

# PROLOGUE

If you could peer down the long annals of history, to see the threads of Time's grand tapestry, to pluck at these threads, change them--Wouldn't you? To see the other threads twisting and changing and the world as you know it disrupting like ripples echoing across the surface of a pond...

*Mawheart.* The word may sound unfamiliar to you, dearest Reader, but it is a class of animal brought about by one of these changing ripples howling down the centuries. It comes from a translated compound word, the literal meaning of which is "stomach-heart"--a term to describe the internal combustion engine. That machine and wonder of engineering that we in this world take for granted. In the other world, however, so similar and yet so different than our own, the internal combustion engine is an organ, a living machine. Engineered not by the hand of Mankind, but carved by Mother Nature, plucking at the threads of Time like a harpist.

From these living engines, implanted in such familiar shapes as cars and boats, spring Mawhearts--the aforementioned class of living machines that humanity bonded with. Some of these creatures are unfamiliar and mysterious, having survived that last great die-off, some sixty-five million years ago. These comprise the flying creatures, jets and aircraft; the swimming divers, the submarines and cruisers; and the vast, ancient, storied classes of the colonial organisms, those holdfasts of a time far gone, the printing presses, the typewriters, the eldest machines.

In the world of *Mawheart*, every machine you can conceive of is alive, from guns to blenders, from jets to zeppelins, from battleships to spacecraft.

And so, dear Reader, I implore you to glimpse with me, a tiny, narrow slice of this unfamiliar world, in a very familiar setting... The sunset of the second World War.

## CH1 - Sendings

David Geissler examines himself one last time in the tiny mirror, trying to ensure his uniform is straightened and all the paraphernalia of the German Tankery Division was correctly in its place. Just this morning, the Chief of Operations called him, delivering orders from even higher up the chain of command.

*You are to take the command of a new tank, and deliver her southwestward post-haste to assist with the defensive planning.*

A new tank... David could hardly believe it. He'd stammered out a *thank-you, sir* and wished the Chief a good-day, hanging up with trembling hands. His superior, Matthias Wolff, had congratulated him in his usual cool manner, and sent him back to his bunk to prepare.

This leads to now, Geissler checking--for the fourth time--his foot-locker, and his knapsack, ensuring all things were in order. He still had twenty minutes to get across the base; satisfied, and knowing if he stood around hand-wringing too much longer, he'd be late, Geissler dutifully set off out the door, shouting a *goodbye* to his bunkmates.

It's cold, and dreary, and terribly grey out; not too far in coloration from the Officers' uniforms, frankly. The tank-barn--really more of a large, concrete garage--looms squat and pale in the dull sunlight. A pair of Panzers jaunt off to the left, undergoing training exercises in the dirt yard, pockmarked by holes and run over by hundreds of muddy track-marks.

David heaves a great inhale, sucking down cold air to steel his nerves, and pushes the door open, being met by dingy industrial lighting and wide tank-stalls.

The door falls shut behind him as he slowly walks in, chest tight from his jog across the base. He slows up as a commander he doesn't recognize smiles down at him. There's ice in his eyes, a sort of clinical cold that sends chills down his spine.

"David..." He glances to the patch he's wearing. "Geissler. Welcome," he says, in the same sort of neutral, sugary tone one uses when politely informing someone to exit the premises. Geissler swallows. He had been hoping for the chill of *Herr Wolff* commanding him like a pistol to the small of his back; he was used to that. This man was foreign, an unknown, and it made his palms go clammy, to which he hid them by folding them courteously behind his back.

Geissler swallows thickly and nods, once. The commander turns and heads further into the large garage, only pausing once.

"Well? Are you coming?" he asks. "The tank is...restless," he adds, showing perhaps a few too many of those immaculate, white teeth. Geissler swallows again and ducks into the door, feeling Wolff practically breathing down his neck, his current absence notwithstanding. His lessons in politeness to superiors, enforced by a snapping *crack* against his wrist, stung hot under the skin, a bruising reminder to *behave well in the face of the men above you*.

David carefully pushes those thoughts aside; he was going to be handling a new tank, and calm was an imperative. He'd read all the textbooks, he knew the steps to this dance by heart...

And there it is, in the middle of the floor, lounging with its legs splayed out like some kind of gigantic, patterned-grey spider. The Tiger-1. The turret, round and flat like a cake, traverses leisurely to fix Geissler in its lone, dark eye. If this was what counted as a restless tank, what was a relaxed one?

The officer steps aside, and gestures smoothly to the tank, smiling once again.

“Go on.” He clasps his hands, only breaking his perfect posture to check his watch.

Geissler looks to the Tiger again, and watches the way it shifts one tree-trunk thick leg lazily, metal claws scuffing the dirty floor of the garage. It growls, warily but curiously. The armor is all laying flat, and David inches closer, heart picking up rate until it galloped painfully in his chest. It gives a long, pneumatic sigh, keeping him in its sight as he hesitantly reaches out.

One touch to the right place would render the tank immobile...

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Wilder’s hand clasps shut on the handle of the Sherman’s hatch, and it hisses, freezing still smack in the middle of trying to buck him off.

“There we go big momma, easy,” he mumbles, stroking the side of the turret and watching the armor fluff slowly lower. He stops to scratch near the secondary gun, and the tank slumps down into a wary squat, grunting and flicking its cannon up in annoyance. Concession, but annoyance.

“Great work, Wilder. She’s yours.” The handler-assistant, hovering nearby, lets out a little puff of relief, shoulders relaxing.

“Let’s get you comfy with my smell, eh miss?” he murmurs, giving the hatch a firm tug. The Sherman growls, keeping it held shut stubbornly. A nice rub near the latch, though, and she opens up. Wilder drops down the hatch, letting the tank snap the lid shut over his head with a *clang!*

“Ha, could’ve given me a haircut!” The tank growls, again, and this time he feels it all around himself, a deep sound that reverberates through every cavity in his body and makes his bones vibrate right in the surrounding flesh. He sinks into the Commander’s chair, stroking the inside of the turret with the back of his hand. “That’s it, feels nice having someone here, doesn’t it? Feels right?”

Another growl, but different—softer, maybe. More amicable. More of a grumble. He leans back, resting his head against the cold hull, letting his body heat seep into the steel. He can feel the whole chassis shift, tilting back and then righting.

“Wilder!” someone shouts from outside. He stiffens and moves to stand, tapping the door with a gloved knuckle.

“May I?” he asks. The Sherman flips the hatch open with a little huff. He stands, patting and stroking the rim of the opening affectionately. He’d been rearing tank-pups since he himself could walk, and this lady was no different.

“Base CO wants you to get your crew’s asses in here and acquainted with the tank. Also needs a name—you know the drill.”

“Course I do,” he says, and leans back a little. “Ready for a little trip, missy?” The Sherman gives an affirmative grumble, and adjusts herself into a proper stance to move. “Alright then! Let’s go, right up there, into the yard.” He taps the front of the turret, giving her a stroke and urging her onward with a soft ‘hup-hup’ noise. She obligingly starts the trek out of the garage, following the brightly-dressed humans into the packed-flat dirt courtyard that the garage and barracks surrounded in a broad horseshoe shape. Two other tanks—a Lee and another Sherman—lounged in the sun, basking with their turrets pointed upward.

Wilder makes to climb out, perching for a moment on the back of the Sherman and giving her a friendly scratch.

“You’re in good hands, big mama,” he reassures. She gives a little chirp, and he hops down to talk with the CO.

## CH2 - On Through The Night

Artemi is tuning the radio, the early morning mist of the eastern front seeping chill into their tank’s armor. He is alone, aside his teammate, Misha.

“Good morning sleepyhead,” he singsongs at Misha, who has just rolled over with a grunt.

“What hour is it,” he groaned. He half-sits up, propping himself against the inner wall of the tank, scrubbing his face exhaustedly. They have been walking and moving for ten days, by his count, and the length of the journey is beginning to wear through him.

“Humm. I think it is... About 7. Late for us!” He nudges Misha with his boot, and the tank shudders and grumbles around them.

“Haha! Even Nadiya thinks you are a sleepyhead!”

“Damn you early risers,” Misha mutters, again scrubbing his face and sitting up from his slump. Immediately, he notices the emptiness of Nadiya’s cabin. “Eh? Where are the others?”

“Foraging food. We are in a city, you dozed off before we got here. Commander Sokolov gave me an order,” Artemi clears his throat and does his best impression of Valeriy Sokolov, “*You must stay with Nadiya and Aleksandrov, make sure they stay safe. Try to fix the radio.*”

“Ah. Any luck?” he asks, adjusting in his seat to turn and look properly at his comrade.

“Some. Listen!” he offers the headset over, and Misha removes his own cap to fit a cup to his ear. Artemi tunes it a little, and a thin, faint thread of music comes through the thick, frizzy static.

“German music,” Misha grumbles, distastefully. He screws his face up, and offers the headset back.

“Yes, but you can hear it! My work—is working.” Artemi grins, flashing his missing tooth, and takes it back.

“Come on then. Let’s make sure Nadiya is ready to go when the others get back.” He stands, the hatch opening for him, and he clambers out, sliding down to the back. He hops from there onto the flagstone-paved roads, and turns to the lounging form of their T-34-85.

“Good morning miss,” he says, reaching to give her affectionate rubs and pats up her front armor. She trills, leaning into it and giving him a little nudge, knocking his cap askew. He laughs, reaching up to stroke her turret. “Yes, hello miss beautiful, did you sleep well?” She hums, a deep, vibrato-rich sound that rolls through her chassis, and stretches. She looks over when Artemi hops down too, turning to face them. Artemi slows in his scratching, his attention drawn.

“Sokolov wishes to meet us due north by three blocks.” Misha nods, and Artemi turns a little, back toward their tank.

“A happy Nadiya is a good Nadiya,” he says, snickering. He gives a firm pat-pat to her side, and she moves to stand, leisurely stretching all six legs. Just one of her paws is the size of the flagstones under their feet, some forty-five centimeters across. As soon as she’s settled, it’s time to move. Misha sees no oncoming threats, and nods to his teammate.

“Good girl. Come on, come on,” Artemi coos, circling to her front beside Misha. Together, the three of them make their way through the main city street, at one point having to squat on Nadiya’s back while she clambered over piles of rubble.

“I heard we are supposed to get some kind of detachment of Americans,” Artemi informs Misha, pulling a *eh, could be worse* sort of face and flipping a hand.

“Americans? *Here?*” Misha can’t help his incredulity. America was hardly what he would call *friends*, let alone *allies*.

“Moving up from eastern part of Africa. Deployed there to stop Rommel, they’re going to come here with some of their fancy American tanks.” Artemi looks, as he often does, quite cheeky about this fact. Likely, he was just interested in seeing other Landships species live and in the flesh.

“*Ptuh*. Capitalist tanks.” Misha shakes his head a little. “I don’t understand how Comrade Stalin expects us to work with those Americans,” he confesses. “They were our enemy! They still are, with their greedy capitalism!”

“But the Nazis are our real enemy, Misha. We are here to stop them. If that involves working with some Americans?” He tilts his hand. “I suppose I can do it.”

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Geissler finds himself Commander of a crew of his brothers-in-arms. They were being sent out already—a little prickle of anxiety made him question the haste, but... the Fatherland needed its sons and daughters’ protection right now.

Not to mention, the Tiger had bonded to him swimmingly and now responded well to his murmured orders and polite taps.

*Krümel*, he’d nicknamed her. *Little one*. *Crumb*. It was pure affection, and she seemed to love it, trilling in delight and squatting her armored front down to nudge his shoulder adoringly.

One of the crewmates, a Sigi Hochberg, had smuggled a small accordion aboard, and played jaunty music as they made their way south through the countryside. *Krümel* seemed to revel in it and trilled in delight as Sigi sang old German folk songs he’d heard from his parents, and grand-parents, and great grand-parents before them...

David missed those times, but felt they were fuzzy and distant. He was younger than all his crew except one—Edgar Bayer. He had a full year on Edgar. They spoke of it, precisely once, and agreed that it was irrelevant. The battlefield and their actions spoke louder than the numbers on their birth certificates.

They were to meet with a division moving north, then head as a collective westward, toward the coast of what had been France; up near Normandy, a new wing of defense.