

C L A N B O O K

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Sample

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Oh, never mind. Like I remember.

YARBLOCKOS!

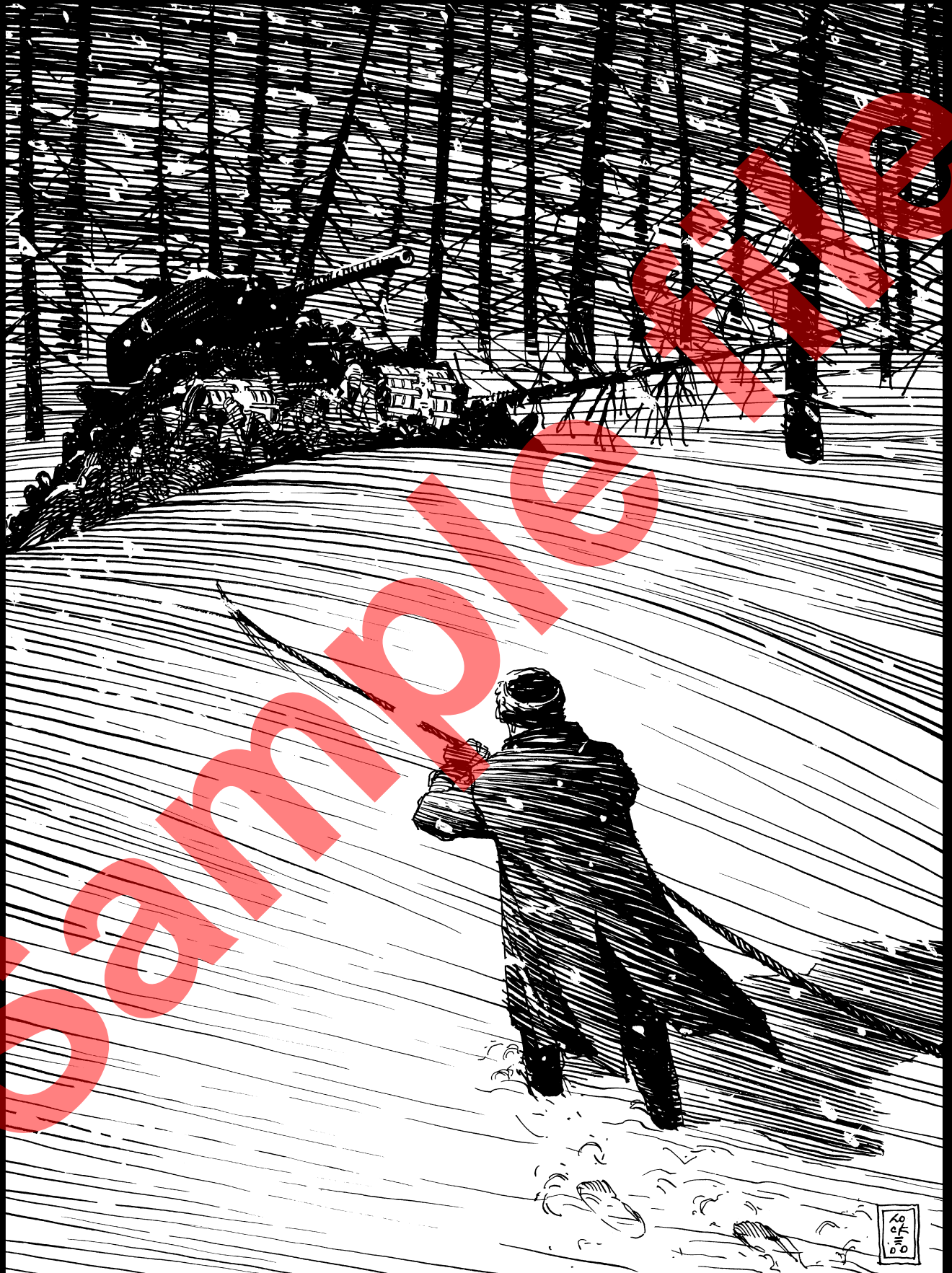
That nasty, villainous puke seat.

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WINTER FIEND

November 22nd, 1942 - Sunday

The landscape was a white vastness, a world without a horizon to separate the earth from the choking mist of the flat Russian steppe. Obergefreiter Dietrich Walling, officer in Hitler's vaunted Wehrmacht, surveyed the once-proud siege engine of the 22nd Panzer Division. His whitewashed Panzerkampfwagen IV lay alone and half-buried by snowdrifts. The OKW recruitment posters never showed the soldiers standing around tanks, watching them burn for the brief moments they pushed away the cold.

The remnants of the panzer division ran out of petrol about 150 kilometers west of Volgograd, near the indentation of the River Chir. The Russian counteroffensive in the Stalingrad campaign began three days ago when a thick mist strangled visibility from the air and biting cold scattered warmth to the four corners. Artillery flashed and thundered in muffled fury, and engaging tanks collided with one another in a clumsy ballet of the blind. The air was thicker than milk, but the Russian 8th Cavalry still surrounded the beleaguered 22nd Division and picked away with their snipers, the T-34 tanks. Dietrich's group finally smashed through the blockade yesterday and vanished into the steppes. Now, broken and dying, they waited for the Russians. The artillery and tank thunder, however, drifted away with morning, leaving the landscape unerringly silent beneath a pissy soup of white.

Kanonier Holden — Dietrich's gunner and the only other survivor from his Panzer IV — stumbled out from the snow-burdened curtain of air. He looked fresh out of Hitlerjugend, with only a tuft of unshaved fuzz on his chin and an oil-smeared face soiling his youthful Aryan looks. A thigh-length overcoat of brown sheepskin hung loosely from his bony shoulders. He was unraveling a towline from a large spool.

"What are you doing?" Dietrich asked. Grizzled with facial growth and dirt that highlighted premature wrinkles, he wore a black field jacket and sheepskin cap. Otherwise, he could have cut a handsome figure, civilization permitting.

"I found this on a Tiger about 20 meters northeast of here. I hooked the other tanks together, in case we needed to find each other in this squall. Leutnant Habsmann ordered me—"

"Habsmann? Is that rat-faced bastard still alive?" Dietrich spat. "I'm surprised they didn't ship him out to Poland with the rest of the Jews."

"Sir, he's not—"

"I know what he says, you idiot!" Dietrich raged. "But he's not Aryan either. He may have fooled the Reich Agency for Genealogy, but you can see the Semite blood in him. It's in his sloped brow, his frizzy black hair and his hooked nose. Didn't they teach you that in Hitlerjugend?"

"Yes, sir, they did, but I can't... I can't disobey Habsmann. He outranks us both. Also, he wants us to gather at his Tiger. He says if we share the warmth, we'll less likely freeze."

"You go if you want, but I won't make it easier for the Russians to find us. I'm staying here."

Holden's expression betrayed all his concerns. Still, he said nothing and tethered the towline to the panzer's forward cable hooks.

"Continue with your report. What else did you see out there aside from that mongrel Habsmann?"

"Well," Holden continued nervously, "I finished cataloguing the condition of the tanks around us, but I don't have paper to write on."

Dietrich ignored his subordinate. It was likelier the Kanonier stuffed whatever paper he had into his pants to keep himself warm.

"...five tanks scattered throughout the area..."

This was a war of unspoken truths.

"...no petrol in any of them..."

Dietrich said nothing about the Balkan sheepskin cap Holden had lifted from a dead Romanian officer, and Holden said nothing about Dietrich's black field jacket decorated with an Unteroffizier's chevrons.

"...one Panzer III is carrying dead soldiers..."

This was a far cry from the proud German phalanx that swept through the Ukraine, freeing places like Izyum and Svatovo from Communism. The villagers, winnowed by famine, heralded the Wehrmacht's arrival as the new Crusade come to sweep the Antichrist Stalin from his throne of bones. They took the German black crosses to mean hope, and Dietrich took their hope to mean victory. That belief died at the altar of Stalingrad.

"...face torn off."

"What? Repeat that!" Dietrich ordered when he realized he'd missed something important.

"I found a Panzer III covered with dead Romanian soldiers. They blocked the hatches. I tried removing the soldiers to get into the tank, but they were frozen to the metal. I pulled too hard on one. I... I think I tore his face off."

"You think?"

"Well, yes. I mean, he couldn't have looked that way before, sir."

"Who was in the tank?"

"I don't know. Frozen corpses covered the hatches and storage bins."

"So? Pull the corpses off."

"I... but... Won't I tear off their faces, sir?"

"Have you ever skinned a rabbit?"

"Uh, yes... yes, sir."

"This is no different. At least rabbits serve a purpose. Go back, pull off the corpses, and scavenge what you can. Don't forget to check the fuel tanks under the floor. We can't serve our Führer by dying here."

Holden was shocked a moment, then nodded blindly before setting off into the curtain of white.

"And Holden," Dietrich added, "say nothing to Habsmann. If you find anything, we'll barely have enough for ourselves. Understood?"

Two hours had passed since Holden had left, and now, Obergefreiter Walling suspected his subordinate had abandoned him in favor of Habsmann. Dietrich rested in the commander's chair and stretched his legs against the main gun's recoil guard. He sat in dried blood, but the thought never bothered him. Oberleutnant Westermayer deserved that sniper bullet when he stood on his chair and stuck his head out from the turret hatch. He was already dead when he tumbled back through and splattered the

interior with thick clots of blood. At the time, Dietrich ignored the crimson gore on his overalls and continued steering. That was a lifetime ago, last week. Dietrich found he grew more inured against the violence with each minute. Not even the bits of flesh or blood encrusted on his clothing bothered him anymore.

A bitter night chill had settled over the region, forcing Dietrich back into the black interior of his tank for shelter. Although the hatches, pistol ports and cupola's vision slots were all closed, the heat still escaped like water through a sieve. Dietrich marveled at how this blade of the Wehrmacht could resist Russian bullets and shells but couldn't keep out the Soviet Empire's greatest soldier, "General Frost." Dietrich didn't want to freeze, but he'd long run out of canned heat and had nothing to burn with his lighter. If he wanted to survive, he'd have to leave the sanctuary of his panzer and search the nearby vehicles. Holden mentioned something about five other tanks; one of them probably had something worth scavenging, but he'd have to take care not to approach Habsmann's Tiger.

Dietrich checked the clip on the Sturmgewehr .44 machine pistol and was about to open the hatch when something darkened the turret's glass vision blocks. Instinctively, Dietrich backed away into the low-ceiling forward compartment, where he bumped into the driver's seat. It couldn't be Holden or any other soldier in the division, Dietrich thought. They all knew to rap their wrenches or gun butts on the hatch before entering lest they find their heads blown off by edgy panzer crews. Someone peered inside, but it was too dark to see anything.

A hiss of cold air slipped into the tank, along with a faint wash of winter white — the intruder opened the cupola hatch. Dietrich felt the pit of his stomach drop away and his blood plummet along with it like a waterfall. Some primordial instinct in the back of his skull screamed for Dietrich to run. This wasn't the enemy; this was a hunter.

Carefully, Dietrich reached behind him and ran his fingers along the recess in the ceiling. The cupola's hatch was completely pulled back. Small eddies of fine frost drifted through the opening and settled over the reddish-brown interior. Dietrich's questing fingers snagged a latch. He pushed it gently, painfully aware of the low groan it made, but the driver's escape hatch finally opened with a satisfying pop. More cold air slipped through and filled the forward compartment. Quietly, Dietrich positioned himself beneath his exit. He could see a pair of milky-white... hands... that tapered off into serrated claws slip past the cupola's hatch. A bear? A clever wolf? Whatever was coming in was doing so head first. Dietrich didn't wait around to see the creature's face; he pushed off the driver's chair, through the hatch and into the bristling, cold air.

With visibility nearly gone, the howling wind swept away all noise and claimed it as its own. Dietrich looked back at the white-washed turret just in time to see black jackboots slip through the hatch. Dietrich leapt off the tank and grabbed the towline linking him to the Tiger. Holding on, he pushed his way through the knee-deep drifts, into the worsening storm.

The drifts grew deeper, slowing Dietrich down, but he pushed through the cold. After what seemed forever, Dietrich arrived at the Tiger. It was a petrol guzzler and ungraceful. It wasn't called a "Furniture Van" for its elegance. Even now, half hidden in a growing snowdrift, it looked unwieldy and ugly. Patches of zimmerit, anti-magnetic mine paste, had fallen away, revealing a mottling of gray. The turret's side-hatch stood wide open. Di-

etrich pulled himself out of the snow and onto the Tiger's skirt. He peered inside the empty tank. The crew must be dead, thought Dietrich, but he had little concern for them now, wherever they were. Dietrich exited and unhooked one of the four towlines that led him furthest from his own panzer. He took the loose towline and pulled himself through the snow while winding the excess cable around his shoulder.

Whatever stalked him would probably go after the other vehicles still tethered to the Tiger, leaving Dietrich safe and alone in his isolated tank. He knew his actions would cost the lives of his allies, but that was a sacrifice he was willing to make on their behalf. Besides, not a one was loyal to Germany anymore. Since Stalingrad, the soldiers privately scoffed at the weekly propaganda reports from the Ministry for Public Enlightenment. If the war faltered, it was because Hitler allowed lesser species to fight alongside the German Volk and because weak men with weak blood fought on the frontlines. Indignant and angry, Dietrich struggled through the snow, cursing the Reich for betraying its own dreams.

The Panzer III was six tons smaller than Dietrich's Kampfswagen, but it had been refitted with a 50mm gun. Still, snowdrifts washed up on its skirt, miring it until next spring. Painted white, it was nearly lost against the blizzard. The only feature that stood out against its surface were 10 Romanians covering the tank like maggots on a corpse. They were all facedown, dead and stuck to the exposed metal, blocking the four major hatches, Dietrich realized, along with the air intake and exhaust ports. Somebody positioned them deliberately, and for a moment, Dietrich found himself appreciating the cold and barren logic that required such action.

"I've walked into the lion's den," Dietrich muttered. Whatever was stalking his division had made his home here, but with the storm already covering his trail, Dietrich had no hope of finding his way back. This panzer was his only salvation. "Besides," Dietrich continued to himself, "whatever barred the hatches did so for a reason." If it was protecting something, then it was worth Dietrich's attention.

Dietrich dropped the cable and scrambled up to the soldier hunched over the commander's hatch. With a firm grip on his shoulders, Dietrich tried prying him off the tank. The corpse's face came off in stiff strips, leaving behind patches of flesh on the metal, but the body remained stuck; something had mauled his face beyond recognition, ripping open his jacket and winter clothing as well. The soldier's exposed stomach and chest were likewise frozen to metal, but not in the way Dietrich expected. The soldier appeared anchored to the metal, with his exposed flesh hooked or melted into the hatch lining. Dietrich didn't care. They were only Romanian.

Dietrich took out his knife and cut away at the flesh, separating the corpse from the hatch. Just like skinning rabbits. After a few moments of cutting and sawing, he used the knife point to dig out the flesh in the lining before finally opening the cupola's hatch. A wave of warm air and the smell of butcher-shop viscera washed over him. The interior was humid. Half-frozen and minutes away from frostbite, Dietrich dropped into the tank, slamming the hatch shut with a loud clang on his way down. Warmth enveloped him.

A noxious mix of offal and innards filled the pitch-black interior, but that didn't bother Dietrich terribly. He'd spent his summers on a Kümmitz sheep farm south of Berlin and was inured to the smell of death. It was the low mewling and sobbing all around him that grated on his nerves. Dietrich fumbled for his