveled, and altogether far different light and manner than the panzer trundling down the Nijmegen Bridge. Compared to the drab, dusty brown and grey of the bridge this panzer was quite a site. Immense in size and killing prowess, the camouflage-mottled beast creaked as it rolled down the bridge's gentle incline, immense barrel pointed forward like some declaration of Germany's might. Compared to its predecessor this machine of war was superior in every way except for one thing. Inside the armored hide of the monstrous weapon of war, behind the giant, white-painted "526" and newly applied SS thunderbolts was the crew that couldn't be beaten. From the top of the tank its hatch slowly peeled open and fell backwards with a clang, a jet-black wolf emerged from the beast's turret and rose up into the waiting sunlight.

The commander rest his right arm on the cupola he sprung from, batting his other hand back and forth in front of his snout. "Guh, this town stinks."

"Sir?" The inquisitive tone of Serge filled the Hauptmann and each of the other crew members' ears.

"It smells, Serge, what more explaining is there to do? This town smells like crap, and we're fighting over it."

Taking his right hand off his controls for just a second, Erwin adjusted his mic closer to his lips. "The bridge is very valuable though, sir. Worth fighting over."

The wolf smiled as he reached down to fetch his binoculars stored in their holster fastened to the roof of the inside of the turret. "It still smells like crap." He brought the binoculars up to his eyes and scanned down the main road of the town. "Any news of the enemy yet, Nicholas?"

As the wolf looked down each of the main arterial roads from Nijmegen's center his radioman confirmed his boredom. "Just a few skirmishes sir, the Americans and British don't seem too eager to attack Nijmegen head on."

"That will change, Nicholas, trust me." The Hauptmann lowered his binoculars and flicked his tongue between his teeth. "With Best now under their control it's only a matter of time before their balls get too big for their pants."

"Then we will have to lop them off." Eckart chortled into his comrades' ears, a collective groan responded back.

"That was a bit much Mr. Brandt, even for you." The Hauptmann pseudo-reprimanded, the crack of a smile in the corner of his lips.

"Do you think we'll face anything outside of the briefing, Hauptmann?" Erwin queried as he shifted the King Tiger's engine power down as the incline increased with the last leg of the bridge.

"If they make a move, I don't expect more than a few cooks and infantry." The wolf mused as he reached back into his turret to stow his binoculars.

"Child's play." Serge mirthfully cackled into everyone's headset.

The five-man crew all smiled at Serge's comment. They all believed in the might of their new charge, and were eager to test its mettle in the crucible of battle. Again Erwin lowered the output of Jägerwolf's engine as the panzer leveled out and hit flat, supportive ground. The incredibly loud engine's smoke output tapered and the groan of its operation quieted just a bit before picking right back up, the husky taking the behemoth into an ear-scraping turn across the pavement. Across the square the King Tiger picked up speed, rapidly it approached a respectable twenty kilometers an hour and kept going, engine straining louder.

Lurched back against the rear of his cupola's ring the lupine officer atop the tank scowled and held onto his headset. "Mr. Nein, did I not say to take it easy on the engine? Quit showing off for the locals."

"Sir, I'm not doing that, the throttle's stuck open!" Erwin hastily responded back into everyone's ears.

"Well close it, Unteroffizier!" The wolf shouted back into his microphone as the panzer still sped up, engine roaring and belching smoke, it was unhealthy to rev it so much.

“I’m trying, sir!” The dog yelled back.

Inside the turret of 526 Eckart and Serge looked across the main gun’s breach at each other, teeth bared in a gesture of worry. Nicholas pulled his attention away from the various channels on his radio and looked down the sights of his machinegun’s mount. Through the sights the corner of a deli was coming into view.

“Unteroffizier Nein, slow us down!” Ritter yelled into his mic, the impromptu deli-scrap-yard rapidly closing its distance with them.

In the front left of Jägerwolf the husky driver was yanking at the throttle lever and madly pumping at any control apparatus he had access to. “I’m trying sir, the transmission won’t disengage either!”

“Shit, shit, shit!” Nicholas yelled out into the mic, the building on their collision course growing dangerously close. “At least turn us out of the way, Erwin!”

“And break a track or smash into the other side of the alley?” The driver angrily quipped back at the other dog opposite him in the front of the panzer.

“Oh for... Hold on, men.” Ritter urgently, but calmly, groaned and advised.

At the top of his tank the wolf lowered down to his neck into his cupola, deli barely fifty feet away now. Inside the front of the King Tiger Erwin still fought with all of the control mechanisms at his disposal minus the steering. Eckart and Serge both hugged themselves tight against the breach of their gun while Nicholas pressed himself tightly back against his seat and gripped tightly at handles below the radio. In a crash of masonry on metal, Königstiger 526 barreled through the feeble barricade in its way. Like a crude, dull knife through butter the almost eighty ton monster bulldozed its way through the bottom, street-facing corner of the deli. In a fantastic display it tore through the shop and took half of the front wall with it in a cascade of brick and shattering glass. At such a pace, the collision didn’t last long; in and out, 526 sliced its way through the building and emerged out the other side, unscathed, right track guard covered in dust, brick, and debris. Behind the tank Hauptmann Ritter watched a portion of the second floor of the deli collapse under its own weight, taking another room with it in its fall; a final ruckus and the pile of brick, wood, and mangled furniture piled in the street.

“For God’s sake.” The wolf groaned into his mic. “Would you please stop us before we end up in the river on the other side of town?”

“Sir, I can’t get the throttle to-“

There was a massive grinding sound, followed by a low metal groan, and almost instantly the King Tiger’s engine throttled down to almost nothing. With a slow growl the chorus of treads and massacred pavement lowered as 526 slowed. The engine whined in protest as the

momentum of the panzer kept its drive shaft spinning far faster than the engine was set to be at. This lasted for only scant seconds however, before the metal hulk came to a jerking halt, sitting still in the middle of the street, exhaust lazily belching smoke, and a line of masonry trailing following it from the deli. Erwin sighed, exhaling heavily in relief at his vehicle finally halting its possessed drive towards the wall of buildings outside the exit of the alley.

“Are we quite done?” The sarcastic voice of the Hauptmann filled everyone’s earpieces.

“Yes sir” Erwin answered back. “I think I might know the issue, the factory lubricant they used is of a very poor quality. I’ve been removing and replacing most of it throughout the engine compartment all week.”

“And you didn’t replace the throttle’s because? ...” The wolf paused, letting the question hang in the transmitted air.

“I didn’t think they’d be dumb enough to use inferior oils in such a critical location”

“Well, they did.” The wolf sighed into his mic, mumbling to himself. “Brand new and it already runs like shit. Very well, can you quickly replace it in the field, Erwin?”

Off in the distance, South of their position, and beyond the city limits, explosions started echoing into the city and the back and forth cackle of gunfire started to permeate the idle noise of Nijmegen.

“Not without another grease gun and a pneumatic wrench, sir.”

The Hauptmann pounded his fist on the ring of his cupola. “Damn it.”

In the distance there were more explosions and the faint symphony of gunfire increased in tempo. Atop 526, its commander snarled and spun his hand around in a circle in the air.

“Alright, then watch that sticky throttle Erwin, I don’t want us stuck charging the enemy like some damned fools.” The wolf reached down with his left arm to lovingly thump the side of his turret. “Take us into the fray, let’s see what she can do.”

“Jawohl! Engine to 460ps, taking us in, Hauptmann.”

Once more the behemoth of a tank lurched to life, its massive tracks gripping and mauling the ground underneath its weight and pull in a slow and purposeful trundle that grew to an intimidating quickness. Carefully Erwin navigated the panzer free of the alley out to the streets. On the open road he pushed throttle back open and 526 roared to life, noisily crashing down the road and belching smoke. To each side soldiers were running alongside the massive armored vehicle; a squad of eight men broke from the right side of the road to hastily jog into place behind the large profile of the King Tiger cruising down the road. From the left side another squad did the same, both following 526 into battle with her mass as their bulwark.

1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, Reaper Detachment
3:14p.m. September 19th, 1944

“I hate these new uniforms, why do we even have to wear them, it’s not like anybody sees us in here.”

Inside the noisy interior of Königstiger 526 Serge reached across the gun that took up most of the room in the turret. The Saint Bernard gave a punch to the shoulder of his vulpine neighbor who was tugging at his shirt and complaining.

“You heard the Hauptmann. Even if we don’t like it, we’re part of the SS now, it’s the standard uniform.”

Eckart tugged at the collar of the cotton shirt, the buttons of which had been agitating his neck for quite some time now. “Someone should tell them they suck. I can barely breathe in this thing.”

“Maybe you should lose some weight then!” Nicholas’ static-laced voice crackled into their ears.

“To hell with you both, these things are uncomfortable.” The fox paused, tugging at the collar once more. “Serge’s the one who needs to lose weight anyway.”

“Hey!” The Bernard spoke up grumpily and looked over to the fox.

“Just saying!” Eckart smiled and put his hands up in a gesture of “don’t shoot.”

Serge grumbled and looked back forward, he idly rubbed at his paunchy stomach as he settled his vision back into the sights of his gun. Eckart smiled a mildly victorious grin and reach back to loosen up the round stacked on the one particularly troublesome holder in the back of the turret. Down in the front of the tank Nicholas was chattering back and forth with units on the edge of Nijmegen. The various posts and holdouts were reporting various signs of armor, artillery fire, and infantry making a dash for the town. Erwin was glued to his periscope, watching the dirty, damaged streets pass by and out of the corners of its vision. Riding high and watching the various plumes of thrown dirt and smoke rise into the air on the edge of town was Hauptmann Ritter. The wolf brought his binoculars up out of their holster and looked down the road they were traveling.

“Erwin, take the next right, that should put us two streets away from the edge of town.”

“Yes sir!” Came the Husky’s acknowledgement.

526 came up on the turn in question and slowed to a rattling halt. With a short roar of her engine she rotated in place, the soldiers in line behind her giving the panzer a wide berth. With a screech of pavement the tank stopped turning and trundled down the new avenue.

“Take a right at this intersection.” The Hauptmann sounded off into his mic.

82nd Airborne, streets of Nijmegen, 3:16p.m. September 19th, 1944

“Stop.” Sergeant Howe whisper-yelled to his squad, hand raised up in a fist.

Behind him his squad of six paratroopers stopped in place and lowered down onto their haunches. The men all readied their various carbines and submachine guns, scanning the windows and doorways of the buildings up and down the street.

The closest man to Howe, a black and tan bearded dragon, tapped his NCO. “What is it sarge?”

The sergeant, a grey-muzzled black lab, turned his fist into just his pointer finger gesturing to the sky above them. The men all looked up, quickly saw nothing, and looked back down, expecting an explanation.

“Hear that?” The dog whispered, his floppy ears just barely directing themselves at the noise.

All the men of the squad finally paid direct attention to the creaking, crashing, and metal-groaning that was becoming louder.

“Kraut armor.” Howe confirmed, looking back to his squad. “Maybe a street away.” The lab stuck his hand out and beckoned one of his men closer. “Allan, get that bazooka up here.”

From the back of the squad a black and white tabby, tufts of his fur burnt in some places around his exposed right forearm, came sprinting up to the front of the squad while hunched over. Without even being asked the cat took a few steps past his commander and looked around the corner, spotting nothing. Around the corner the sound was much more pronounced and the cat leaned into the rubble of the dilapidated house his squad hid behind. Sergeant Howe slowly crept up behind the tabby and leaned into the rubble with him, watching the opposite corner. From the dusty debris both men watched the intersection 100, maybe 150 the cat guessed, feet away. The noise of the German armor, like the heavy machinery of a factory made to walk on two legs, grew louder. At the intersection a mottled brown, green, and tan prow rolled out from behind the profile of the house on the corner. More of the panzer pulled past the outline of the corner-house, showing off even more of the massive tank. Emblazoned on the side of the turret in white lettering was “526”, to the left of it were smaller, but still visible SS markings.

“Jesus...” the tabby bazookaman announced to nobody in particular.

“Don’t gawk, shoot the fucker in the side!” Sergeant Howe yelled to the cat in the dirt beside him.

Quickly, and steadily the cat rose to a kneel, shouldering the matte-green tube on his shoulder. He closed his left eye and stared through the distance slits of the bazooka with his right. Carefully the cat raised the profile of the anti-tank weapon and the distance slits with it. Satisfactory angle achieved the cat’s hand tightened at its grip and pressured the trigger.

Much like the sound a potato being shot from a home-made cannon, but further followed by the sound of propellant carrying it downrange, the bazooka round left its barrel, spiraled slightly around in a lazy roll and shot down the street. In the blink of an eye the warhead smashed into the tank down the street and ricocheted right off the side of the panzer just above its track guard, no discernable damage done. In response the massive enemy tank instantly halted, three fourths of its side exposed to the paratroopers.

“Shit!” The cat hissed and he lowered his profile again, eager to get out of sight. “Didn’t even scratch it.”

“Load another!” Howe shouted. “Adams, get over here with that ammo.”

The labrador ushered his man closer with his hand frantically, looking down the street at all the other worried looking men lining the wall of the street. To the dog’s right the cat stuck his head up and looked back down the road. From the top of the tank a black canine was pointing furiously in their direction, then the panzer started rotating in place to face them, turret doing the same. From the corner of the house German foot soldiers spilled into the street, a few rushing into a house across the street, others hugging the street and finding various cover to take as they leapfrogged towards the paratrooper’s position.

“Sarge, we gotta go!”

“What?” The Labrador looked back as Adams came to a halt just before the debris pile.

“Run!” The cat yelled as he clambered to his feet, bazooka awkwardly held under his right arm.

In an uncoordinated scramble and rush the cat, his sergeant, and Adams about faced, dashed, and cleared the corner’s debris pile. Vacating their position as quickly as their legs and synapses would let them.

“Move!” Sergeant Howe yelled, hand pointing down the street back the way they’d come.

His men stood up and back peddled a few steps before turning around completely and breaking into a full run towards a courtyard back down the street. This sprint was proved a fruitful decision when the corner they were just on was obliterated in an explosion of dirt, cement, dust, and shrapnel. Like the hand of god taking offense at his name taken in vain the shockwave rushed around the corner throwing Sergeant Howe into a stumbling fall. Wood and all the other shredded remains of the home’s corner were scattered through the street by the high explosive round, bouncing off pavement, wall, and man alike. Not one to stick around and admire the view, Howe was up on his feet with the assistance of Adams and on the move again.

“What the hell was that, sarge!?” The bazooka-swinging cat yelled back to his commander as he sprinted.

“A big fucking Kraut tank! I’ve never seen that one before!”

1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, Reaper Detachment
3:18p.m. September 19th, 1944

“Shot on target.” Serge yelled out.

“Kills?” Hauptmann Ritter called out, carefully obscuring most of his body within 526’s turret.

“Dust is still settling sir.”

The Hauptmann loosened his stance and slid down into his seat inside the King Tiger’s turret. A bit surprised by how quickly they’d come into contact with the enemy, the wolf wasn’t taking any chances. He reached out of the turret and pulled the hatch securely shut.

“Don’t worry about them, just infantry, our soldiers can take care of them. Turn us around Erwin, I want us on the frontlines before they can get a foothold inside the city.”

“Yes sir!” Erwin acknowledged as his feet and hands alternated pushes and pulls.

With its standard metallic creak, Serge lining up the barrel in line with the hull as it did so, 526 rotated in place to face the opposite direction. The crew inside lurched to their right as the armored monster stopped in place. They were quickly pulled lightly against the back of their seats as their panzer cruised its way back up the opposite direction of their first encounter. Behind them one of the squads that had been following them was already in control of the corner they’d been attacked from, and advancing on where the enemy had fired from. The remaining squad of infantry followed Jägerwolf’s tracks like a path to salvation; they practically hugged the back of the exhaust-spewing engine of war as they kept in step behind it. It was impossible to hear anything else over the din of the King Tiger’s engine when so close to it, so it was no wonder that the front-most soldier almost smacked himself up against the back of the panzer when it came to an abrupt, grinding halt.

“Tommy cooker!” Serge shouted to his comrades.

In front of 526 a British Cromwell tank had just barely rounded the corner at the end of the street. The boxy, inferior, and altogether self-deprecating tank stopped in its place, turret rotating to face the Reapers even though the German’s had already started rotating theirs first.

“Serge?” The Hauptmann asked hurriedly, watching through his range finder as the British tank lined up its shot

“Almost.... Almost.... On target!” The Bernard yelled out once more, turret finally rotated.

“Fire!” The wolf yelled.

Behind Jägerwolf the squad of soldiers were still hunched down in cautious worry. The squad's sergeant, the man who had almost smacked against the back of the tank in front of him earlier, walked to and peered around the side of the panzer's body, curious of its turret rotation.

The answer to the soldier's curious peering was as plain as day. Down the end of the road an allied tank was stopped in place, turret almost looking straight at him and the panzer in front of him. He barely managed to grit his teeth before 526 fired. It sounded like the end of days harnessed and brought to bear on the enemy as it loosed the massive 10.5cm round. All around, dust was kicked up, intact-windows shook, and men had a bit of air stolen from their lungs as the pressure wave of sound and explosive potential spread outward. This was a blessing compared to the repercussions the round had on the British tank down the road. The British tank's armor, paper-like at this distance, did nothing to stop the massive cannon round. Through the hull, the gunner's legs, and into the engine block the projectile traveled. Instantly it cracked the combustion engine apart, fuel and chemical energy turning against its British owners. Like a match thrown into a puddle of gasoline the Cromwell was engulfed in light and flames, both spilled forth from every hole it could. There was no time for the enemy crew to suffer as their oxygen disappeared and the open air and room, already miniscule inside a Cromwell, was replaced with searing flames in an instant.

"Enemy panzer knocked out!" Serge cheered into his mic.

"Good work crew!" The Hauptmann triumphantly yelled back. "Eckart, load AP, Erwin, keep us moving."

"Jawohl!" The two men answered back in enthusiastic glee.

Ignoring the burning tank like a wolf with its eyes on other, living prey 526 rumbled past the wreck and turned to face down the road the Cromwell had come from. Down the street another Cromwell tank was parked in the middle of the road, red-bereted commander pointing in 526's direction, and yelling frantically. British troops were scattered about the road, a Bren carrier on the right side of the road was already spilling its terrified man from their seats. Reactionary, but ineffective, rifles and guns fired downrange in an effort to somehow harm the German monster.

"Erwin, halt! Serge, enemy panzer, 30 degrees left."

"Target sighted!" Serge hollered as the turret whined towards its target.

"Round is loaded!" Eckart confirmed

The Cromwell down the road fired first. Admirable in resolve, the effort was still futile with the 75mm shell careening up and off the upper glacis of the King Tiger's hull like a pebble thrown at a brick wall.

“Fire!” The Hauptmann shouted, eyes staring through his range-finder eagerly.

The German sergeant still following this massive panzer halted. The flames of the burning Cromwell were intense, almost blistering to be even within a few feet of, and it would be impossible to take cover behind the tank. The soldiers all looked on in awe, a few flinching when the screeching pang of the second Cromwell’s round ricocheting rang out. The high pitched scream of clashing metal was replaced by the trumpet of the gods once more when the massive 10.5cm bore rocketed backwards again. Once more the shockwave lifted every bit of dust off any surface it rested on around the tank and knocked the wind out of the soldiers so close to it. The sergeant grasped at his helmet, not in any risk of losing it, but still reflexively feeling like the sheer power of the King Tiger’s gun would tear it from his head like the wind of a storm.

Hauptmann Ritter watched the British commander down the road through his range-finder. He smiled viciously as color left the man’s face when his round did nothing to the invincible German war-machine. The wolf pursed his lips in a mock goodbye kiss and then ordered his gunner to fire. The Cromwell had barely started to back up when the Reaper’s round tore into its turret. A hole the size of a football appeared in the front of the Cromwell’s turret armor and the red-bereted commander’s face contorted in agony, he slipped down inside the turret of his tank. The Cromwell continue to back up, smoke now rising from the open hatch of its turret, obviously knocked out of the fight.

“Serge, I want another round in the Tommy cooker, aim for the hull.” The wolf calmly shouted to his gunner.

Eckart’s hands finished their routine and chambered the next round in response to the Hauptmann’s order. “Round up!”

“Firing!” Serge announced.

The King Tiger rocked backwards against, breach rocketing backwards inside its turret and then resetting. In their sites Serge and the Hauptmann looked on, watching another football-sized hole appear in the center of the Cromwell’s hull. This killed the tank in its entirety, the boxy tank abruptly halting, transmission destroyed.

“Tommy cooker destroyed, sir!”

“Good work, men.” The Hauptmann lauded his crew with vocal fanfare.

Immediate threat knocked out, the crew was now free to acknowledge the constant, repetitive pings of bullets crashing against their impervious armor. It seemed the British soldiers had more resolve than the Hauptmann had given them credit for. They still seemed sure that they would cripple 526 somehow.

In a mocking, taunting growl the Hauptmann laughed at their paltry efforts. “They are scratching your paint job, Erwin.”

The driver laughed into his mic. “And I just finished the hull yesterday.”

“Serge, Nicholas?” The Hauptmann coolly asked, not directly ordering his men.

“Mowing them down, sir.” Serge acknowledge, rotating the turret even further to the left to start at the street’s far side.

Nicholas turned away from the dials of his FUG radio and shouldered his MG. Out for revenge for Sven and eager to serve his commander in any way, the German Shepherd had no qualms now about cutting down the murderous allied soldiers. Like twin buzz saws the MG34’s tore open the air around the tank with their zipper-like echoes of fire. In controlled bursts Nicholas dropped one, two, and then a third British soldier, toppling them backwards from their kneeling and standing positions behind their Bren Carrier. Various rounds found purchase against the armor of the Universal Carrier, punches a few holes in weaker portions of its metal, and spalling others. Serge, focusing on the other side of the street, rotated to face the coaxial MG34 on his second target. If the massive cannon pointing directly at them wasn’t enough of a morale shock, the left-most soldier of the group pulling right and toppling over as a hail of bullets tore holes in his uniform certainly was.

Somewhere amongst the ranks of the soldiers in the street someone yelled to fall back, that was the only thing it took to get the resistant British turning tail. Fourteen men stood up from their various pieces of cover and dashed back down the road. In sync with the British retreat the German foot soldiers rounded the burning Cromwell and jogged down the street past their panzer, stopping to take shots or fire from the hip at the retreating British. Nicholas squeezed his trigger in two more bursts, catching two men zigzagging past the abandoned Bren Carrier and dropping them in the street. Turret a bit more unwieldy than the Shepherd’s MG ball, Serge left the “grass-cutting” to the grunting, jeering dog in the front of the tank.

In his range-finder the Hauptmann watched the last of the British soldiers break free of the street’s corridor around corners, through ruins and behind the wreck of a Panzer IV at the next intersection down the street, no doubt lost to the two Cromwells who had been taken out by 526.

“Road cleared, good shooting Nicholas. Erwin, take us to the edge of town.”

“Jawohl, Hauptmann!” was the always-proper husky’s reply.

Jägerwolf screeched back to life and its wheels spun, pulling the panzer forward on its tracks. Serge had just resumed rotating the turret back to line up with the orientation of the panzer’s hull when he spotted the driver’s hatch of the second Cromwell tank pop open in a rush.

“Looks like we’ve got a prisoner, Haha!” Serge laughed and watched the yak clamber from the smoking prison he’d surely suffocate in.

“Erwin, halt!” The Hauptmann shouted, tank grinding to a halt almost instantly in response with no speed built up.

Inside the turret Serge and Eckart looked back to their commander while Erwin and Nicholas both looked back to the legs of Serge and Eckart.

“Sir?” Serge asked for all them, curious of what was wrong.

“We don’t take prisoners anymore.” The wolf calmly said as he reached up and unlocked the hatch of his cupola.

In the street the German sergeant, Walter Klein, approached the hairy yak climbing free of the smoking Cromwell tank. He yelled for the man to get down, pointing his MP40 towards the man and gesturing downwards with its barrel; it was clear, if not expected, that he didn’t speak German. The tanker only shook in fear and raised his hands in the air, looking from the squad of German soldiers on his right to the massive tank that had destroyed his tank company on the left. Frantically the yak’s eyes shot back and forth, not understanding what the German soldier wanted. His vision locked back on the tank as its hatch flew open and a jet-black wolf emerged from the cupola, headset still mounted tightly on his head. The panzer crewman wasted no time in reaching to his right and swinging a machine-gun back around on a ring mount of the cupola.

The yak looked back to the terrier in the street, yelling and gesturing with the barrel of his gun, then back to the wolf. He looked at the black canine, seeing only malice in his features as the wolf pulled back the charging handle on the MG42’s side. There was intent, intent the Cromwell driver could sense. He looked to the dog yelling in the street and gesturing with his gun once more, only now did he understand. “Get down!” he thought in his head, turning to face the wolf one last time. He locked his pupils with the panzer commander’s and his own eyes spread wide in horror. The yak cried out, panicked noises of distress as he bent over to climb down off his tank. They were drowned out by the telltale “ripping” sound of an MG42. He tore open in various places even as he clambered to obey, blood sailing in different directions from where bullets cut into his body. The British soldier, already halfway bent over to get down, fell forward onto his face, smashing down sickeningly against the front of the Cromwell’s track guard and then rolling off into a heap on the ground beside it.

Sergeant Klein startled, not expecting the hail of machinegun fire. He regained his composure quickly and watched the British tanker bloodily slump off his tank, fall to the ground, and hit the pavement with a wet thud, red puddles already building in size beneath him. The dog’s arms lowered and fell to his sides, he looked to the dead man and then to the source of the gunfire. On top of the massive panzer the black wolf was already swinging the gun back around

on its mount, stowing it in its travel lock. Dumbstruck the dog watched and waited for the wolf to explain himself. No explanation was given, only an order.

“Sergeant, get your men to the edge of the city, now!”

With that, the wolf disappeared back into his turret and the panzer roared, a few seconds later it rumbled down the road. Walter Klein only stood there, watching the King Tiger drive off.

1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, Reaper Detachment

3:25p.m. September 19th, 1944

Inside the turret of Königstiger 526 Hauptmann Ritter sat silently, hands in his lap. He looked down to his palms and watched, flexing them open and closed to observe how his fingers interweaved with each other. He stopped and raised one of his hands up to press against a metal object inside his shirt, sighing and smiling at the reassuring pressure of the object applied to his chest.

“Sir?” Serge looked back to his commander, watching the Hauptmann grasp at his chest triumphantly.

Ritter looked back up to eye level with his gunner and loader. “Yes, Serge?”

The Bernard smiled, “Good work, sir.”

The wolf nodded to his gunner and straightened up to look back through his range-finder. “Mr. Nein, the front lines please.”

“On our way, sir”

It was a straight shot to the outside of Nijmegen now. Resistance was cleared from this main road, and based on what Nicholas was relaying to his crew from reports coming in, the allied attack wasn't coordinated. It seemed that this was the tip of Thirtieth Corp's spear; it was thought that there were only a few armored elements, a fair amount of men, and barely any American paratroopers taking part in the overstepped advance on German ground. All around the town this assumption was proving to be true. Though the loosely coordinated thrust into Nijmegen was fierce, it was not something that would last if it could not find purchase inside the city. As streets were taken back block by block by the Germans all over the edges of the town, this purchase in question was being lost. The Southeastern part of Nijmegen now belonged to the Königstiger patrolling its streets. The last hope for any allied breaking of Nijmegen's perimeter was the sparsely defended Southeastern quadrant. All that the British and Americans knew right up until Fox Company's Cromwells stopped radioing in was that some German tank was in that sector. Unaware of the actual threat they faced, Able Company sent two squads of

paratroopers armed with recoilless rifles while the British attached two Sherman Fireflies to their command just to make sure the panzer died.

“Erwin, do you see that garage ahead of us on the edge of town? It’s the building with the blue car painted on the wall?”

“Yes, Hauptmann!”

“I want you to hide us in it. We’ll ambush anyone coming down this main road.”

Erwin promptly obeyed, barking off an ever eager affirmative as he adjusted 526’s trajectory towards the garage on the next block. Back down the street Sergeant Klein and his men were finally on the move, the terrier disregarding the crime he’d witnessed. The men jogged down the road, following the tank as it seemed to be heading straight for a building across the intersection. The King Tiger’s turret shuddered, dust falling from its sides, and rotated, bringing the barrel of the panzer away from the wall it was driving towards. In time it faced itself at a right angle to the hull of the slowing behemoth. Ever so gently, or however gently an 80 ton machine could be, the wall of steel pressed its nose against the back wall of the garage. Like a finger pressed to tissue paper the brick wall bent, bowed, and then tore; in a quick reaction a quarter of the wall caved in on itself, sliding off the top, angled hull of 526. Unobstructed, the panzer knocked more of the wall down just by slowly pressing its weight against it in short accelerations. The entire back wall of the garage shook in protest as even more of it was left unsupported and then caved in on itself. Careful precision is what the panzer driver applied as he slowly used the nose of his tank like a bulldozer. In just under three minutes he had carved a respectable hole in the back wall of the garage, leaving a gaping entrance for his massive vehicle. Inside the turret of the beast, its commander smiled in appreciation as his driver reversed and the gunner rotated the turret back into place.

“Stop us here for a second Mr. Nein.” The wolf calmly ordered as he reached up to once more unlock the fastening of his hatch.

Sergeant Klein had watched the odd, destructive dance the panzer had been performing for the last few minutes, waiting off to its side for any further orders. He had expected, with the odd bulldozing of the abandoned building, a further order from the tank’s commander, and he assumed right. The tiny hatch on the top of the tank flew open, landing with a clang, and the wolf stood back up into view, rotating his neck slowly to counteract the turret’s rotation.

“Sergeant, take your men, cover the entrance to this main road. Hold it as best you can, if you’ve getting overwhelmed, send a runner here to this garage.”

Klein looked to the wolf, it seemed a bit of a death sentence, but he respected the chain of command. “And what if they have any-“

“Panzers?” The wolf cut him off.

“Yes” The terrier growled in his mind as he spoke.

“Send a runner to us,” The wolf took one of his hands and gestured from the front of the road back up its length to the next intersection where he left his hand pointing at it. “take the rest of your men up the road in a retreat, lure them to that intersection. Instruct your runner that as soon as all of their armor passes this garage he is to let us know. This will allow us to bottle them up in this street and slaughter them, as well as any tanks they may have”

Sergeant Klein frowned slightly. His men were still in danger, the direct line of fire, and acting as bait; but, he had to admit, the wolf’s plan was a good one, and a sure-fire way to make sure none of the allies escaped. With a mild reluctance the terrier saluted, turned, and jogged off; as he went he pulled a lithe beagle close to him and gestured back towards 526, explaining to the dog his role as the squad’s new runner.

Plan in motion, Ritter slid back down into his turret and clasped the hatch shut tight above him. He didn’t even give the order and Erwin was already slowly sliding 526 into the massive garage bay as carefully as possible. Tight fit was an understatement, there was no more than half a foot between the top of 526 and the ceiling and the lack of clearance between the cupola of the panzer and the roof of the garage became very apparent as it stuffed itself inside. Opening the hatch was an impossibility, but that made the spot all the more convincing a place to never hide a tank. With a gentle rock and creak of its suspension, Jägerwolf finished parking itself in the cramped space; the rear of it belched less smoke, and the engine noise lowered along with the amount of exhaust until both were left at a bare minimum, just enough to keep the engine spinning and ready to fire up at any moment.

“Hauptmann, why are we hiding inside this building?” Nicholas asked, taking his attention away from his radio to sate his curiosity.

“Don’t underestimate the immediate and morale-crushing effects of the element of surprise, Nicholas. I’m sure we can handle anything coming at us in a head on fight, but we cannot be everywhere at once. Units being wiped out to the man and disappearing without any warning, or with at least very frantic ones yelled into their radio is sure to give the allies pause. We might just break the attack on Nijmegen.”

“And that’s why he’s the one in charge.” Serge half lauded Ritter, half teased Nicholas.

“So now we wait?” Nicholas answered back, still eager to learn of any more planning.

“Simply put, yes, Nicholas. We wait. They’ll have to come up this road if they hope to secure the square, and we’ll swallow them up in their foolhardy eagerness.”

The Hauptmann adjusted himself in his seat and rubbed at his forehead in an instinctual response to the itching pressure his headset created where it rested. Eckart reached to his left to loosen the one sticky shell-holder in the back of the turret, just to make doubly sure the round

wouldn't be stuck fast, and useless. Serge leaned back from his sights and sighed, not having anything to see through them but the darkness of the abandoned garage anyway. Erwin kept his hand clutched around the throttle at his waist's level, ears on a hair trigger, waiting for any noise of enemy armor outside, or his Hauptmann's command. Nicholas was the only one still really at work; calmly the shepherd sifted through all the incoming communications, making mental note of German progress in holding every corner of Nijmegen so far. They all relaxed, taking advantage of the momentary lull in action, keen on letting their minds and bodies get away from their addiction, if only for a few minutes.

1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, Reaper Detachment
3:38p.m. September 19th, 1944

The Reich's Reapers were all paying attention to the noise outside their steel home. Without the engine screaming in their ears it was easier, but still difficult, to hear the sound of gunfire outside the tank. They all kept their mouths shut, not daring to risk overshadowing any important noise they might need to take heed of. To the assembled, cramped men it seemed that the Hauptmann's assumption was right. The general area that the gunfire was coming from seemed to shift. The din slowly moved backwards through the tank, shots still coming from both ends, but the nearest cluster was slowly moving beside, and then behind 526's hiding spot. It sounded like Klein and his men were falling back, reflexively Ritter and his men all shallowed their breathing and perked their ears up. There was a faint grinding, like a car traveling down a gravel road. The gunfire that was surely Klein and his group kept moving farther away, while the more constant automatic fire of the aggressors grew closer to the garage. A stray round hit the garage, punching straight through the simple brick wall and ricocheting off of 526's left side.

"They're here." Erwin whispered, his voice still amplified and overwhelming in the other crewmen's headsets.

"Quiet!" Eckart hissed back, expressing everyone's sentiment.

The grinding-gravel noise grew in volume and proximity, eventually morphing into a clearer rumble of engine and heavy treadfalls of enemy panzers. The air inside the German tank seemed to thicken, everyone unintentionally holding their breath as the noise seemed like it was just outside their metal walls. The sound of Allied Shermans filled the metal compartment now; they were so close, yet so unaware, like a mouse passing by a waiting snake. The din of their treads passed, the rumble of their engines with it. It was almost time, Nicholas and Erwin's hearts beat faster, thumping inside their chests. Eckart and Serge both flexed their fingers and rolled their wrists, the two men's mannerisms so synched after countless time spent working in tandem. In the rearmost seat of the King Tiger, Hauptmann Ritter looked down to his lap, hands clenched in fists and tongue starting to escape his snout to pant. They were all on a knife's edge

as the sound passed them, surely behind them now. The assorted noises started to lower in volume and the sound of shaking brick and debris soon halted altogether. The Allies had walked right past them, like a blind man without his cane. Still the Hauptmann waited, staring into his lap and waiting for the signal from Klein's runner. His patience was rewarded when four solid knocks were hammered against the right side of Jägerwolf's hull by the runner's rifle butt.

"Now, now, now!" The Hauptmann shouted, hands shooting upwards to take hold of the railings of his cupola.

Erwin's right arm jerked backwards while his left extended outwards quickly, throttling the power plant of the King Tiger into the open.

Corporal Mitchel was a bit surprised when he heard the building whine of a third engine from his rear. The 32 year old badger turned around to face the noise, drawing the attention of two of his other paratrooper squad mates.

"What'cha looking at Mitch', the Germans are that way." His friend Brian, a lanky wolf up the road from him, chided as he pointed in the direction various rifles and tank-mounted machineguns were firing.

"You guys hear that?" The badger cocked his head and craned his neck forward in the direction of the sound.

Brian and the private, John Lemaire, to the right of him followed the corporal's gaze back down the street to a blown out garage. Now that they were paying attention to everything, and not just their tunnel-vision for the retreating German squad, they heard it too.

"Yeah, sounds like an engine, big one."

"Let's check it out." Corporal Mitchel demanded, looking back to his friends then rolling his head in the direction of the sound that was now a roar.

"It's probably an armored car man, we better tell the gearheads" Brian answered back, hesitantly stepping backwards from the direction of the sound.

"We've got the recoilless rifle. We can take it out." The private to his right boasted as he pumped the tube into the air and then back down onto his shoulder.

The building roar reached an apex and a massive puff of black smoke left the dark interior of the seemingly-bombed-out garage. A massive creak of metal followed and then the ground beneath the three men's feet started to shake as the cacophony from the garage filled the corridor of the street. Men further up the road now looked back, the noise and vibrations

impossible to miss. Corporal Mitchel, Brian, and the private with the now-waning courage started to back away quickly.

“Maybe you’re right Brian.” Mitchel worriedly said, feet instinctively moving backwards.

Before they could react further a massive, camo-mottled wall of steel bounced up and over the heap of bricks at the rear of the garage down the street. In a thunderous crash the eighty ton monster cleared the building, trailing bricks with it, sending a mini earthquake through the immediate streets as it landed, straining its suspension from the feat of agility. The monumental proportions of the emerged panzer were revealed in full now, and the paratroopers just a few hundred feet away, who had already broken into a run back towards their column, were shouting and waving their hands to alert the men down the street who had no view of the behemoth.

“Tiger, TIGER!” Corporal Mitchell shouted, yelling to the other members of his squad curious as to what shook the ground beneath their feet.

The other men had barely heard Mitchel’s warning when the prophesized demon shifted gears and rolled forward, quickly pulling into the street behind the Allies.

“AMBUSH!” Captain David Perron yelled, breaking into a sprint for the wall to his right, abandoning his position behind the Sherman Firefly, “Jack the Ripper.”

In trained order the various paratroopers spun around and scanned for targets; it was immediately obvious who was ambushing them, thought in this case it was more “what” was ambushing them.

“Fire God damnit!” Captain Sutter yelled, his body slamming roughly against the wall of the upholsterer he had dashed for cover against.

In the street Corporal Mitchel and Brian kept running for the crater directly in front of them. Behind them, bravely or stupidly, Private Lemaire spun on his heels and lowered himself to his knee. The paratrooper quickly brought the aiming lens of his recoilless rifle over the advancing steel wall, pulled the trigger and sent his munition down range, intent on reenacting David and Goliath. His round shot true, but crumpled up against the flat armor of the tank’s turret face in an explosion of smoke and sparks, barely leaving a dent in the 180mm of armor.

“Fuck!” Private Lemaire shouted.

He shot up and spun in place on his heels once more, but only got three strides down the street before the hull MG of the German panzer tore him open with six very distinct holes. The paratrooper rag-dolled to the pavement. Three more recoilless rifles loosed their rounds at the lumbering beast, to just equal and fruitless effect as the first. The barrel of the tank ignored the various nuisances scattered about the street and fixed its massive bore in line with the rear of the

left firefly. Both of the Shermans had stopped, turrets rotating to face the direction of their most dangerous enemy, but it was too little, too late.

“Fire!” Hauptmann Ritter yelled, tensing his arms on the handles below his cupola.

Racking up another kill for the Reapers, Jägerwolf’s barrel recoiled backwards and massive gouts of smoke shout out from the sides of its muzzle-brake. Quicker than the blinking of an eye the almost 11cm shell penetrated the rear of “Jack the Ripper” without losing so much as a fourth of its energy. With an ease that was almost sickening the round carved through the engine block and detonated. The crew inside of the Sherman died instantly, their lives violently winked out as their tank’s engine and stowed rounds cooked off. Like someone detonating an M80 in a soup can, the turret of “Jack the Ripper” tore free of its ring and launched into the air, gravity quickly reversing its direction and slamming the flaming dome back to earth in a fireball of fuel and billowing smoke alike.

“Good kill, Serge! Eckart, load round, and fire!” The Hauptmann screamed to his crew, adrenaline pumping through his veins as he watched paratroopers scattering away from the flaming, exploding Sherman.

A telltale glint of metal flashed by in the bottom of the wolf’s vision as Eckart ejected the spent casing from 526’s breach. The motion was followed up with a streak of orange fur as the fox stuffed another massive round into the breach, and cranked down on the breach’s lever, sealing the munition inside.

“Round up!”

Giver permission with the last command, Serge merely rotated the King Tiger’s turret, filling his sight with the sitting-duck profile of the other firefly. He cranked his hand and the barrel depressed, lining up on the rear hull of this firefly as well. With a squeeze of his finger the jarring explosion of another shot shook the Bernard in his sight’s embrace. Through the focused tunnel of vision he watched the spark of the round clearing the armor’s armor like tissue paper. A gout of flame came back out the created hole and the Sherman shook in his sights. The Bernard grinned viciously as Eckart racked and cleared the breach next to him.

“Kill confirmed!” The Hauptmann shouted once more, watching the Firefly shudder and rock. The hatches on the tank’s turret flew open and he watched the tan-clad Tommy and another one of his men bail out. “Eckart, load high explosive rounds!”

The fox didn’t need to change his actions, before even being ordered the fox was already bringing one of the twenty howitzer-like rounds they had left the base with forward from the rack in the back of the turret. He stuffed it into the barrel and slammed the breach shut.

“High explosive ready!” He shouted.

“Serge, target is the bottom floor of the shoe-shop, 70 degrees right.”

In the street Captain Perron watched as his only hope of resisting the panzer literally went up in smoke. The stench of charred meat and burning gas filled the air, wafting over from the remains of “Jack the Ripper.” He watched the King Tiger’s turret traverse and rotate towards the shop three of his men had taken cover in. His eyes followed the direction of the barrel and saw the three men hiding inside the doorway behind the register counter.

“Aiken, Caparzo, Crowe, get the hell out of there!” He shouted over the din of MG34 and rifle fire.

From the shoe-shop, Caparzo, a goat in his twenties, saw his captain yelling in his direction and waving his hand to get their attention. The goat couldn’t hear him over the constant gunfire and rounds cooking off inside the burning Shermans. Worried and daring to peak up and over the counter, the goat saw what the Captain was hollering about rotating towards them.

“Get out!” Caparzo yelled, throwing himself from the counter the German cannon was staring right at.

Captain Perron threw his head down behind the cover of his arms as the shoe-shop disappeared in a blast wave of smoke, fire, and scattered timber. He coughed and hacked, dust-cloud pluming and traveling across the street. He barely cleared his vision past the crest of his arm when the second floor of the shop fell down on its first, burying whatever remained of his men under a ton of building. As if the panzer wasn’t bad enough, the German squad they had been routing had doubled back and started firing as soon as the dust had started to clear from the shoe shop’s destruction. Captain Perron and his men were caught in a vice, he knew it. He watched Corporal Mitchel and Private Brian bolt from their crater just past Private Lemaire’s body. They got five feet from the impact-site before the hull-MG of the tank jerked to face them; it let out a five round burst, toppling Private Brian over his now crippled leg. Corporal Mitchell skidded to a halt and about faced, turning back to reach down for his wounded friend. The MG fired a second time and Mitchell slumped forward, back weeping blood in various spots. Private Brian groaned and stirred; the foolish movement coerced a third burst of fire from the vigilant machine-gun, a final one.

Able Company’s remaining men had turned their focus to firing on the German infantry that had returned, at least that could actually hurt or kill them. Maybe if they killed enough, they could even escape. Captain Perron decided to give his men the best chance they could of getting out of this death trap. The cardinal peeled himself off of the wall he’d been glued to and made a break for the enemy panzer slowly rotating its turret back to the left to fire on his men fighting off the German infantry. His subordinate, Private Miller, followed the captain in his mad dash for the enemy tank. Both men ran at the imposing wall of green, brown, and tan steel with reckless abandon, SMG’s shaking and swaying in their arms as they threw them side to side.

They were so close, if they could only get on top of the damn thing they could knock out its vision slits and periscopes. Captain Perron felt his lungs start to burn, a mix of sudden-exercise and inhaled, caustic smoke. Just a few more feet, he thought, his vision narrowed and his mind focused itself for a leaping jump. As he neared the tank an innocuous tube on the front left of the tank's turret let out a small gout of smoke and a black object sailed into the air. Miller followed the black cylinder's path into the air, staring straight at the canister as it ruptured and hundreds of red-hot bearings and shrapnel exploded downwards at him and Captain Perron. Both men were ended quickly; various wounds peppered their bodies, but both of them killed instantly by bearings punching through their skulls.

"Launcher fired, sir!" Eckart confirmed, finger still held pressing the middle-left button of a group of four to the right of his head.

"Confirmed, infantry killed." Erwin acknowledged as he looked over the hundreds of pockmarks dotting the pavement around the two paratroopers' bodies.

In his cupola, Hauptmann Ritter watched through the vision slits as the few remaining paratroopers were frantically fighting back from behind the debris piles between them and Sergeant Klein's men, and the wreck of the second firefly between them, and him.

"Let's mop them up and be home for supper." The wolf grinned, unlocking the hatch above him.

Eckart's hand left the S-mine launcher's button and reached to the shell rack behind him, pulling another massive, high-explosive round from its resting place. The well-oiled machine of the Reich's Reapers were still at home, even in a different Jägerwolf than they'd started their partnership in. They fought under a different banner now, but through it all, they still fought for each other, they still fought for Germany.

End part 4 & chapter 2

Hope you enjoyed! :D