PROLOGUE

A lone man stood on a pier in a vast harbour. He watched the sun set over the enormous sea. The man was tall, still young, but his chestnut hair was touched with early grey. Despite his civilian jacket and jeans, his bearing revealed a military background. Any participant in World War II, now five years in the past, would at once recognize a fellow veteran. There was deep sadness in his grey eyes. Was it from the war? Or something else?

By day, the harbour was full of life and commotion. Now it was almost empty, just a couple of ships by the piers, and hardly a person in sight. On the horizon, the sea blended with the sky; only to the west did the purple-red sunset shine. The rays of the setting sun fell on the clouds, turning them from dark grey to lilac-violet. There, westward, beyond an ocean a thousand miles wide, lay this man's native land, a land both great and miserable.

It had been a tough and dangerous passage. They had started as a group of five. Only two made it, and he had just bid farewell to the only other survivor. Had the whole enterprise been worth it?

Yes, yes, it certainly had. Otherwise they were doomed to die a miserable death. Instead, they chose to fight their grim destiny. Those who did not make it died fighting as soldiers, better than to fade away slowly and painfully, destined for an unmarked mass grave in the permafrost.

Alexander Trofimov opened his eyes. Was it day or night? The small barred window was covered in dirt and cobwebs and let in no daylight. A dim electric lamp burned around the clock. The borderline between day and night was marked by turns of a key in the lock--waking time, breakfast, dinner and retreat. Trofimov remembered retreat being announced, but he could not recall being wakened. That meant it was still night.

He tried to stretch and moaned. His body was a pool of pain. After several weeks in Lieutenant-Colonel Razzhivin's dungeon, there was hardly a cell in his body that did not ache. His kidneys, groin and stomach, and all his limbs were racked by agony. His skin was covered in bruises and lacerated from the iron bars used in endless beatings. The joints of his hands and shoulders were dislocated after hours of hanging on the rack. All the time Razzhivin's underlings did that to him, he had prayed to die. How long ago was it? A month? A week? A couple of days?

Trofimov could not remember when he was brought here from the pit-jail where the counter-intelligence department of his division had held him. Nor had he any idea where his present jail was. Was he still in Jekabpils? Had he been moved to Riga? At least there was no more torture or interrogation. That meant the investigation was over, and he was to face a court martial. As a captain in the guards, he was entitled to appear before a military district court martial. That meant Riga.

He opened his eyes and looked around. He was alone. When they brought him in, a dozen people had been crammed into the small space. They were mostly Latvians, and their faces clearly showed their hostility toward a Soviet Army officer. Rumour soon spread that he was one of those who had helped their Forest Brethren partisans, and his Latvian cellmates believed it when they saw how he had been tortured. They treated him as a comrade and gave him the best place on the bunks. Who had told them? Certainly not the authorities: most likely they would have claimed he came from a Soviet penal battalion that had butchered several Latvians and was now being punished for his barbarity. Wherever the information came from, Trofimov's cellmates believed it and they treated him accordingly. Soon, however, they were removed one by one, and they never came back.

Trofimov tried to concentrate. There was no way of telling how long he was to stay there, but one thing was clear: at any moment he could be taken away to face trial. And then "it" could come--either straight after sentencing, or later on, the next night, the next morning, or even next month. He was not one to seek comfort in empty, unfounded hopes. After all he was a combat officer and had recently fought his way from Moscow to Berlin. It was best to face the inevitable and dismiss illusions. The charges against him were extremely grave, just short of high treason. He should be ready, so as not to lose face whenever "it" happened. After all, it was not painful: a shot in the head then oblivion. That at least he could face with dignity.

There were rumours that sometimes they shot you not in the head but in the stomach. Then they might bury you alive, or fling you into the furnace. Even so, he must not lose face. He must not give those scumbags pleasure.

And who was to blame for what was happening to him and to other war veterans? It was their own fault, he told himself. There were more than ten million of us. We had guns and mortars, tanks and planes, courage and experience. Who could have stopped us if we had turned on those bastards from SMERSH there and then, back in Germany? We could have slaughtered every one of the scoundrels and gone back to Mother Russia, to Moscow. On our way we could have routed the MGB secret police troops, and then

we'd have dealt with the Great Leader himself and his henchmen. We could have gone home not only as victors but as liberators. Instead we relaxed and celebrated the end of the war. We drank with the Allies on the River Elbe. We dreamt of being demobbed, of laying down our arms and going home. Idiots! We were convinced that a happy new life awaited, by the grace of Comrade Stalin. Why on earth did we trust that lot? How blind we were not to realize that these men were enemies of the Russian people no less than the Nazis were. Stalin's henchmen watched us and singled us out one after another in this round of purges. We got our due. All that was left was to preserve our dignity.

"Trofimov."

The door of the cell opened, and an unfamiliar guard stood framed in the entrance.

Trofimov sat up, overcoming his pain.

"Come out and bring your stuff."

Gritting his teeth, Trofimov tried to rise to his feet but fell to the ground. The guard cursed but helped him. "And don't forget your trash. I ain't gonna mess with it," he said.

The large office was bathed in sunlight. Sunlight! When had he last seen it? A general and two colonels sat at the desk. On the wall behind them hung a portrait of Stalin. The Great Leader smiled. Trofimov stood in front of them, trying hard to remain on his feet. He dimly heard the questions put by the board members and answered them automatically. The sound of his own voice reached him from afar. The questions were trivial. It was only when the general asked whether he pleaded guilty to the charges that Trofimov forced himself out of his somnolent state and uttered a firm "No" although he realized that nothing he said would affect his fate in the slightest. His fate had been decided on high. A few more questions followed, after which the guard escorted him out of the office. He stood outside, collecting his thoughts. Death was the most likely sentence, and he wondered what he should do. Pray? If so, what should he pray for? For the salvation of his soul? For his poor parents about to lose their last surviving son? But he found he could not concentrate even on this. He was consumed by pain and exhaustion.

At last he was called back into the office. The general wore a familiar expression of virtuous severity, the demeanour of a man performing his noble and solemn duty, to purge society of filth and corruption.

"In accordance with the USSR law of 1939, concerning high treason, and the USSR law of 1934, concerning conspiracy, the Court Martial of the Baltic Military District has found Trofimov,

Alexander Ivanovich, born 1922, Russian, former captain of the Soviet Army, guilty, in respect of Article 58/1b, activity undermining Soviet military rule; Article 58/6, espionage; and Article 58/11, conspiracy. The said Court Martial sentences him (Trofimov held his breath) to twenty-five years of imprisonment in corrective labour camps. This verdict is final, and the accused has no right of appeal."