



THE HUNTER
FROM THE WOODS

**ROBERT
McCAMMON**

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Robert McCammon

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When the pain has passed, there remains the power.

It, too, is born of pain. Yet from it comes the rush of life unknown to ordinary men. After the bones have bent and reshaped themselves, after the gums have burst and the fangs emerged, after the skull and face have become both less and more than human, after the hair has rippled and scurried in its thousands of frantic pathways across the flesh, after the heart has ceased its crashing and the lungs their straining for new breath, after the scents, sounds, colors and forms unknown to ordinary men have exploded upon the senses and nearly driven the reeling brain mad with their profundity of meaning only the wild can decipher...

...there remains the power, and that is the alpha and the omega of the wolf.

The Great White Way

THEY TRAVEL BY night.

Along the roads that cut through massive fields of wheat and sunflowers as high as a man's head, beneath the silent stars and the watchful moon, the caravan of horsedrawn wagons and gypsy trailers creak and groan on their way from here to there. They pass through towns, villages and even-smaller hamlets that have been asleep since sundown, and the dust they raise glitters in the moonlight like diamonds before it returns to the Russian earth. They go on until the circus master, the white-bearded Gromelko, decides to pull his leading wagon to a halt at the centerpoint of two or more rustic towns that have likely never seen a circus since a Cossack first sharpened his saber on a blood-red stone, and there Gromelko uses his hooked nose to smell the summer wind. Then, if the wind is right, he says with satisfaction to his long-suffering wife, *This is our home for tonight.*

The wagons and the trailers form a small village of their own. Torches are lighted and placed on poles. The main tent goes up first. Then the smaller tents, and the canvas signs announcing the attractions. One of the signs says how many coins are needed for entry, or how many chickens. The work animals are kept in a corral. The show animals—one young mule that can count up to twenty, two aged snow-white horses and a bandy-legged zebra all sleepy and dusty from their trip—are herded into a green tent to eat their hay and await their moments. The black leopard

with one eye is kept in its own cage, because it has been known to bite the hand that feeds it. The wolf, too, is kept caged apart, because the wildness can't be whipped out of it. The ancient toothless bear lumbers around freely until it wants to return to its cage as protection from the leopard, the wolf and mean little children who taunt it.

Then there comes the birth of the Great White Way.

This is Gromelko's huge pleasure in life, now that he's nearly seventy-five years old and he can neither drink, smoke, nor screw. He stands watchful as ever, expectant of miracles, and it is somewhat miraculous that from the dirt and the sawdust rises within hours the village of the travelling circus, and then—miracle of miracles—that the Great White Way blinks several times like an old man waking up from a solemn snooze, and suddenly there is an electric odor like a passing thunderstorm and all the dozens of bulbs light up in simultaneous splendor along the midway's length. As long as someone pedals the stationary bicycle that powers the generator, the bulbs will glow. The bulbs are not very bright nor the midway very long, but as the saying goes: A sparrow in the hand is better than a cock on the roof.

In the morning, the towns awaken and the farmwork begins with its routine and drudgery, and then someone in the fields sees the tents. Not long after that, the wagons come through with the circus banners rippling on their sides, and in the backs of the wagons stand—or wobble, if they've been early with their vodka—some of the star attractions. There are the catlike Boldachenko sisters, Vana and Velika, who perform jaw-dropping feats of acrobatics and contortions atop a forty-foot pole; the Lady Tatiana, who with her daughter Zolli gallops the horses and the zebra at full speed around and around a terribly small bigtop; Yuri the clown and his miniature clown-doll Luka, who always seems to get the better of his befuddled master; Arman the handsome, who walks a wire in his black tuxedo and throws a paper rose to a lucky farmer's wife at every show; and Gavrel the fire-eater from whose mouth flare ropes of flame and showers of sparks that whirl around the tent like the eyes of demons in the dark.

And also to mention the stars of the midway! For after the big show has ended, the audience is encouraged to walk in the glow along the Great

White Way, to spend more coins or trade more chickens to visit Eva the bearded lady, Motka the man with skin so hard a hammer bends a nail upon his breastbone, Irista the wrinkled dwarf who also plays superb classical Tchaikovsky on her pink toy piano, Natalia the emaciated spider woman, and last but not least the massive wrestler Octavius Zloy, who wears a purple cloak and a Roman helmet and stands with tree-trunk arms crossed over his traincar chest and, his slab of a chin upraised and his small eyes narrowed, dares any son of Russia to pin his shoulders for the count of three.

Though many have tried, no one ever has. And Octavius Zloy has no mercy for any son of Russia who climbs into the ring. Many have been removed, senseless and bloody, while his young and beautiful wife Devora raises his sweat-streaked arm and accompanies him as he parades back and forth like the superhuman species he believes himself to be.

The sons of Russia do not know that Devora, for all of her dark gypsy beauty and nineteen supple years, is missing several teeth and used to have a straighter nose. They don't know about the broken arm of last summer, and the black bruise across her lower back that caused her to hobble like an old woman through the month of June. But it is late August now, in this year of 1927, and as the saying goes: When Anger and Revenge are married, their daughter is called Cruelty.

It is the vodka, Devora thinks. Always the vodka. He lets it own him. And then when he has had more than enough to blaze his bonfire and not yet quite enough to topple him into sleep, Octavius Zloy rises up ragged and enraged within his own skin and he will not rest until someone has been hurt.

That someone being herself.

Oh, how he can use his hands. His hands were made for the punishment of other people. They are as strong as shovels, as brutal as bricks. They suit his soul.

So on a night like this one, after the big show is over and all the people have gone, after the coins and chickens have been put away, after the midway has closed down and everyone departed to their little wooden trailers and bolted their shutters and the Great White Way has faded to

dark, Devora wipes the blood from her nostrils with a cloth and walks past the drunken bulk of Octavius Zloy snoring on the bed. She checks her face in the oval mirror behind the door. Her ebony eyes are puffy from tears and pain. Her nose is swollen. Her lips look crushed. Her thick black hair is streaked with henna, because he likes the appearance of fire in his fists when he grips her head. She realizes she looks like a slim hard girl who has come many miles from where she began, yet she is still so far from anything.

It is time to go, if she is going tonight.

She has slipped into a patched gray dress, like the other few she owns. Octavius Zloy says he prefers her naked, anyway, and spread out upon the bed beneath him in helpless abandon. She puts upon her bruised lips a fingertip's worth of color, a deep red. Octavius Zloy would not like this, if he were to see. But soon it will be worn off. When she leaves the trailer she has a key with her, but she does not lock the door.

It is silent in the village of the circus.

Well, not quite silent...for as Devora walks her path she hears the distant note of someone's fiddle, a soft sad playing, and then the plinking of a toy piano. She can't understand the kind of music that Irisa plays, it's too far over the head of a country girl, but she appreciates how swift and sure the small hands are.

She goes along the darkened Great White Way. The night's breeze stirs tent folds. Moonshadows lie at her feet. Her heart is beginning to beat harder, it seems, with each step. She is going to see the boy who takes care of the animals. Her lover. Her desire and her freedom, if just for a little while.

As the saying goes: There is no winter in the land of hope.

He is waiting for her, as always, in the green tent.

He is a strange boy. He stays by himself most of the time. He seems to prefer his own company and the company of animals. Seventeen years old, he's told her. His first name Mikhail. He hasn't offered his family name, nor does she ask. He arrived at the circus little more than a month ago, with no belongings, wearing baggy clothes that might have been stolen from a fence where they were drying in the sun. Had he ever owned shoes? He never wears any. He is lean and sun-browned, and she can count his

ribs. He has an untidy mop of shaggy black hair that always seems to have straw in it, and when he stares at her calmly and fixedly as he does with his luminous green eyes something in her soul thaws and warms and melts. At the same time, something lower than her soul moistens and tightens and readies itself like a creature over which she has no control. It was such the first time she saw him, and has been every time, and is now.

He has lighted a few candles for them, in his private space of hay where he sleeps.

He has put down a wheat-colored blanket and smoothed a place for her. But first, before she can enter his domain, he turns and picks up something folded upon a piece of clean canvas, and turning toward her again he smiles and lets unfold the beautiful dark blue dress he has brought for her, and Devora catches her breath because no one has offered her such a gift for a very long time. Of course there were the wildflowers he had for her last week...but *this*...

He tells her to try it on, so that he can take it off.

Over from the far side of the tent, Devora hears the wolf pacing in its cage.

She does what he asks, with great happiness. The dress makes her feel sleek. It makes her feel...what is the word, when one feels uncommon? Well...*uncommon*. She won't ask where Mikhail stole it from, because now it belongs to her. She owns so few pretty things. She tells him she loves it. Loves, loves, loves it. The woman who gave her birth told her to say *loves* a lot to a certain kind of man, because they liked to hear it. Devora is very sure Mikhail is that kind of man. Boy. Whatever he is.

But she knows she must have him, for the need for him is rising in her and as he advances and begins to slowly and gently remove her new dress she puts her arms around his neck and he kisses her mouth so softly it is like a feather tracing the outline of her crushed red lips. An angel's feather, Devora thinks. For truly this boy has come to her from Heaven.

He blows out every candle but one.

The wolf paces faster, back and forth. The leopard sits watching, its single eye catching a glint of light. The bear sleeps, and shivers a little in some dream of honey.

Apart from the caged animals, the horses and the zebra doze but the ears of the intelligent mule twitch to catch the sounds of human passion.

Devora interrupts their deep kisses to remove her lover's clothes. Then they sink down together upon the blanket in the hay, and she puts a hand in his thick hair and guides his head between her thighs because this is what she craves most tonight, and he is so good at it, he is so wonderful at this, and so she moves against his tongue faster and harder and he is patient and content to give her everything she needs.

She will not ask who his teachers were. She will not ask who else he has loved in this way. But she loves, loves, loves this, and it is a sensation the selfish Octavius Zloy has never given her.

When she is wrung out and trembling and the sweat of heat and exertion glistens on her body, she tells Mikhail what she needs now to do for him, and he turns over and says he is all hers, which sounds to her ears even better than music.

She has a little trouble with this, though, and he understands why because she's told him about the force of Octavius Zloy's thrusts into her mouth, and how he seemed to want to choke her and though Octavius Zloy is not very large he uses himself like a battering-ram in her throat. So Mikhail quietly says, as he always does, that all else of life might be pain but love should be pleasure, and so he moves her back upon the blanket and lets her wait for a moment as his tongue plays with her navel and downward. Then he slowly presses into her, and they are one.

As the boy moves within her, Devora looks up into his handsome face and green eyes. A light sheen of sweat glows on his cheeks and forehead. She thinks she could live with him forever. She thinks she could follow him wherever he went. But, alas, he has no money. He is a pauper, whereas Octavius Zloy has a boxful of money hidden somewhere in the trailer. She dares not search for it, but she believes it's there because her husband has never lost a bout and so never had to return any coins.

Mikhail's rhythm is stronger. He is ardent and powerful and somehow older than he seems.

She has told him, over the many nights, how her husband has beaten her. And he has seen the marks, too. She has told Mikhail how the brutish

wrestler took her from her home when she was sixteen because she was the prettiest girl in the village, and he was a bully passing through and no one could stand up to him. So the thirty-year-old Octavius Zloy, which was not his real name but suited him as much as his hurtful hands suited his selfish soul, threw her into the back of a wagon and told her she belonged to him. He was so huge and so terrible, she had told Mikhail, that fighting him was like trying to fight a whirlwind. So she had simply waited for her moment to escape, and yet...the moment never seemed to come. Where would she go if she tried to run away? Who would help her? And if he caught her—*when* he caught her—it would be more blood on her face and on his fist. It was as if, she'd said, he was trying to make her look as ugly as he was inside.

Mikhail and Devora kiss and bite and cling to each other as they thrust together, and the wolf and leopard are both very interested in this performance.

At last, when the spasms have shaken both of them and Devora has squeezed her eyes shut and cried out and Mikhail has pulled out of her and left his white signature upon the damp hair between her thighs, she rests her head against his shoulder and in the golden light he listens to her speak.

She tells him that Octavius Zloy has vowed he is going to kill her when he awakens. She tells him that her husband may be insane, and that he cannot be stopped.

Mikhail listens. The wolf is pacing again.

She tells him that if she was free from Octavius Zloy she would find a way back to her village. But how to be free from him? How to be free from such a mad whirlwind as that?

Mikhail is silent for awhile. Then he says he will go to the trailer and talk to Octavius Zloy.

Devora shakes her head and tells him that talking will not do. She tells him that Octavius Zloy only understands violence, and so if Mikhail wants to help her he must go into that trailer where the bad man is sleeping and knock his brains out with whatever is at hand.

Then, she says, she can be rid of him. The *world* can be rid of him. And she will be free. But, she says, he has vowed to kill her when he wakes up...so what shall happen next?

And she presses her head against Mikhail's shoulder and cries a little bit, until Mikhail stands up, his face grim and his lips tight. He puts on his clothes and says he will go and talk to Octavius Zloy.

This time, Devora does not speak.

Mikhail says he will return and, without a weapon but his own slim frame and fists, he strides out of the tent on his urgent mission.

Devora waits for awhile.

Then she puts on her drab gray dress, made ugly with the patches that hold it together, and she looks with contempt at the blue dress the traitor has brought her.

He will learn a lesson tonight, she thinks. The lesson will be: do not stand and let Zolli take your hand, when you belong to me. Do not smile and laugh and talk with Zolli, the little bitch, and think that I don't see what you're doing. I could put a knife into Zolli's heart and twist it a hundred times, but instead I will stab you in the heart with a blade called Octavius Zloy.

Yes, she thinks. Her eyes are slitted, her face crimped with ugly rage because her jealousy is and always has been a crippling disease. Go talk to him. He will be awake by now. Go talk to his fists, because I have told him you steal things and beware that you come to steal the moneybox in the dark of night.

I will survive as I always have, she thinks. I will take my blows from him, because I know that when he beats me it is out of the purest love and sweetest possession.

She knows that the boy and Zolli have been here, right here, in this same place. She knows that they must have laughed at her stupidity, for letting herself believe that the boy cared only for her.

No one cares for her but Octavius Zloy.

He has told her so himself.

Devora stands up and leaves the tent, and she walks slowly and gracefully, as if in a dream, back the way she has come, back along the dark and moonshadowed Great White Way, back to the gypsy trailer where by now her husband has delivered justice to a very evil boy.

As the saying goes: A stranger's soul is like a dark forest.

And Devora is very certain the strange boy carries within him an unknown wilderness. But it is not one that any other woman in this circus will share, and for sure it will not be the simpering and smiling and oh-so-pretty Zolli.

The trailer's door is open. Wide open. There is only blackness within.

Devora goes up the steps and then inside. She speaks softly, calling for her husband. She hears breathing in the dark. It is a harsh rushing of breath. She smells the caged wolf on her skin. She spends a few seconds fumbling for matches and the candle on the table near the door, as she continues to call for her husband. He should be right there, the bed is right in front of her. The match flares and the candle's wick is lighted and she holds the flame out and then she sees the blood.

Well, she thinks, justice has been delivered. Perhaps *too* harshly, but still...

And she smiles a little, not thinking yet of what she's going to say to her husband to explain where she's been, except out walking in the moonlight as she sometimes tells him when he is contrite and weeps like a little child after he awakens.

Then by the candlelight she sees the red mass on the floor at her feet and in it is something that might be a beefy arm torn from its socket, and there a leg with a massive thigh clawed to the crimson muscle and white bone.

On the floor are blood-spattered clothes. She has seen those clothes tonight. She has removed those clothes tonight.

She calls in a weak and trembling whisper for Octavius Zloy, her husband and her protector, the tyrant of her heart.

The candlelight finds a head upon the bloody planks. It has a slab of a chin and small eyes and bears an expression of open-mouthed wonder and horror. On the end of an arm that has an elbow but no shoulder is a clenched fist, the scarred knuckles already turning blue.

Devora is about to scream when something shifts just beyond the range of the light.

He speaks from the dark. What he says she can't understand, because it sounds like a growl. It sounds like an animal's rage put to nearly-human voice. Then he speaks again and this time his voice is almost his own.

■ Robert McCammon

“You’re free,” he says.

And he repeats it: “You’re free.”

Devora shakes her head and spittle drools from her mouth. Because she doesn’t want to be free. She doesn’t know how to be free. She knows only that he beats her because he loves loves loves her so very much. He wants her to be the perfect wife for a great man like himself. And the film that is to be based on his life...she was to star in it also, and they would be stars together on the cinema screen, and both of them so uncommon the dolts and whores in her village couldn’t stand to look upon the savage sun of their faces. He had promised about the film. Just as soon as he raised enough money.

Then all life would be pleasure, and so many people would be jealous. But now...*now*...

A hand moves into the light, reaching for her. It is not quite human, and seems alive with moving, shifting bands of hair.

“I love you,” the boy whispers.

A word comes from Devora’s bruised lips.

That word is *Murder*.

She speaks it again, louder: *Murder*.

And now her eyes widen into terrified circles and she lets the scream go that will awaken the entire village of the circus and have the first of them here within seconds: *Murder*.

A figure leaps from the darkness. It is strangely-shaped, glimpsed from a nightmare. As Devora staggers backward, the figure throws itself into the bolted window shutter and crashes through. Devora screams *Murder* again but now she is alone in the trailer with the torn meat, broken bones and smeared guts of a wrestler.

They take her away to a place to sleep, but she cannot sleep and they cannot get the extinguished candle out of her hand. She lies in the bed with her eyes open and stares at the ceiling, and she doesn’t respond when Lady Tatiana and her daughter Zolli, both of them so kind to everyone, come to sit at her bedside. It is soon clear to all that Devora has embarked on a journey that has no destination.

The hunt for a murderer goes out across the countryside, but the boy has vanished. How the boy did what he did, to a formidable man like

Octavius Zloy, is a mystery with no solution. Why did the boy take off his clothes? And another very odd thing: why did the boy leave a puddle of piss on the trailer's floor? It would be talked about in the village of the circus, and under the glowing bulbs of the Great White Way, for the rest of this dwindling season and surely into the next, as well.

But, as with everything, life—and the show—must go on.

Over several bottles of vodka and with men sitting around a table in the last twilight of August, old white-bearded Gromelko sums it up best.

Beware the quiet ones, he says. Beware the ones who would rather live with animals than in the company of humans.

For as the saying goes: Make a friend of the wolf, but better keep your axe ready.

The Man From London

THE MAN FROM London, who today had journeyed by horse-drawn sleigh from a small Russian town called Pruzhany, wore dark glasses. Without them, the glare of the afternoon sun on the great wide landscape of snow was blinding. The man from London was careful with his eyes. Covered up with coarse blankets, he sat in the back of the sleigh while his driver cracked the whip on the struggling horses. He wore a brown mink cap with ear flaps. The man from London today went by the name of William Bartlett. Yesterday, in Minsk, his name had been Keith Suddings, and it was while wearing that name that he'd shot his target through the right temple in room 53 of the Hotel Fortitude.

Last night the train had brought him to Pruzhany, and today the sleigh would take him to another place. He was a relaxed man. He was a cool, collected and calm Englisher. But there were times today he had looked back over his shoulder across the sea of snow, his pale blue eyes slightly worried behind the dark lenses. He knew there were always trains running from Minsk to Pruzhany, and if he had not undertaken to visit this drear little hamlet he was approaching he would already be in Warsaw by now, having a cup of what the Poles called tea and sending a coded telegram through the proper channels. But he was the chosen boy for this job, so that was that. And anyway, all the loose ends were tied up. Weren't they? He tapped the fingers of a gloved hand on the knee of his gray corduroy

trousers. He was wearing several layers of clothing beneath a fleece-lined overcoat, because even the bright sun in a Russian winter felt frigid. Or maybe, he considered, it was just him.

Revenge, of course, was a dish best eaten cold. He hadn't really known the man he'd executed in room 53 of the Hotel Fortitude, but he was the boy chosen for the job, chosen to carry out the revenge that some unknown other man desired, and now the desire for revenge would probably flip to the other side, and that was that.

The man from London was a thirty-six-year-old boy, Oxford-educated and wise to the ways of the dirty little world in which he found himself on this sunny Russian afternoon. It was the eleventh of February, 1928. In Germany the pain of the Great Depression was cracking the old order of things, and an ambitious man named Hitler had imposed himself as leader of a secret society with the trappings of medieval militarism.

In Russia the equally ambitious Stalin had just inaugurated his first Five-Year-Plan to advance industry while underhandedly manipulating the peasants and the military. In Britain, cannabis had just become a controlled substance.

But the British lions were awake. In fact, they never slept. In the back-rooms under the small intense lights directed to the tables of maps and radio signal transcripts, the hale and hearty fellows from such stellar universities as Oxford, Cambridge, Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham made their deductions and decisions, and perhaps over time they would lose their hale and hearty demeanors and become more solitary and sallow, but that was the job.

Someone had to do it.

The man from London looked back once more over his shoulder, at all the snow and sky behind him. He was trying to summon up a Russian proverb. What was it? Oh, yes.

The past is a different country.

"How far now?" he asked the driver, in his meticulous and careful use of the Russian tongue. His answer was a shrug; you couldn't rush these oxen-like people.

It was very interesting, the man from London thought, how the merry sound of sleighbells could over time drive a man nearly mad.

But at last the driver said, “We are here,” around his cigarette, though the cluster of wooden houses were still a thousand meters away across the flat white plain. As the sleigh closed the distance with its horrendously-jingling bells, the man from London could see stone ruins atop a small hill overlooking the village.

That was the point of his interest.

A few people emerged from their houses to watch the sleigh approach. They were bundled up in the tattered and patched coats of poverty. They stood like scarecrows in the wind. One of them, a small child, lifted a hand in greeting and the man from London cheerfully waved back because he knew it was important to make a good first impression.

Then he shifted a little in his seat, because the compact one-shot assassin’s pistol under his coat and three sweaters was pressing into his side.

A large bull of a man emerged from one of the houses and approached the sleigh as if he owned this particular piece of snow-covered earth, which he probably did.

The sleigh’s driver recognized authority and put his muscles into the reins; the two horses stopped walking and blew gout of steam. The bull-man, wearing brown britches and a heavy red sweater, came forward like a force of nature and was flanked by two other men who matched his stride but not his size. The bull-man had a bald head, a thick gray mustache and beard, huge gray eyebrows and gold rings in both ears. His boots crunched through the snow until he reached the sleigh’s side.

“Hello,” said the man from London in the native language, his cheerful smile wide and his square white teeth ablaze with good intentions.

“Who the fuck are *you* and what are you wanting here?” came back like a cannon’s blast.

Obviously the village chief, thought the man from London. Which was saying that maybe this gentleman owned more cattle or pigs than the others, or maybe he had the biggest gun or the biggest dick.

“My name is William Bartlett. I’m—”

“*English!*” It was spoken with incredulity. Other people were pressing forward now. The houses were emptying their peasant owners. The Russian-spoken *English* went around like a hushed echo.

“Yes, I am,” said the man from London. “May I step out?” He decided to add, “I’ve come a very long way.”

The chief only glared. A small wizened woman who had eased up beside the bull-man gave him an elbow shot to the ribs. “Step out,” came the reply, with a small wince of pain.

“Ah, thank you.” The man from London put his boots into the snow and hauled himself free from the treacherous seat and smelly blankets. He stood six feet three inches tall and towered over the Russian heads. He was lean and broad-shouldered and gave the sensation of coiled power, for in his youth he’d been a champion boxer and such hard training and arduous experience never fully faded. Further evidence was his many-times broken and craggy nose, but he’d always given worse than he got. “May we go into your house, sir?” he politely asked the chief.

“I asked what you wanted here.”

“Yes, so you did.” The man from London removed his sunglasses to reveal the blue eyes that were as pale and sharp and cutting, if need be, as Imperial daggers. He paused to let them scratch the bull-man’s surface. “But I didn’t answer, did I?”

The moment hung between jeopardy and violence.

But the man from London knew the Russian mind. Perhaps bull-like, yes, but also holding the curiosity of a child. And very respectful of courage, that was certainly true.

The chief’s mouth seemed to tilt to one side. His eyes narrowed.

“Come on, Bartlett,” he said, speaking the name as if he’d spat it, and he led the path to his house a short distance away.

A fire was crackling. The window shutters kept out much of the cold. The furniture was table, chairs, and foot-stool in the front room. Before the man from London had removed his coat, he had a brown mug of tea in his hand from the wizened old woman. He drank it down steaming hot to warm his innards, then he took off his coat and hat and let them see the silvery-blond hair and chiselled profile of an Englishman with Viking blood in his

veins. His jaw was square, his forehead high enough to house a brain full of facts these people could never comprehend, and across his cheeks and the crooked bridge of his battered nose lay a scatter of freckles that made him appear perpetually boyish and drove women absolutely nutsy.

"Fine tea," he commented, though it was not so much tea as it was tree bark.

"You're a fine shit thrower," said the chief, who sat down in the best chair and hooked the foot-stool toward him with a haughty boot.

"I *am* that," agreed the man from London, with a placid smile. "But you have to know why I'm here. You're not stupid, are you?"

"Not stupid."

"All right, then. I understand he lives in the ruins."

"The *church*," said the chief. "It is our village church."

"The *ruins* of a church," the man from London corrected. "He lives there, yes?"

"Maybe."

"He lives there. Yes," said the man from London, with a firm nod. He thought of sitting down, but the other chairs looked none-too-steady and to fall on his bum before the chief and the watchful old woman would do nothing for the balance of power in this room.

The chief stared up at him with something near pleading in his small black eyes.

"What do you want with him? Huh? What does an Englishman want with him, to come so far?"

"I want to speak with him. I understand he speaks English."

The chief peered steadily into the fire.

"I know he's wanted for murder. I know it's just a matter of time before they find him."

"They won't find him. We hide him."

"Not very well," said the man from London. And added: "*Obviously*."

"Don't make airs with big words," the chief warned, his face clouding over. "That last Englishman who came...he made airs with big words, too. Him with his camera and all his little geegaws. *Oh*." The chief's mouth hung open for a few seconds, and then it slowly closed. He smiled

thinly. "I see. That Englishman...the newspaper writer...he told someone, is that it?"

"He told the man who told the man who sent me. So...you're correct."

"And us trying to help a poor English newspaper writer fix his broken-down wagon," the chief said, with a fearsome scowl that turned into a sad half-smile. "We said we'd do the work for a few coins and he could stay the night. Then he saw something, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did." That had been back in October. The English journalist was in actuality a member of the British secret service on a piddling errand involving the movement across the Polish border of a few document photographs. Minor, busy-work stuff...but then the tale he'd brought back from this village on the raw and windswept frontier...much more interesting than armored-car blueprints. Therefore, while the man from London was in Minsk killing a Russian double-agent he did not know, and was so close to this little village, it might be worth the extra small trip.

The bald-headed bull-man said nothing for awhile. Then, spoken quietly: "He catches food for us. He feeds the whole village. He's a very good young man. But...troubled."

"Yes, being wanted for murder is troublesome." The field agent had brought back that information as well, gleaned from a young girl in the village who had heard it from the murderer himself. Such girls gave up quite a lot of information for a pair of silk stockings or a box of chocolates.

"Not just that. Troubled. Here." A hand pressed against a Russian heart. "Deep."

"Hm," said the man from London: an emotionless comment. "The story I've heard is a little bit difficult to believe, you know."

"Believe or not." This was delivered with a shrug. "What does it matter to you, anyway? I'm telling you he catches food for us, even in the snow. The rabbits have no thought of getting away. He brings down caribou...the wild boar...the stag...everything that moves in that forest over the hill. So believe or not, what does it matter to you?"

"It matters. Or, that is to say, it *might* matter. I'd like to speak with him."

"He doesn't accept visitors."

"I'd like to find that out for myself."

The chief abruptly stood up and advanced on the man from London, who held his ground as if rooted to the boards. A bulbous nose pressed up close to an Adam's apple. "This is *my* village. You don't come in here and tell me, I tell *you*. Now...I don't know what he is, and I have never seen what some people *think* he is...but I am telling you, Mr. Englishman, that he belongs to *us* and he will not be leaving here with the likes of you."

"And I can't leave here without speaking to him." The voice was calm, collected, cool. But the icy blue daggers were very sharp. "I *won't* leave without speaking to him." He offered a boyish smile, his specialty. "Let's don't be unpleasant, when it's so terribly unnecessary. All right?"

"Show him," croaked the wizened old woman. "He talks a storm of manure."

"Well put, madam. I think this whole tale is a storm of manure." He daggered into the bull-man's eyes. "Show me."

On the way through the village toward the ruins on the hill, a group of people got around them and followed. It was evident where the Englishman was headed. Suddenly a girl of about sixteen with warm brown eyes and curly golden hair beneath her woolen cap plucked at the man from London's coat sleeve.

"Tell him Nena forgives him," she implored. "He won't speak to me anymore, but won't you tell him?"

"I will," the man from London promised. He saw that the girl's right hand was heavily bandaged.

The group of people fell back and stood watching. The bull-man took his charge up almost to the ruins and then he too stopped and held his position. The man from London continued on alone, climbing up snow-covered stone steps to the onion-domed shell of what remained.

He entered the cold shadows, and listened to the silence.

Stairs led down. He followed them. The light that lived in this stone chamber was blue, and he could smell woodsmoke. He went on, into deeper blue. His boots clattered on the floor. Noise enough to wake anything that could chase down a caribou. He paused for a moment, because suddenly he was not so calm, cool and collected. He could see a small fire burning

beyond an archway. Not much more than a bundle of sticks and brush, it appeared to be.

His heart was beating harder.

“Hello?” he tried. There was no answer. He decided to use his English. “Hello? Can I come in?”

Still, nothing. He could hear the fire pop and crack. He saw shadows scrawled upon the walls.

“Anyone here?” he asked, in the King’s tongue.

“*You* are here,” came the quiet reply, also in English, from beyond the archway. It carried a faint, menacing echo. “But you shouldn’t be. *I* wouldn’t be here, if I were you.”

The man from London cleared his throat. “Nena says she forgives you.”

There followed only the sound of the small fire burning.

“I’m from London,” said the man. “Originally, I mean. Today I came from Pruzhany. My name is William Bartlett.”

Again, there was no reply for a few seconds, and then the voice asked, “Is that your real name?”

It seemed the right time to be truthful. “No. My real name is Valentine Vivian.”

“Oh. Well, then...I understand the need for an alias.”

“Actually, my name helped toughen me. I had to be tough, with a name like that. I had to learn to be quick and sharp. To think fast on my feet.” He began to walk casually toward the archway. “You should see my father. His name is Mildred.”

“*Stop*,” said the voice, and Valentine Vivian immediately obeyed.

“I’d really like to see you,” Vivian offered. His throat was tight. “Won’t you let me come in?”

A few seconds passed, during which Vivian wondered if the young man—if the young man was really so *special*—could hear his heartbeat.

“Come in,” said the voice.

Vivian entered the chamber.

The fire was indeed small and made up of little broken branches. Several skeletons of rabbits lay about. There was a jug of something, probably water. The young man did his business over in a far corner, and the

smell wasn't very pleasant. Curled up in the opposite corner, close to the fire, was a bundle of dirty rags. Vivian saw a human shape in them. He saw dirty legs, dirty hands, a dirty mass of black hair and the smallest section of face with an eye peering out at him. The eye was bright and startlingly green. Its intensity made Valentine Vivian stop at the center of the room, because for all his experience and intelligence and bravado he was no damned fool.

"May I ask your name?" Vivian inquired, keeping his voice light.

"Mikhail."

"Family name?"

It was a long time coming. Then: "Gallatinov."

"How old are you?"

"How old are *you*?" came back at him.

"Old," said Vivian. He tried for a smile that refused to stick. "Actually, I'm *Major* Valentine Vivian."

"British Army?"

"In a manner of speaking. And may I ask how you speak English so well?"

"I had an excellent teacher," Mikhail replied.

"Yes, you did." Vivian knelt down on the floor. A small skull lay next to his right boot. A rat's skull, perhaps? The young man was not a picky eater. "You never told me your age."

"Old enough," the mouth behind the dirty rags said. And then decided to say, "Seventeen."

"And your birthday is when?"

There was a long pause of deliberation, or perhaps an attempt to jog a distant memory. "March. The seventh day."

"Well," said Vivian, "now we're getting somewhere."

The rags shifted and two green eyes stared at the major. "Are we? Getting where?"

Vivian eased himself down to a sitting position. He was always aware of where the pistol was and how fast he could get to it. "I understand," the major said carefully, "that you have a very unique..." What would be the correct word here? "Gift," he said.

“Gift,” Mikhail repeated, hollowly.

“I’m just saying what I’ve been told. The details are sketchy. But I understand you are a...um...dedicated hunter?”

“I’m dedicated to not starving. Or letting my friends starve.”

“Yes, quite so. And admirable, too. Oh...by the way, I know about the murder. That incident...was it last summer? Something to do with a wrestler in a circus?”

Silence from the bundle of rags.

“Could I ask...just a favor, you see. A small favor.” Vivian’s smile blinked on and off. “If you can. Really, *anything* you can. But...would you show me...*something*?”

“This,” said Mikhail, “is not the circus.”

“Of course not. No offense intended. But...really, I’ve been asked to come here and see you...*talk* to you...get a sense of *who* you are.” Or *what* you are, he nearly said.

“You were seen...last October...in...how shall I put this? Oh, dear. You were seen...supposedly...changing your *form*,” said Vivian. His smile this time was very tight. “The man who witnessed this does not drink. He is not given to visions of fantasy. He is what we call a *drone*. Drones do not embellish nor do they otherwise distort. They observe and they report. So...you see...we’re a bit curious about this.”

“We?” An eyebrow lifted. “We *who*?”

“Oh, pardon me for not giving a complete introduction. I’m a major in the British Army, yes, but I am a fulltime field operative for the British Secret Service. Special Operations Branch. Which brings me to why I’m here. You see...I’m *recruiting*.”

The body shifted a little under the rags, but there was no comment.

“Recruiting special branch operatives,” Vivian continued. “We were wondering...if you were so inclined, and you were to show an interest and be educated, then...ah, but first I have to be shown something.”

“Shown what?”

“Something amazing,” said Vivian. He waited. Nothing happened.

“I’m Russian,” Mikhail said, behind the rags. “Why would I want to leave Russia and go to England?”

Valentine Vivian drew his knees up to his chin. His eyes sparkled in the low firelight. “I can make you,” he said, “into a citizen of the world. You could walk as a man in any country on earth. Walk as a *gentleman*. You could walk with honor and grace. You would have a purpose, Mikhail...do you mind if I call you Mikhail?”

Did the rags shrug? Maybe.

“You would be trained and educated and fashioned into a...a very unique weapon, Mikhail. A very unique *tool*, if you will. You know there are great changes coming in this world, don’t you? Well, you would be there to see them happen, and you would be there to make a *difference* in their happening. To *prevent* them from happening, if that’s what was called for.

“Now...if you wish to stay in this little fire-lit hole in Russia,” Vivian went on, “that would be your future. Feeding these villagers...it’s very noble, but it’s not much of a future. I can tell you that if you show me something, and I am amazed by what I witness, and you leave with me today for Warsaw—and I can get us across the border tonight, no doubt—then I am authorized to pay these villagers of yours enough money to rebuild this church many times over and buy an armored car or two to protect it. Then your future would be out there, in the world.” Vivian let that hang for a few seconds. “I believe you’re a very intelligent and capable young man. Whether you’re what we’re looking for is yet to be seen. But I can tell you—and you already know—that if you stay in this country it will eat you alive. If you come to England with me, and you have the right ability, you will have the chance to become one of the greatest hunters who ever lived. Is that a challenge you have any interest in taking?”

Mikhail was silent and motionless.

There is nothing here, Vivian suddenly thought. There is only a young man in rags, curled up on the floor. But how could the drone have been so wrong?

“Shakespeare’s country,” Vivian heard Mikhail say quietly. “The blessed plot. Someone told me that. He was a great man. He was...” Something came up and choked him. “I feel...*alone*,” he said, but now his voice was

under firm control. “Did you know...that Nena used to come visit me... and bring me wild berries? Did you know that one day...she was feeding them to me...and I licked her fingers...and then...something came over me...a terrible thing...and I bit off the first joint of the little finger on her right hand?”

Mikhail lowered the rags enough for Vivian to see his full, gaunt and haunted face. The green eyes glowed like spirit lamps.

“And I crunched it between my teeth,” Mikhail breathed, “and I *swallowed* it.”

Neither man said anything for awhile. Then Valentine Vivian stood up from the floor, more carefully than he'd planned, and he said, “But she forgives you.”

“I don't forgive myself,” said the young man. “I hurt her. I will never forgive myself.”

“Then show me something,” Vivian told him, nearly begging. “*Show* me! If you show me, we can walk out of here together, and you can work to make sure many, many people in this world are *not* hurt, and that those who *are* hurt find justice. *Show me.*”

Moving slowly and deliberately, Mikhail pulled the rags over his face and he was gone from sight.

Vivian sighed. What a waste of time this had been! A certain journalist was going to get his ass scorched over a bed of charcoals. Damn, and now back to the jingle bells!

He needed to get out of this stinking hole. Out of this ruin. Out of this village. Out of this country.

At the archway, Vivian looked back at the motionless bundle.

He said, “Goodbye...” And decided to use the English name: “Michael.”

He walked out through the blue light and ascended the stairs, and halfway up he heard the engines.

He could see them coming across the snowscape. He knew who they were coming for.

There were three of them. Three white-painted aerosans with red stars on the sides. They were wooden, box-shaped contraptions meant to carry three or four men in each enclosed cockpit. They travelled on four large,

pontoon-like skis. On the rear of the vehicles were aircraft engines and a single pusher propeller shoving the aerosans forward at about seventy kilometers an hour. Behind them spun banners of snow. Atop each aerosan a soldier sat in a hatch manning a bolted-down machine gun on a swivel. The vehicles were almost to the village, and already the sleigh horses were panicked and running and all the driver could do was hang on. The aerosans came on with a noise like hornets from Hell.

Oh my God, Vivian thought. Obviously all the loose ends had not been tied up after all. But still...he might be able to talk his way out of this. His charm knew no limits. He straightened his overcoat and walked down through the village to meet the aerosans as if taking a Sunday stroll in Piccadilly. But as the machines slid to a halt, the engines wound down and the exit doors were unbolted from within, Vivian suddenly found himself looking at the barrel of a Nagant revolver aimed at his stomach.

“Valentine, my good friend!” said Varga Raznakov. He was wearing a black overcoat and a gray fur cap. He smiled, but it was an ugly smile. He had a long horse-like face with a thin nose and a small trim mustache that almost looked pencilled on. “What ever are you doing in this little piece of shit?” He fired a quick dark and mocking glance at the bull-man, who stood among a knot of other villagers. “Huh?” he asked Vivian, and he walked up to the major and pressed the barrel of his gun against the man’s throat. “Talk to me!”

At the same time, two soldiers from one of the aerosans began to frisk the major.

They found the single-shot pistol and removed it, giving it to Raznakov.

“This is a beautiful thing!” Raznakov said. His left eye had begun to twitch just a fraction, a sign of his agitation. A dangerous sign, Vivian thought. He had known this old and respected enemy long enough to recognize the sign of impending murder. “Is this what you used at the Hotel Fortitude? Really, Valentine! Are you slipping? Drinking too much? Pursuing too much of the lady’s kitty? Did you not know you were being followed all the time you were in Minsk? Did you think I’d not know you were there? Not that we care about the wretch you killed—he was worthless—but if it meant getting *you*, my fine English asshole, then *that* is

a golden trophy!" He pushed the revolver's barrel hard enough into Vivian's left cheek to leave a ring. "Okay, then! Let's go!"

"I think I'd rather stay here, if you don't mind," said Vivian. "I don't think you'll kill me in front of all these—"

Varga Raznakov turned smoothly and fired a bullet into the bull-man's bald skull. The village chief toppled into the red-spattered snow. The wizened old woman screamed and fell to her knees at the man's side.

"Witnesses?" Raznakov asked. "You know I won't kill you here, Valentine. We have much to talk about first. But all these peasants in this little shit of a town...who are they to me? Now come along like a good boy, or I'll have to waste another bullet on a feeble brain."

When Vivian hesitated, Raznakov turned his pistol on the young blonde girl with the bandaged hand. She shrank back and her mother shrieked, but a soldier stepped forward to grasp the girl's shoulders.

"Don't," the major said. He held his hands palm out. "I'll come with you."

"Yes, you will!" Raznakov agreed, and motioned toward the aerosans with his gun.

The soldiers returned to their vehicles. The machine guns were manned and the safeties clicked off. The drivers took their places. Raznakov sat behind Vivian with the gun ready. The engines were started with a burst of noise and black smoke, the propellers began to turn faster and faster and then one by one the aerosans shot forward, gaining speed as they were guided again on their pontoon skis to the east.

The noise was terrific. Wind whipped through the compartments from the open hatches. Vivian tried to close his eyes and think, but he knew he was done for. No way to even get a message out. Back in London they wouldn't know how he died. *Missing In Action* would be on his dossier. But maybe they wouldn't kill him. After he was beaten for the information they wanted, maybe he would go to a jail cell. Oh, a filthy vermin-infested Russian jail cell would be a fine end to a man like himself! He thought he would prefer to be—

The soldier up in the hatch began firing his machine gun, two short bursts.

"What the hell are you shooting at?" Raznakov shouted.

The soldier looked down. He had a fleshy, thick-cheeked face and cruel blue eyes.

“There’s a black wolf coming up fast on the right side!” he shouted back.

Valentine Vivian sat up straighter. He leaned over toward a viewslit, and there he saw the beast approaching.

It was not a large animal. It was a little on the thin side, a little shaggy, but the damned thing could *move*.

The soldier began firing again. Vivian saw the wolf veer to one side and leap across the snow as bullets marched along its previous path. Then it righted itself and came on faster, and now Vivian could see that it had luminous green eyes.

He couldn’t help himself.

He shouted it: “*Oh, Jesus!*”

The gunner in one of the other aerosans started firing. It was all great sport. Bullets zigzagged along the snow, but the wolf had already zagzigged. The third aerosan’s machine gunner began shooting, squeezing off long and deadly bursts. Vivian saw snow spray fly into the wolf’s face. God, that had been close! The animal put its head down, veered away, and headed straight for the aerosan that carried the eager gunner. Then...the amazing thing happened.

As Vivian watched, his heart hammering, the black wolf streaked across the snow on a diagonal to intersect the third aerosan. It bounded toward one of the pontoon skis, and when it clambered against the vehicle’s wooden side and gripped hold of a viewslit it had fingers instead of claws.

Within seconds, the black animal shape had become the white naked body of a seventeen-year-old boy. “Oh my Christ! My Christ!” the gunner in Vivian’s aerosan shouted raggedly, proving that a Communist who saw a lycanthrope—because that *was* the proper word—immediately regained his castaway religion.

The first aerosan, in the lead, turned to the right and made a wild circle. Vivian reasoned they too, had seen this awesome miracle. But Mikhail Gallatinov was now climbing up the side of the third aerosan, and when he got up on the top at the gunner’s hatch he hit the astounded

and dumb-struck soldier in the face so hard the teeth flew out like river pebbles. The soldier slid back in, and then as the aerosan careened across the snow Vivian's jaw dropped again as the white body rippled with bands of black hair, the spine contorted, the skull changed, a tail burst free and twitched like a rudder and the wolf leaped down into the passenger and driver's compartment.

Within seconds, the exit door crashed open and three men came flying out. The aerosan turned to the left and headed to intersect the vehicle carrying Vivian and Raznakov. The major realized Gallatinov must be manning the wheel, and the lycanthrope's intent was to ram.

"Shoot it!" Raznakov screamed. "Shoot the thing!"

The machine gunner started firing. Bullets slashed across the snow and holes pocked the aerosan's side. It was then that Vivian decided he could sit still no longer; he twisted around in the narrow compartment, grabbed Raznakov's gun wrist and jabbed for the man's eyes with the outstretched fingers of his other hand. Blinded, Raznakov got off a shot that scorched past Vivian's side and put a hole through the aerosan's roof. Then Vivian headbutted the bastard, and though it was neither cricket nor gentlemanly the move was successful because Raznakov's thin nose exploded and suddenly Major Vivian had the pistol.

The first aerosan's gunner got off burst after burst at the vehicle Mikhail was piloting. Splinters flew into the air. The bullets hissed past Mikhail's face, his shoulders and chest as he twisted the wheel back and forth. Then, at the same time as Vivian put the pistol against the chest of Varga Raznakov and shot him somewhere north of the heart, Mikhail left his wheel, climbed through the hatch and swivelled the machine gun to take aim at the aerosan that roared down his throat. He fired two bursts not at the gunner but at the front of the vehicle where the driver sat, and then he jumped.

And as he jumped, he once again summoned the pain and the power.

The two aerosans, both runaways, slammed together. Wood crashed and crumpled. One of the huge propellers flew, still spinning, into the air. Gasoline and oil ignited on a spark. First one aerosan exploded and then the second blew, and the one with the remaining prop began to spin around

and around in a mad circle throwing flaming fluids in all directions. Burning men rolled frantically in the snow.

The black wolf took quick note of the carnage and then sped toward the last aerosan.

Within it, Major Valentine Vivian had taken charge. He saw the gunner squaring aim at the wolf that bounded ever closer, and with no hesitation he fired into the man's groin. That caused all machine gunning to cease. The gunner crawled out, leaving a bloody trail, and flung himself off the top of the aerosan into the snow where he thrashed in agony. The wolf passed him, close enough to touch, and then went on.

Then there was only the driver.

Vivian pressed the pistol against the man's head and shouted, "Stop this damned thing!"

The driver, a sensible and long-suffering soldier with a wife and six children, decided he did wish to live. He cut the engine and guided the aerosan to a halt.

A moment or so later, a naked young man walked up alongside the vehicle and peered through a viewslit. Mikhail Gallatinov wasn't even breathing hard.

Vivian couldn't speak for awhile. But someone *had* to speak, eventually. "You!" he told the driver. "Get out and take off your clothes!" Then, to Mikhail: "For God's sake, cover yourself! We don't do things like this in London!" Vivian dragged Raznakov's body out to lighten the load. When Mikhail was dressed in the uniform, which was far too big for him but would have to do, he entered the aerosan through the door and took a seat. The naked driver, induced by pistol, started the aircraft engine again. The prop began to spin faster and faster.

"Are you all right?" Vivian asked the young man, as the aerosan turned toward the west and gained speed.

Mikhail nodded, but his eyes were hollow and his face grim.

"Listen to me," Vivian said. What he wanted to say tangled up in his mind and in his mouth, and he had to wait for his English composure to return to him as best it could. "You are a *miracle*." His voice cracked. "Do you understand that? You are...very, very fortunate."

■ Robert McCammon

“Am I?” Mikhail asked. “I hope you’re correct. But I suppose we’ll find out, won’t we?”

Vivian couldn’t help it. He put his hand on the young man’s shoulder and gave him a fatherly pat. Or maybe it was a pat one might give an exceptional animal.

A stop must be made first, to arrange the delivery of gold coins to a village in Russia where the ruins of a church sat atop a hill. After that, the aerosan would be crossing the border into Poland. Once there, the driver would be thrown out, naked and wiser to the ways of things he could never understand and that no amount of babbling could ever explain.

Then the two men would be going home, to the land of Shakespeare. To the land of the blessed plot.

To the land where stands the city of London.

SEA
CHASE



ONE

At Work By Midnight

HE WAS A gentleman in search of a good piece of meat.

He was out for enjoyment this evening, strolling casually through the charming streets of Danzig, a busy harbor city on the coast of the Baltic Sea. It had once been known as Gdansk and was originally part of Poland, had a complicated political history between the rulership of Poland and Germany and was now, in this month of April in the year 1938, known as a “free city” with its own national anthem, constitution, government and even its own stamps and currency apart from the Polish standard. The population was ninety-eight percent German, and this was also reflected in its language.

As he walked along what was locally known as the Royal Road—so named because it was the procession path of visiting kings—he passed sights like Neptune’s Fountain at the center of the Long Market and the Golden Gate with its statues symbolizing Peace, Freedom, Wealth and Fame.

He enjoyed peace, he relished freedom, he didn’t really need wealth nor did he desire fame. But tonight he had to find the perfect chateaubriand.

The clerk at the very expensive Hotel Goldene Eiche had given him the name of the Restaurant Maximillian. Too far to walk? Not at all. Three miles was a nice stroll and the evening was cool, the city was lighting itself up for the night and there was a certain *excitation de la vie* in the air. So he'd set out, dressed in a dark blue Saville Row suit with a crisp white shirt and a plain-spoken black tie, neither walking too slowly nor striding too fast, for he always took pleasure in every moment.

He was twenty-eight years old and as fit, probably, as he would ever be. He was a large man, standing six-feet-two with a broad chest, narrow hips and long, lean legs. He had the look and smooth motion of a track-and-field athlete. He wore his thick black hair closely-trimmed, and from his darkly-handsome and rugged face his intense green eyes inspected the street-scenes he passed with genuine interest, consideration for the cast of characters involved, and not a little flash of humor at the chaos of what was called 'civilization'.

His eyes also did not fail to note the bright red posters on some of the street corners proclaiming the future of the Nazi Party as the future of Germany.

But this was an evening for a good steak, a glass of wine and possibly some music later on. He did have a schedule, though. He had to be at work by midnight.

In the oak-walled quiet of the Restaurant Maximillian, he spoke German in ordering his chateaubriand rare and was informed by the waiter that it served two persons. The diner's response was that he wouldn't be eating quality steak for awhile, so please bring it on along with a bottle of Cabernet, waiter's choice.

Sehr gut, sir.

The coat-check girl, a very willowy redhead with bee-stung lips, wandered over as he was drinking his initial glass of wine and engaged him in light conversation about was this his first time at the restaurant, where was he from, and so forth. It got to the point where she said she was free this evening after ten o'clock, and if he wished to come back for her she could show him a hot music club that would make him, as she put it, "itchy".

He smiled and said thank you, but he had to be at work by midnight. What kind of work? she asked, a little dark of disappointment in her eyes.

He told her he was in the nautical trade, and then he wished her a pleasant evening and she went away.

After a leisurely dinner, he continued his stroll. Around the corner he discovered a tavern of orange-painted bricks that had been in operation, more or less, since 1788. In the dark-timbered, slightly-musty but quite pleasant confines he ordered from the barmaid a Tyskie pale lager. She was a personable and angelic-looking young woman with curly blond hair and eyes nearly the color of the lager. Her globes were absolutely huge north of her equator, and she didn't mind making sure he got many good looks at the way they threatened to burst from her ribboned bodice. Then she leaned in close, smelling of peppermint and peaches, and confided in him that she thought all men were babies at heart, and that what all men truly—*truly*—desired was a nice pacifier to put into their mouths and suck on to their heart's content. And what did he think about that? she asked with her red lips twisted to one side.

He said he didn't really have an opinion on that subject, because he had to be at work by midnight.

What was his job? she asked, as she toyed with one of her ribbons.

The nautical trade, he told her, and then he finished his Tyskie and left.

The night was moving on. So was he. Two streets over, he entered a dimly-lit but well-attended music club and sat at a table to listen to a trio playing piano, muted trumpet and drums. He ordered a glass of ginger ale. He took the music in while staring at the twinkling multicolored lights that clung to the ceiling. After the third song he noted a man in a gray suit get up from a nearby table he shared with a woman and head toward an alcove on the far side of the bandstand. When the man had gone from the room, the woman got up from her seat and came directly and purposefully to his own table.

She was sleek and black-haired and wore a black dress that she'd been poured into. She wore a fashionable hat with a little fluff of lace descending over her forehead and left eye. She stared at him with her sea-green eyes as if she'd been searching for a good piece of meat, and here it was.

She asked him if he would be gentleman enough to save her from a very poor specimen of mankind, and while her escort was gone to the

restroom she would be pleased and happy to leave this club and show him another place where one might get to know one much better than here.

He gave her a faint smile, sipped at his ginger ale, and told her he was flattered she'd chosen him as her potential savior, but he had to be at work by midnight and in fact he would be leaving in a few minutes. Also, he said, he wanted her to know her escort must have either come upon an occupied bathroom or suffered a false alarm because the man was even now returning to their table.

Therefore he did not get to tell her he was in the nautical trade.

He checked his wristwatch. It was time. He paid for his drink, left the club and began walking back to the Hotel Goldene Eiche. Again, his pace was neither hurried nor languid. In his room at the hotel, he thought of taking a shower and shaving but decided against both. Then he removed his necktie, his Saville Row suit and white shirt and took from the closet a stained and dirty brown canvas duffel bag. From the contents of the duffel bag he put on faded gray underwear and white worksocks. He put on a red plaid shirt with patches at both elbows. He put on a pair of baggy brown trousers that made a mockery of his fitness and was furthermore stained with the shadows of old grease. He laced up cracked and battered workboots. He pulled a brown woolen cap down on his head, and then shrugged into a canvas jacket that was missing three buttons and bore enough stitches to make Frankenstein jealous. His fine English wallet was replaced with a Polish travesty of cardboard and rubber bands. His equally fine Rolex wristwatch, last year's model, went away in favor of a tarnished pocketwatch that was possibly new when the British charged from their trenches at the first battle of the Marne. His shaving razor was flecked with rust, his boar bristle toothbrush worn to a nub, his personal bar of soap made from pig's fat. And smelled it.

He was nearly ready to go.

He left his suit and other belongings on the bed. Everything would be collected later, by someone else. There was no need to study himself in the mirror; he appeared no longer to be a gentleman, but was a scruffy-looking roughneck. Just as planned.

He tied up his duffel bag with his other sour-smelling work clothes in it and left the room. Crossing the Goldene Eiche's famous lobby with

its indoor oak tree and cream-colored sofas that had never hosted an uncreased trouser was interesting, because suddenly he no longer belonged in this rare air. A squat man wearing a bowtie—a house detective?—began striding after him, calling for him to please stop.

He didn't.

Outside on the street, he asked the doorman to hail a cab for the harbor. He received a haughty glare until the Danzig currency in his fist spoke. Then there was the skittish cab driver to deal with, and again money changed owners. The cab pulled away, with the roughneck and his duffel bag on the back seat.

An instruction was given to stop well before the harbor entrance was reached. That instruction was explicitly followed. The roughneck swung his duffel bag over his shoulder and walked toward the harbor with the smell of Baltic salt, oil, dead fish and the metallic friction of cables and machinery in his nostrils.

Beyond the gate, worklights glowed aboard the dark shapes of moored freighters.

Figures moved about, walking through the beams of illumination. Hammers swung and sparks jumped. A crane engine growled, pulling up crates in a netting. Orders were shouted and re-shouted. Someone flicked a burning cigarette butt into the water like a shooting star. Ropes creaked as the sea moved beneath rust-streaked hulls, and trucks barked black fumes as they hauled flat trailers piled with more crates and stacks of burlap bags.

He stopped at the security hut to sign the detail sheet that was offered to him.

With the bleeding fountain pen he wrote *Michael Gallatin, Ordinary Seaman*.

Then he swung the duffel bag up over his shoulder again and he walked on in his battered boots toward Slip Number Four and the Norwegian diesel ship *Sofia*.

TWO

Sailor's Hands

WHEN THE LAST cargo of farm fertilizer in three hundred black oil drums and sixty crates of ball bearings had been loaded in the *Sofia's* hold, red dawn was beginning to break. The huge double diesel engines throbbed and knocked, making the old ship vibrate like a tuning-fork and moan like a busted fiddle. Orders were shouted along the deck. Lines were cast off. Brown water stirred up from the muddy bottom by the twin props boiled at the stern. The ship, born in 1921, gave a small lurch as it left the pierside like an elderly dame startled from her nap. The one-hundred-and-fourteen-meter length of *Sofia* swayed back and forth as she searched for her balance. Her central wheelhouse sat atop an ugly stack of port-holed steel. Two masts spider-webbed with cables and nettings stood fore and aft. Ventilation funnels had been riveted to the deck in no apparent rhyme nor reason; it was the triumph of some Nordic ship designer's descent into a bottle of aquavit. Everything topside was painted a vaguely-spoiled yellow, mottled with patches of orange rust. The hull was smoke-gray, except for more rust streaks that streamed down from the anchors at the pier-dented

bow and clung just above the waterline like a strange species of ivy. The *Sofia*, an undignified and much-abused mistress of the sea, was rocked by the most innocent of waves and caused to cry out at her joints and rivets and bulkheads and deckboards as if she dreaded any touch of the man she had once loved.

The ship left the harbor in quiet shame.

In the mess hall belowdeck, Michael Gallatin was looking askance at a plate of fried potatoes swimming in oil. His scrambled eggs, likewise, were about to slide off the plate in a greasy foam and what passed for bacon appeared to be made from fat and brown rubber.

Thank God, he thought, for the memory of the chateaubriand.

At least the ship's coffee was palatable. Not necessarily good, but strong enough to make the teeth ache and the gut clench. Colonel Vivian had warned him that the food might not be up to the standards of a sidewalk kidney pie in Soho, but it was for the best during the first few days of the voyage until Michael got his sea-legs and sea-stomach. Those tramp freighters roll like a whore with bedbugs, Vivian had told him in undelicate terms. Best to do your puking from an empty bag.

But breakfast was served, and Michael was hungry. He had to eat. The mess hall, even just past dawn, was full of cigarette smoke and men with cigarettes clenched between their teeth. Michael figured almost all of the forty-two crew were here, except for the first and second mates and a few other specialists on engine duty. The clatter and scrape of eating utensils on plates was a diabolic symphony. But the work had been hard and constant since midnight, and now that *Sofia* was underway—at about five knots per hour, it felt to him—and breakfast was piled up on the gray tables, the mood among the rough-hewn, rough-fleshed and rough-eyed men was definitely lighter.

He hadn't really met anyone yet. He'd been assigned to a loading detail, but everyone was a stranger. He was sitting at a table with a wiry, wrinkled man of about fifty who could eat around his cigarette by shifting the stick from side to side in his mouth. The second occupant of his table was a stout fellow with sandy-brown hair who wore a sweat-stained blue work-shirt and giggled to himself at every opportunity, and the third was a lean

black man around thirty or so who had a shaved head and was missing the right half of his nose. It had been carved away to the rippled pink flesh. A very sharp razor at work, Michael thought as he tried one of the bacon strips. The black man wore a necklace of cowrie shells, another necklace of ebony beads and a third with some kind of hexagonal blue stone hanging from it. He had deeply-sunken eyes that looked at no one directly but seemed to be seeing a lot.

“Ah, *ya!*” boomed a voice behind Michael. “Here’s da sumabitch I wanna find!”

Michael turned around in his chair. Over him stood the monstrous, huge-shouldered, lantern-jawed man he’d heard called ‘Olaf’. They’d been on the same loading detail. Michael had already apologized for some infraction that had involved the passing back and forth of heavy crates, though he wasn’t sure exactly what he’d done to make Olaf holler a curse and spit on the deck. Michael had been briefed and trained on all this, but the briefing book and the landlubber’s lessons went out the window when the hard, fast work began.

“I’m talkin’ to *you!*” Olaf said, as if Michael didn’t already know. The mess hall went silent. “You gonna sit there or I’m gonna pull you up?”

The man’s protruding brow was dappled with red. His dark brown eyes were also red-rimmed and as fiercely hot as volcanic stones. He had a dirty matting of brown hair with an untameable cowlick sticking up in back. He stood with his meathooks on his wide hips awaiting Michael’s decision.

Michael was tempted to return to his breakfast, but he reasoned he should stand.

“Now you *listen!*” A finger with a filthy nail jabbed his chest. “You don’t get in Olaf’s way! You don’t *push* Olaf! Eh? You don’t make Olaf look *slow* in front of nobody! Eh?”

“I already said I was—”

“You *shuddup!*” Olaf growled, with another painful finger jab. He looked Michael over from boots to cap. “You ain’t no *sailor!*” Michael said nothing. This was getting serious; who would have thought the dummy could see through him so easily?

“No sailor!” Olaf repeated. “I seen how you don’t know what you’re doin’! And them hands! They ain’t no sailor’s hands! *These*,” he said, thrusting his work-scarred and rope-burned palms into Michael’s face, “are sailor’s hands! So you gonna be tellin’ me, what *real* sailor you put out of a job by signin’ on here! Eh? What friend a’mine you put out on da pier, him with maybe a wife and three, four kids?” He gave a scowl that caused even the black man with the shaved-off nose to wince. “You ain’t no *good*! I take a breath a’ you, and you *stink*!”

Michael had no reply for this. He’d already gone one sorry too many.

Olaf smacked his left palm with his right fist. His mouth wore a wild grin. “Ah, I’m gonna *teach* you! Olaf’s gonna drop you, pretty fella. Olaf’s gonna fix that nose and close up them eyes. Olaf’s gonna stretch that neck and give you a new set a’ teeth! Olaf’s gonna—”

But what Olaf was going to do was interrupted by Michael hitting him in the jaw with his right fist as hard as he could let one fly.

Olaf went back on his heels and crashed over the next table and fell over two men who tried to get away but were caught under the toppling bulk. Then Olaf slid down their backs and fell to the sickly-green floor tiles, where he lay with blood on his mouth, his eyes twitching in their sockets and his fist still balled up but unthrown. He made a bubbling noise over his bitten lower lip, gave a thunderous fart from his massive ass, and then went to sleep like mother’s best baby.

Michael sat down to finish his breakfast. He’d nearly broken his knuckles on that slab of a jaw, but at least he was on his way to having sailor’s hands.

Somebody laughed and somebody hollered. Somebody gave a whistle of respect and somebody shouted out in a singsong language Michael had never heard before. Then the clatter of utensils on plates continued, cigarette smoke puffed into the air, and the black-bearded second mate burst into the mess hall with one of the cooks and wanted to know who the fuck was fighting in here.

No one said anything. The second mate, a Spaniard named Medina, stood staring down at the sleeping Olaf. He repeated: who the fuck was fighting in here?

“Hey, mon!” said the black man with the carved nose. He grinned wickedly, showing white teeth sharpened by chewing Jamaican sugarcane. “That big fool, he fall down and bust hisself open! Doan be no fightin’ goin’ on!”

Medina looked around the room for a second opinion, but suddenly everyone was very much enjoying their oily potatoes, greasy eggs and rubbery bacon. He reached out, grabbed a mug of coffee from another table and threw the liquid into Olaf’s face. The sleeping giant began to come around with a hitch and sputter. “You! And you! Get him into a shower! And don’t waste the water!” The two men Medina had pointed out, the very same two who’d nearly had their spines rearranged, grumbled around their cigarettes but they dragged Olaf out of the mess hall through the swinging door. Medina backed away as if retreating from a roomful of wild animals. “Nobody better fight!” he warned, just before he got out.

The ritual of face-feeding continued. Soon some of the crew would hit their bunks while the others had work detail. Michael was scheduled for six hours of sacktime. He looked across the table at the black man. “Thanks. I’m Michael Gallatin.” He offered his hand.

“Didn’t ask,” the man said. He stared coldly at the hand. “Doan *want*.”

He scraped his chair back, stood up and sauntered out of the mess hall with as near a rooster’s strut as Michael had ever seen.

Michael finished his coffee. Across the table, the grinning idiot giggled into empty space.

A navigator’s degree at a time, the *Sofia* was turning across the sunlit waves toward the Denmark passage to the North Sea.

THREE

The Best Man

ON THE THIRD morning at sea, as *Sofia's* bow pushed through blue waves under the glare of the Baltic sun and gulls swooped the length of the ship, Michael got a look at the girl.

As his rank of Ordinary Seaman dictated, his was the most mundane and mind-numbing of jobs. His work had much to do with scrubbing away rust and refinishing the affected areas with sealant, primer and paint; there was a lot of rust, and there was a lot of paint. His work also involved a mop, a bucket, and a deck that seemed to go on forever. Therefore as he labored at these concerns he let himself mentally drift, yet not so much as to lose the necessary rhythm that got the job done.

His count of the crew's nationalities: fifteen Norwegians, nine Swedes, five Poles, three Spaniards, three French, two Dutch, one Brit besides himself, one Russian, one African and one Jamaican. He'd known this before setting foot aboard *Sofia* the first night. He also had known their names and what histories could be discovered about them, no simple feat even for the British Secret Service.

■ Robert McCammon

The Jamaican's name was Dylan Custis. Had been arrested in Kingston for having three wives at the same time. Later the authorities had found out about the counterfeit money he was creating in his cousin's basement. Custis evidently had an artistic talent suitable to mimic a very reasonable five-pound banknote.

Olaf Thorgrimsen, from Trondheim, had been at sea since he was a thirteen-year-old engine boy on a steam freighter that probably made *Sofia* appear a beauty queen. His only brushes with the law had been several public brawls. Since the incident in the mess hall, Olaf had been in an infirmary bed and the scuttlebutt was that he was feigning double vision.

The other Brit was an eighteen-year-old Ordinary Seaman named Billy Bowers.

Michael had seen him at work and bunked near him, but the young man was quiet and kept to himself. Bowers had no criminal history, the only exceptional fact being that the young man had at fifteen evidently left his home in Colchester after the death of his mother.

Michael knew that the first mate was a twenty-six-year-old African named Enam Kpanga. No criminal record, but a sterling educational history and graduation with degrees in business and maritime law at the University of London.

The *Sofia's* captain was an interesting case. A Frenchman named Gustave Beauchene, fifty-one years old, from Paris. Beauchene had gone to sea in his late twenties, for a French freighter line, and had drifted from company to company until at last he made captain for the Norwegian Blue Star line at age forty-nine. There was intimation in the report of a fondness for strong drink and a reputation for outbursts of vitriolic anger. Michael had not yet laid eyes on Captain Beauchene, nor had the good captain deigned to speak or otherwise meet with any member of the new sign-ons.

Michael had not wanted this assignment, and had tried to dodge it with as much fervor as he could summon. He didn't care to be cooped up on a ship for so long, he'd told Colonel Vivian. It was against his nature. It did not require his specific talents, anyway. And besides, shouldn't it be better handled by someone with actual nautical experience?

We send the best man we have at the moment, the colonel had told him in that infuriatingly calm, cool and collected way Vivian possessed. You've been trained to do what is needed. When it is needed. You are needed now. Please take those reports with you. I am to remind you that your briefing and training session begins promptly at eight o'clock in the morning aboard the freighter John Willis Scott, moored at drydock at Battersea.

You've got to be joking, Michael had said. You've secured a freighter for me?

I used to joke, Vivian had answered, already turning his attention to another document on his desk. But that was when I was a major and a hale and hearty boy.

Now, I fear, I'm all grown up. Good day, Michael, and good hunting.

And Michael Gallatin had answered, Let's hope there's no need for any hunting on this one.

Quite, said the colonel with one of his quick, tight smiles. He rarely showed his teeth anymore. Do enjoy your night in Danzig, the Hotel Goldene Eiche is very charming.

Michael's paint brush moved back and forth, masking with dull yellow an area that had been scraped of rust and reprimed. But he knew, as everyone did, that rust was an enemy that never slept.

He was on his knees on the starboard deck, working on one of the series of ventilation funnels, when he noted the girl come through a doorway at the base of the amidship superstructure. He knew exactly who she was, though she was dressed against both the chill in the air and any eye that might turn in her direction. She was wearing a shapeless gray overcoat, buttoned to the throat, the collar turned up as well. She was wearing large circular-lensed sunglasses and a dark brown silk scarf over her hair and tied under her chin, rendering herself nearly faceless. Michael could tell her body was slim and she was young, but then again he already knew that Marielle Wesshauser had turned sixteen in the second week of March. He heard the hard clump of her left shoe against the deckboards, and quickly he glanced there though he already knew about her left leg being three inches shorter than the right. The clunky black left shoe, as ugly as the right one since orthopedic shoes are rarely lovely, had a built-up sole to compensate for the problem of balance. Did she catch the movement of

his head and did her own eyes behind the sunglasses very quickly mark his notice? Possibly. But she walked away from him with her face downcast, the air slightly ruffling the mouse-colored scarf and the thick-soled shoe beating a halting rhythm on the deck.

She disappeared aft, possibly intending to make as many circuits of the ship as she could before either the impoverished strength of her leg gave out or the hammerblow noise of her condition beat down her willpower.

Michael saw a shadow fall over him.

He realized he should have smelled the medicinal odor of the infirmary in the air a few seconds before he did. He twisted around and there indeed stood Olaf Thorgrimsen, cleaner now than before, his hair combed back and damp from a fresh shower. The cowlick would not be controlled.

“There *you*,” said Olaf.

“Yes,” Michael answered, still on his knees. “Here I am.”

They stared at each other for a few seconds, neither one moving on their own but the ship moving them with its slow roll against the sea.

Olaf reached into a pocket of his trousers and retrieved something wrapped in a piece of old Norwegian newspaper.

“Give you *this*,” Olaf grunted, and he held it out.

Michael put aside the paintbrush and took it. When he opened the piece of newsprint, he saw it contained an oatmeal-and-raisin cookie still warm from a platter in the mess hall. Like rust, the cooks never slept. “Thank you,” Michael said.

“No sailor,” Olaf told him. “*Yet*. But maybe you fighter. Eh?”

Michael didn’t know how he should respond. He simply nodded.

“Olaf likes fighter,” said Olaf. Then he turned away. His thick bulk shambled away from the hard sunlight into the shadow beneath a blue awning roped against the superstructure. Michael heard a door open and close.

He returned to his painting, ate the cookie, and in a few minutes heard the sound of Marielle Wesshauser coming back. Her pace had slowed. It appeared the left shoe was heavier than before, and it dragged at her leg like an anchor. She made her way around a lifeboat, negotiated passage between two ventilation funnels, may or may not have glanced quickly at him as she clumped past, avoided the gaze of a couple more ordinary

seamen doing the same work as Michael, and then she went through the exact door by which she'd left the interior of the ship. She was going back to her cabin, the one she shared with her twelve-year-old brother Emil. Her father and mother were in the cabin across the hallway. There were two more passenger cabins on the hall. Michael knew that a V. Vivian had paid for them, but V. Vivian had not shown up for the voyage and so those cabins remained empty. Michael knew that Paul and Annaleisa Wesshauser had made arrangements for their food to be delivered to their cabins. Their names on the *Sofia's* passenger list, a very short document, were Klaus and Lili Hendriks.

Michael finished his job. But there was always another one to do, and the advice he'd been given by the ex-master of the freighter *John Willis Scott* was to always find it and apply himself before he could be spotted dawdling and be assigned to something far worse. Therefore he went directly to another funnel and started the process of scraping away streamers of orange rust.

He knew his real job aboard this freighter. It was to carefully watch the crew, to listen to their conversations and gauge their movements, to fit in if at all possible, but to be very vigilant. To be as observant as a wolf on the hunt, so to speak. Much depended on it. Maybe many thousands of lives, as well.

Certainly four lives.

He thought he had things well under control so far. It would be a long voyage. They'd travelled about four hundred nautical miles already, but there were eight hundred and sixty-odd more yet to go. From Danzig to Dover, it was a journey of roughly ten to twelve days to two weeks, depending on the weather.

Michael suddenly had the desire to stand up from his kneeling position and gaze back across the sea they'd just crossed. It was untroubled but for the white foam of the freighter's wake.

He recalled Colonel Vivian telling him that sometimes loose ends could come flying apart with remarkable and dangerous consequences. He recalled the colonel telling him to always be prepared for the unexpected.

Good advice, he thought.

■ Robert McCammon

“Hey, you! Get to work there!” It was the Spanish second mate, throwing his weight around. His voice was loud enough so that everyone could hear how a real man gave orders. Without comment or a change of expression, the lycanthrope from Russia knelt down and continued his labor.

FOUR

Vulcan At His Forge

SOPIA ENTERED THE North Sea on the fifth night, having stopped at Copenhagen to take on another load of machine parts in crates and a couple of hundred hardwood logs.

Michael lay on his bunk in the semi-dark of the crew's sleeping quarters and thought this must be a little preview of Hell. The smells of men who worked so hard for a living could never be completely eradicated by the paltry streams of water from the reluctant showerheads. A toilet had backed up and added its odiferous fumes. The pungent, nose-wrinkling stinks of oil and diesel fuel were always floating about; Michael imagined he could see them, like currents of green and yellow smoke moving in the sodden air. If some of these men snored like this at home, they would be smothered in their uneasy sleep by half-deaf wives. And there was also the problem, to him, of the *closeness* of people. He was unable to find a private space, unable to breathe a private breath. He longed for a run through the woods. He longed to be away from the odors of cigarette smoke and human foulness. But here he was and here he had to stay until this voyage was

done. He cursed Colonel Valentine Vivian, and he lay on his back feeling the ship roll against the rougher North Sea waves and hearing her groan deep in her guts where the engines knocked and clattered every second of every day.

Everyone was growing a beard by now. Shaving was too much trouble. It seemed almost too much trouble to change clothes. Michael put an arm up over his eyes to block out the dirty lightbulb that always burned at the entrance to the showers and head. Occasionally someone belched, struggled up and went off to relieve themselves. He couldn't help but hear their further struggles and blasts of escaping gas, thanks to the fried and oily food. The cooks knew a dozen ways to prepare kippers, but none of them worth eating. Michael wondered if the *Sofia's* passengers had gone on a starvation diet, but then again they were probably getting better food for their money.

He thought that he could so easily let the wolf out in this miserable chamber, and it *wanted* to get out. It always wanted to get out. The change was not so much a matter of willing it to happen, but letting it happen. Opening the soul cage, is what he considered it.

A little less vigilance, and it would be there. Sometimes at night, when he *could* sleep, he awakened with a start to feel the wolf coming out. Just sliding out of him, first the rippling bands of hair and then the searing pain of bones reforming. The smell of his own animal in his nostrils. His mouth in agony, his gums starting to be ripped apart, the taste of blood from new fangs. He always slammed the soul cage and locked it before he went too far...but the wolf was always there, and it always yearned to break free.

Life aboard a freighter was not suitable for lycanthropes.

He had enough of the noise and the smells. He had to get out and find some fresh air and a quiet place. He eased out of the bunk and from his duffel bag put on his red plaid shirt, his paint-dappled trousers and his cracked boots. He shrugged into his dirty canvas jacket and went through the door that led to the stairway up.

The *Sofia* was illuminated by small lights atop the masts and running lights at bow and stern. The windows of the wheelhouse, atop the central superstructure, showed dim yellow light, as was suited for nighttime eyes.

Waves drummed against the hull. The ship shivered, as if it felt the chill wind. Michael put his hands into the pockets of his jacket and breathed deeply and gratefully of clean salt air. He walked along the portside deck, trailing a shadow. The night was very dark beyond the wash of *Sofia's* lamps. Michael had seen clouds closing in before sunset. Now there were no stars. But a fitful flare of lightning occasionally jumped within the clouds, and very distantly there was the sound of thunder.

He heard a clumping noise coming toward him, getting louder, and he realized at once that she too was having trouble sleeping. He kept his head down until they were almost together. Then he looked up into her face, and he smiled and said in German, "Hello."

She shivered like the ship. Her head had also been lowered. She had her arms around herself. She was wearing the ugly mouse-colored overcoat and a gray head-scarf, which allowed just a glimpse of her blonde hair. Tonight, of course, there was no need for sunglasses. Her eyes were a cool shade of aquamarine under unplucked blonde brows. Her nose was small and sharp-tipped and her chin was adorned with a small dimple. She looked at him with something like horror in her face, and then she put her head down again and tried to get past as quickly as her weight of a left shoe would allow.

"May I walk with you?" Michael asked, before she could escape him.

"No," she said, more of a whispered breath than a voice. "Please. Leave me alone." She was trying to move faster, but she suddenly stumbled and had to catch her balance against one of the funnels.

"Don't you want to see Vulcan at his forge?" Michael asked. She was still trying to get away, not daring to meet his gaze. He gently spoke her false name: "Kristen?"

The teenaged girl took two more staggering steps before she looked back over her shoulder.

"Come watch Vulcan at work," he told her, standing against the gunwale. "Just for a moment."

"I have to go," Marielle said, but she wasn't moving. Her eyes darted here and there; anywhere but to his own eyes. And then: "How do you know my name?"

"I suppose I heard someone mention it. From the passenger list." He smiled again. "I think it's a very pretty name."

"I have to go," she said again.

The right foot moved, but the heavy left foot remained where it was. Lightning flared amid the clouds.

"There!" Michael said. "Vulcan at his forge. Did you see it?"

"No."

"Keep watch, then. It'll just be...*there!* Did you see it then?"

"It's lightning," she said, with a trace of irritation.

"It's Vulcan," he corrected. "Working at his forge. He's the god of blacksmiths, you know. Ah, listen...hear the sound of his hammer on the anvil!"

"*Thunder,*" she muttered.

"Vulcan has an interesting history." Michael made a half-turn so he could watch the display in the clouds but she could also still hear him. "He was the son of Jupiter and Juno. But Juno thought he was ugly. She cast the baby off the top of Mount Olympus into the sea. When he fell all that way, he was injured."

There was no response for a little while. Then her quiet voice asked, "Injured? How?"

"He broke one of his legs," said Michael. "It never developed properly. After that, he was always crippled. There he is again! Listen to that hammer!"

Marielle Wesshauser, the daughter of Paul and Annaleisa and sister to Emil, was silent.

At last she said, "I shouldn't be talking to you. Father said not to talk to anyone."

"He's right. There are some men on this ship who are not very nice."

She frowned at the deck. Michael saw her glance quickly up at him and then away again. "Are *you* nice?" she asked cautiously.

"If I said I was, would you believe I was telling you the truth?"

She had to think about that one for a moment.

Michael watched the lightning. The sound of thunder was nearer now; a storm was on the move. North Sea weather, particularly at the change of seasons, was never predictable. "You don't have to talk, Kristen. *I'll* talk. Can I tell you some more about Vulcan?" He turned to face her.

She kept her eyes averted. She shrugged beneath her overcoat.

“Vulcan,” said Michael, “sank down to the bottom of the sea. The sea-nymph Thetis found him and took him to her grotto, and she raised him as her son.” He paused, firming up the memory of this story from his mythology studies. “Vulcan had dolphins for playmates. He had all the sea as his world. Then one day he found what was left of a fisherman’s fire on the beach. Do you know what it was?”

She shook her head. Again, her eyes slid to his, lingered for just a few seconds, and then darted away.

“A single coal,” Michael continued. “Glowing red-hot. Well, he became fascinated with it. He became fascinated with fire, and with creating things from fire. He made rare and beautiful necklaces and bracelets out of sea stones and metals for his mother. He could make anything out of fire. It was his element to be used and adored. *There!*” That particular flash had been tinged with vivid electric-blue. “He’s working extra hard tonight.”

“*But,*” said Marielle. She hesitated, as if thinking she’d already said too much. “*But,*” she went on, “how did Vulcan get back up to the clouds? You said he was in the sea. How did he get back to the sky?”

“His real mother invited Thetis to a party on Mount Olympus. Those old Greek gods were always having parties. Then Juno saw the magnificent necklaces and bracelets of rare sea-metals and wanted to know who forged them, because she wanted some too. So she invited the son of Thetis to come up and make some for her. That’s how he got back to Mount Olympus, and after that Juno realized who he was.”

“And then he lived there with his real mother?” Her frown deepened. “Even though she didn’t like him?”

“He tricked her,” Michael said. “He built a fantastic metal chair for her that trapped her with its arms and wouldn’t let her go. Jupiter couldn’t even free her. Jupiter begged Vulcan to let Juno free. Finally Vulcan, because he had such a kind heart, let his mother go. And because of that, Jupiter told Juno to leave the boy alone, and then do you know what happened?”

“No. What?”

“Venus fell in love with Vulcan. The most beautiful of the goddesses, in love with *him*. And him only a crippled blacksmith. But

Venus saw his heart, and that was what she loved. It was enough. After that, Vulcan went to work making arms and armor for all the heroes of Olympus, and he made thunderbolts for Jupiter. Look there! See? He just made a new one.”

She cocked her head to one side and studied him. A little shy smile came up and, like the quicksilver lightning, flashed away. “I think you’ve been on this ship too long.”

“True, very true,” he agreed. “My name is Michael Gallatin.” He offered his hand to her.

Now her heavy left shoe did move, scraping across the boards. She stepped back, as if she’d been presented not with a human hand but with the claw of an animal.

“I’m tame,” he told her. When I need to be, he thought.

But she was having none of it. Without looking at him again she turned away and struggled onward across the moving deck. Michael decided to let her go. It was a long voyage yet; there would be plenty of time.

Time for what? he asked himself. A shipboard romance with a sixteen-year-old girl? Certainly not! But watching her pulling herself along that first day, making herself faceless to hide from the world...

He knew what hiding from the world was all about, and he didn’t wish that on anyone. Particularly not on a girl with such beautiful eyes and a shy smile. Perhaps there had been sadness in that smile, too. He sighed. In any case, it was time for him to move along. The smell of advancing rain thickened the air.

He walked briskly toward the stern. And just past another lifeboat he came upon two figures standing together, peering through binoculars at ship’s lights off in the distance. Michael judged the second vessel to be possibly three or so miles away.

His sudden approach and footfalls, clumsy rather than careful, caused the two men to lower their glasses and turn toward him. One of the men was Medina, who screwed up his black-bearded face in a rictus of anger. “What do you think you’re *doing*, man? You’re not on duty! Why are you out of your bunk?”

“I’m walking,” was the calm reply.

“Walking?” Medina pressed forward, his chest pushed out and his chin pulled in. “This isn’t a stadium! It isn’t a road! Tell him what this is, Mr. Kpanga!”

“It’s a *ship*,” said Enam Kpanga, but his attention had already returned to focusing the lights on the horizon in his binoculars. Michael thought Kpanga was awfully unconcerned about the fact a first mate had just taken an order from a second mate. The African wore a black suit and an open-collared indigo shirt. Kpanga’s flesh was the hue of purest ebony from the heart of the dark continent. He was thin and tall, about the same height as Michael. He had a cap of close-cropped hair with a widow’s peak. He wore wire-rimmed spectacles with round lenses, and Michael thought he looked more like a first-year law student than the first mate of a rust-gnawed freighter.

“Where were you walking to?” Medina inquired acidly. He grinned, which was almost his undoing. “Home to your momma?”

Michael Gallatin increased the intensity of his green eyes. He said nothing, his face placid. Medina’s grin vanished.

“Careful the way you look at me, man!” the second mate warned, which was nearly his second brush with disembowelment.

“Very strange, this is,” said Kpanga, lowering the binoculars. He had a melodic British accent tinged with the smooth rhythm of his tribal tongue. He cast a gaze at the wayward crewman. The *Sofia*’s lights sparked off his eyeglasses. “Return belowdecks, if you please.”

“We ought to make an example of him.” Medina didn’t quite know when to stop edging toward a fast and brutal reckoning.

“Return belowdecks, if you please,” Kpanga repeated, as if the second mate had not only never spoken but wasn’t even standing there.

Michael nodded. The African once more peered through the binoculars. Medina waited for a further provocation. Michael thought he could tear the Spaniard’s beard off in about three seconds. He looked toward the distant lights. Another freighter, most likely. Also headed for England? Before Medina could speak again, Michael turned away and went forward to the stairs he’d ascended from his little bunk in Hell.

FIVE

The Captain

IT WAS A small movement. A small sound. A change in the thudding of waves against the hull. A quietening of the labored diesels.

Michael Gallatin sat up on his bunk.

Had he been asleep at all? Maybe for two hours. Everything was still semi-dark. A few other crewmen had felt the change in their sleep as well, and were groggily stirring. Someone spoke out in Polish, as if from a dream. A question that had no answer.

Michael's heartbeat had quickened. He swung himself off the bunk and because he was still mostly dressed all he had to do was pull on his boots, his jacket and his woolen cap. Then he was up the stairway into the night.

A cold, stinging drizzle hit him in the face. He saw, first of all, that the lights of a ship were about five hundred meters off the port beam. The ship's bow was aimed toward *Sofia*. Michael judged it was making maybe ten knots. A shrill alarm went off in him. *Sofia* was slowing nearly to a glide. He saw a signal lamp blinking up at the second ship's wheelhouse. Sending morse code to *Sofia*. He took a moment to decipher it.

Stop your engines. We are overtaking.

“Damn it,” he breathed, and then he went to the stairs leading up along the side of the superstructure and raced to the wheelhouse at the top. At the locked door, he balled up his fist and started hammering.

The door opened and a startled-looking Enam Kpanga peered out. Raindrops flecked his glasses. He said, “What are you—”

Then he stopped speaking, because Michael shoved him back and walked into the low-lamped wheelhouse, where a Swede with a face like the business end of an axe was manning the helm. Before him, the wide rectangular windowglass was streaked with rain.

Medina was standing at the engine order telegraph, the brass instrument by which the bridge communicated speed changes to the engine room. Michael saw that the pointer was set to the *Ahead Two-Thirds* position instead of what would normally be *All-Ahead Standard*. Medina’s hand was on the pointer and was about to ring the next lowest engine speed, *Ahead One-Third*.

“Keep your speed up!” Michael commanded.

The moment was frozen. Rain pattered against the window’s glass. *Sofia* moved over a wave and down, then began to rise again. She moaned somewhere amidships.

“Seaman!” Kpanga had not shouted it, but nevertheless his voice carried absolute authority. “Get off the bridge!”

Michael turned to face him. “I want to see the captain.”

“Are you *insane*?”

“I said, I want to see the—”

A pistol’s barrel was placed against the back of his skull.

“Get out of here *now*,” said the Spaniard, “or I will blow your fucking head off.”

“My name is Michael Gallatin,” he said to Kpanga. “I’m an agent with the British Secret Service. Special Operations. Your German passenger is a weapons expert named Paul Wesshauser. He’s trying to get himself and his family to England and away from the Nazis. Obviously the Nazis don’t want that to happen. We believed a freighter was the safest way over. Their secret police were watching all the airports, civilian

ship lines and train stations.” Loose ends, he thought grimly. Someone in the network had either been paid to talk or had his mouth loosened by the ugly end of a pair of pliers. “That ship is coming to take him, and I can tell you he doesn’t want to go. Neither do we want him to *be* taken.” He turned his head a fraction. “If you don’t put that gun down in three seconds, I’ll kill you.”

The pistol wavered.

“I’m counting,” Michael vowed, smelling fear.

“Put it down, Monsieur Medina,” said another voice, heavy with a French accent.

The pressure of the pistol against the back of Michael’s head went away.

Michael turned to the left, toward the voice. A figure emerged from a shadowed corridor at the back of the wheelhouse. It was a man of stocky, broadchested build and Napoleonic height, standing five-feet-six at most. He came forward into the dim glow of the yellow-shaded lamps. He was dressed not as the captain of the *Sofia*, but as her lowliest and most decrepit ordinary seaman. The front of his grimy once-white shirt was a nasty mural of coffee stains, grease smears, food spatters and other less definable artwork. His belly bulged over his canvas trousers, which in turn bagged around his stubby legs and were held up by a pair of vomit-green suspenders. His shoes were so scuffed it was nearly impossible to tell if they’d been brown or black; they were the washed-out hue of careless despair.

Captain Gustave Beauchene approached Michael and peered up into the other man’s face. Beauchene had a grizzled gray beard and heavy jowls, his cheeks pitted with the small round scars of smallpox. His eyes, sunken in wrinkles that made Michael think of cargo netting, were nearly the same gray as his beard. His hair, too, was gray and unkempt, ratty in front and hanging down over his ears and the back of his neck. Michael had already caught the noxious fumes of very strong body odor, and also...whiskey, of course. No, that was wrong. Brandy. After all, the captain was a Frenchman.

Beauchene reached out and took the pistol from Medina’s hand. Without hesitation he put the barrel against the center of Michael Gallatin’s forehead.

“I will give *you* three seconds,” he said, as a small red glow of fury burned deep in his eyes, “to convince me you’re not either a liar or a madman.”

Michael saw no need to waste time. “I was placed here to protect the Wesshausers if necessary. But mostly to watch the crew, just in case a member of the secret police got aboard. I know the histories of everyone here. You, Mr. Kpanga, are a very intelligent and ambitious man who did extremely well with his studies at the University of London. Medina, you broke your wife’s right arm in a fight two years ago and your brother-in-law swore to kill you. You wound up putting him in the hospital in Seville with a knife to the belly. And *you*, captain...well, I know you also. Want me to tell you about the Swede?”

“No,” said Beauchene.

Michael nodded. The less said about that child-molester at the helm, the better.

Beauchene handed the pistol back to Medina. Then, moving surprisingly fast for a man his size, he slapped Michael across the mouth with his right hand so hard the blood bloomed from Michael’s lower lip and for a few seconds tears of pain fogged his vision.

“How *dare* you,” said the captain, in a voice made of sharp-edged gravel. “How *dare* you bring this on my crew and on my ship. You *British!* You self-centered prigs! Playing your spy games! Fuck you and fuck all of you!” The spittle flew from his mouth. “I hope you will be very happy with the outcome of this! Monsieur Medina!”

“Sir!” said the Spaniard.

“*All Stop.*”

Medina moved toward the engine order telegraph.

“Don’t touch that,” Michael said.

“Oh, how he threatens!” Beauchene’s ugly mug twisted in an uglier grin. “And him without a gun! Go on, give the order!”

“You stop those engines,” Michael said, “and every man on this ship is dead.”

“Christ, this one *believes* in himself, doesn’t he? All right, my fine fucking fellow, how do you propose to kill every member of my crew?”

"I won't. *You* will. By stopping those engines. You let that ship take the Wesshausers, and you'll think that's the end of it. But then the men on that ship will bring their machine guns and grenades and whatever else they have aboard, and they will begin murdering everyone here. Why? Because the Nazis want no international incident. They don't want the British press or the press of any other country on earth to get wind that they've kidnapped a weapons expert who was trying to get *away* from them. *And* taken his family, as well." Michael paused to wipe his lip with the back of his hand. The smell of his own blood, to him, filled up the wheelhouse.

"You know what they'll do," Michael continued, and now he cast his gaze around at Medina and Kpanga to draw them in. "They'll kill everyone and then sink the *Sofia*. And I'm sure they didn't come unprepared for that. The *Sofia* becomes another statistic. A freighter, lost in the North Sea. Who can say what happened? But I can promise you, there will be no one left alive to tell the tale. So, Captain Beauchene, you stop the engines and give the Wesshausers over, and you and I and every man on this ship are dead."

No one spoke.

No one moved, but for the *Sofia* herself.

The rain had strengthened, and thrashed against the glass.

"*Madre de Dios*," Medina whispered, his eyes huge above the black beard.

"Captain, sir!" It was a voice from a room along the shadowed corridor. Michael recognized a Russian accent. "We're receiving a radio message!"

No one stopped Michael when he followed the captain, Kpanga and Medina back to the small radio room. The Russian-born radioman, a sal-low long-jawed drink of brine, had his earphones resting around his neck and was tuning the dials on a slab of a radio with louvers in it that displayed the red heartbeat of its tubes.

Over a noise of static and tones that sounded like a half-drunk Scotsman playing a bagpipe as a scorched cat howled along, a firm and clipped voice from the radio's speaker said, "Repeat: this is the German vessel *Javelin*, to the Norwegian freighter *Sofia*. Captain Manson Konnig requests you to follow his instruction. Stop engines and prepare to be boarded. Repeat: stop engines and prepare to be boarded."

Then the static and tones increased in tumultuous noise and the radioman had to dial down the volume.

“Still jamming us,” he told Beauchene. “We can’t get anything out, sir.”

“Merde!” The captain smacked his fist into the palm of his other hand. “Merde! Merde! You can’t break it?”

“No, sir.”

Beauchene shot a glance of disgust at Michael. “You see what you’ve done? We can’t even send an SOS! We’re helpless out here!”

“Tell me about their ship.” Michael was addressing Enam Kpanga. “When did you first spot it?”

“Just after sundown. Through the binoculars it looks only like another merchant. Maybe one hundred and thirty meters in length. Wheelhouse toward the bow. Normal running lights. Two masts strung with cargo netting. The ship is riding high, so it’s not loaded down. It’s even been flying a Norwegian flag. We tried to hail it by radio and got no reply. Very strange, that was. It held its position for awhile off the portside stern, and then it picked up speed. We saw it drop the flag of Norway and raise a German banner. Right after that the jamming started.”

“Can you determine its speed?”

Kpanga adjusted his glasses. Was his hand trembling just a little bit? It was hard to tell. “If you’re asking if *Javelin* is faster than *Sofia*, I would say definitely yes. It caught up very quickly. We can make top speed of seven knots—”

“Eight,” the captain interrupted with a sneer. “Shows how little you know!”

“I’d say *Javelin* can make sixteen,” Kpanga said to Michael, his face as impassive as stone.

In layman’s terms, Michael thought, the German ship could run rings around this piece of wallowing wreckage.

The static and droning tones on the radio ebbed though they did not go away. The Russian dialed up the volume. A clipped voice said, “German vessel *Javelin* to Norwegian freighter *Sofia*. Captain Konnig has generously given you thirty minutes to comply with our request. Repeat: you have thirty minutes to comply with our request or severe action shall be taken.”

The jamming increased in volume once more, and again the Russian turned down the racket to spare everyone's ears.

"Do you have guns aboard?" Michael asked anyone who could answer.

"Some in the storeroom," Medina said. He looked pale and stunned. "Four or five rifles. A pistol or two. Mutiny insurance. Ammunition for everything." He shook his head, defeated. "I don't know."

"Any machine guns?"

"I've got a Thompson in my quarters." Beauchene motioned toward another closed door across the way. "I like to have my mutiny insurance under my bunk."

"Good. You're going to need it, I think."

Beauchene's eyes narrowed. "What's your name? Gallatin, you said? Well, Monsieur Gallatin, you're going to pay for this when we get out of it. Believe me. Monsieur Medina, order engines full ahead. And change course, thirty degrees to starboard. After ten minutes, change course... oh...make it eight degrees to port. Set up a zigzag every ten minutes afterward, but keep that damned ship in our wake." The Spaniard was slow in responding. "Move *today!*" the captain growled.

Medina stumbled toward the helm and the engine order telegraph.

"Captain?" Kpanga asked. "Do you want me to—"

"I want you to shut your black hole," came the reply. "Gallatin, let me get my Tommy and then you're coming with me. We're going to find some men who can handle firearms. Then I want to be introduced to this good German shit who's put all our necks on the fucking guillotine."

SIX

Freighter Trash

FOR ALL HIS sourness and bluster, Gustave Beauchene was masterful at managing his crew. Michael stood at the back of the mess hall as the captain addressed his men in no-nonsense terms. Beauchene spelled it all out. *German weapons expert and family on board. Trying to get to England. A German ship with probably a Nazi captain now just a few hundred meters away, and the threat of violence to come. And not just the threat of violence, but the probability that the Sofia and her crew would be destroyed even if they bowed down and handed Herr Wesshauser over to the swastika swine.*

“No one asked for this,” Beauchene told them as he walked back and forth, a little Napoleon in a dirty shirt and a yellow rainslicker with his hands on his hips. “You’re not being paid any more for it.” Michael watched him cast his hard-eyed gaze across his audience: the Norwegians, the Swedes, the Poles, the Spaniards, the French, the Dutch, the young Brit Billy Bowers and Dylan Custis the necklace-festooned Jamaican. Even the dull-witted Olaf Thorgrimsen was paying rapt attention like an Oxford student on exams day.

“You’re working men, not fighting men,” said the captain. “Well, *some* of you are. *Working* men, I mean. We’re here and there’s not much we can do about it.”

“We can get on the lifeboats and get away!” one of the Norwegians said. “Get off the ship! Can’t we?”

“And leave this beautiful bitch?” asked Beauchene, which brought a few harsh barks and bells of nervous laughter. “Oh, you could do that, very well. *Certainement!* But did you ever see the lifeboat that could stop a *bullet*? At least here you’ve got some steel to hide behind. *Rotten* steel, but there you have it.” He paced back and forth again. “Did you men know I used to be a baker? That’s right. A fucking honest-to-God *baker*. In the City of Light. My family business. Yes, laugh if you want to and I’ll cut your nuts off. I’m talking to *you*. In the blue shirt. What’s your job? Cock stretcher?” He turned his attention away from the giggling fool. “A *baker*,” he went on. “Throw everything into the mix, knead it, beat it, do whatever you want to do. *Pray* over the fucking thing. But nothing is ready until it passes through the fire.” He nodded, scanning their faces. “Gentlemen, whether we like it or not...we’re going to pass through some fire, very soon. I *hope* we won’t. But I know we will. Those Nazis...they don’t quit, they don’t give up. They’re not going to let a shipful of freighter trash stop them. Now I don’t know what’s going to happen, but when it starts...no one will blame the man who goes to his bunk. Hear that? *I* said it.” He swelled his chest out a little. Then he motioned toward the five bolt-action rifles and the two revolvers that lay on the table before him, along with boxes of ammunition. His Thompson submachine gun—the ‘Tommy gun’—was propped up in a corner. “We may have some uninvited guests. I need seven men who *won’t* go to their bunks. Seven men who can handle a weapon. And not just their own, with five-fingered Mary. Any takers?”

Michael watched. He had Medina’s revolver tucked in his waistband.

No one moved for a moment. Then a tall Norwegian with a tattoo on the back of his neck stood up and took one of the rifles. “Stand over there,” the captain told him.

Two more men, one Dutch and the other a Swede, took rifles. Billy Bowers stood up and chose one of the pistols. Olaf Thorgrimsen took the

second pistol. A Spaniard picked up a rifle. Then the last rifle went to another Norwegian, a squat burly man with thick black eyebrows.

“Load up,” Beauchene told them. “Get out on the deck. Choose your positions and keep watch. Don’t shoot yourselves.”

As the men left the mess hall, the brown-haired and gray-eyed Billy Bowers glanced at Michael, his fellow Brit, and acknowledged him with a lift of the chin.

“That’s all. If you’ve got work to do, get to it. Breakfast is up in two hours.” Beauchene retrieved his Thompson and motioned Michael to follow.

They went to Wesshauser’s door. Beauchene slammed on it with the butt of his submachine gun. A noise to rouse the dead.

“My God! My God! What is it?” asked the gaunt, pallid man who peered out the door and fumbled with his eyeglasses.

“Your cruise is over, pussy,” said the captain.

Beauchene pushed in and Michael followed, feeling very ungentlemanly. He averted his gaze from Annaleisa Wesshauser, a striking-looking woman in her early forties with curly blonde hair and the aquamarine eyes of her daughter, as she sat in bed and tied her lavender-colored gown up to the throat.

“What’s this about?” Red swirls had surfaced on Paul Wesshauser’s cheeks. He was wearing a white T-shirt and a pair of gray pajama bottoms. Behind his glasses his eyes were very dark and very angry. He had a thatch of brown hair that stuck up in spikes from its encounter with the pillow. If he was any thinner he would have fit through one of the cracks in the walls. But Michael was sure that a man desperately hiding himself and his family from the Nazis for several weeks before this trip could be arranged did lose some of his appetite for strudel.

“This is your Jesus,” Beauchene told the couple, motioning with a thumb toward Michael. “Praise him.”

Paul and Annaleisa looked at each other as if they’d been awakened to a nautical nuthouse.

“My name is Michael Gallatin,” said the man from London. “British Secret Service. I was sent to make sure your trip was...”

“Unexciting,” Beauchene supplied, as he sat down on a floral-printed chair with his submachine gun across his knees.

“Unopposed,” Michael corrected. “And unfortunately, that no longer is the case.”

“Momma?” It was Emil, coming in sleepy-eyed and with touselled brown hair nearly like his father’s. Behind him limped Marielle, wearing a long enveloping blue robe. When she saw Michael she jerked herself back out of the room as if the floor under her uneven feet was redhot.

“It’s all right,” Annaleisa said quietly, though Emil had by now seen the submachine gun. “Don’t worry, it’s all right.”

Marielle’s face, her blonde hair falling about her shoulders, peered carefully around the doorjamb.

“The German ship *Javelin* has come to take you,” Michael said, standing in the center of the room. “We’re not going to let that happen.”

Paul regained his composure. A muscle worked in his jaw. “How did they find out?”

“Loose lips,” said the captain, “sink ships. True a thousand years ago, true today.”

“Torture probably had something to do with it,” Michael answered. “Or money. There were several people who knew. One may have been a double-agent. In any case, speculation about that will have to wait for the experts to backtrack the trail. Right now, there’s the *Jave*—”

“Captain! Excuse me, please!” Enam Kpanga had come into the room. He nodded at the Wesshausers before he focused his full attention on Beauchene. “Sir, the ship’s pulled up on the port side. They’re hailing you with a bullhorn.”

Beauchene simply stared at the African.

“Sir? Did you—”

“Get out of this room,” Beauchene said, standing up from his chair. “This is a *private* room. A *nice* room. Do you think people in this room want to *smell* you in here?”

Michael winced. He saw Kpanga swallow hard.

“Sir?” the African said, with a note of pleading in his voice. “I only wanted to—”

“Smell up this room, *oui*. You’ve done your job. Get out.”

Kpanga gave a look to Michael of forlorn indignation. His mouth opened as if he wished to say something, perhaps to make some explanation of the captain’s remarks. But no explanation could be made. Kpanga closed his mouth, straightened his back which had begun to hunch as if readying for the strike of a bullwhip, and strode quickly out of the room.

“You and me,” Beauchene told Michael. “Up on deck.” He braced the Thompson against his shoulder and without another word to the Wesshausers or their children he went into the hall.

“Wasn’t that a little harsh?” Michael asked as they walked.

“He’s a black nigger,” came the flat response. “Worse than that, he’s a college boy.”

The rain had again tapered to a nasty drizzle. A smear of faint gray light had begun to show to the east. *Javelin* was so close to the port side of *Sofia* the two ships were almost trading paint. Michael took the revolver from his waistband. The other crewmen with weapons were lined along the portside gunwale. They were facing a dozen black-garbed men, also wielding rifles and pistols, who were lined along *Javelin*’s starboard gunwale. A *Javelin* searchlight swung back and forth across the scene, stabbing the eyes. *Sofia*, still at full speed, shuddered over a wave and shards of white foam were flung up between the hulls. The sound of diesels was the muffled beat of wardrums.

“Captain of the *Sofia*!” called a voice over a bullhorn. “Show yourself!” There was a few seconds’ pause. “Captain of the *Sofia*! Show yourself!” That same request and pause was repeated over and over.

Michael had a good view of *Javelin*. It did, indeed, look like any ordinary freighter. Its mast and running lights illuminated coils of ropes, lifeboats, ventilation funnels, capstans, nettings, various machines and cables used in hoisting cargo and the like. Michael saw a figure in a black raincoat and a white captain’s cap standing at the railing up at the blue-lit wheelhouse. Just watching, casually examining the scene. Captain Manson Konnig, in the flesh?

“Captain of the *Sofia*! Show—”

Gustave Beauchene stepped forward and fired off a short burst from his Tommy that shattered the arrogant searchlight and instantly killed it.

SEVEN

In Sheep's Clothing

TWO SECONDS AFTER the searchlight's death, a rifle was fired from *Javelin*. A bullet whacked the gunwale in front of *Beauchene*. Someone else on *Sofia* pulled the trigger. A bullet sang off *Javelin*'s superstructure. Then the shooting started overlapping each other, echoing between the ships. A porthole on *Sofia* was smashed. Everyone crouched down behind whatever cover they could find. A bullet zipped past Michael's left shoulder as he knelt behind the gunwale. *Beauchene*'s Thompson chattered and bullets beat against steel.

Several shots rang out fast upon each other, and there came a cry of pain from one of *Sofia*'s crew. Michael got off two bullets at a man in a black rainslicker and cap who scurried up a stairway. He saw the man clutch at his left thigh. Bullets slammed into the gunwale before Michael, causing him to duck his head.

Suddenly from amidships on *Javelin* there was the noise of a bolt going back.

A belt-fed machine gun began to speak, its tone deadly. Bullets bit into *Sofia*'s deck, ricocheted off a capstan and pocked holes through a lifeboat.

Michael lifted his head and saw the machine gun and its team up on a metal-shielded platform that a few moments before had been camouflaged with a gray canvas tarp. The gunner swivelled his weapon back and forth, spraying bullets across *Sofia*. Michael got off two more shots and saw sparks fly off the metal shield. Then the machine gun came hunting for him and nearly chewed through the gunwale in its enthusiasm.

More of *Sofia's* bullets banged into the metal shield. The gunners shifted targets and fired at the annoying hornet's nest. Michael squeezed the rest of his bullets off and quickly reloaded. A high-pitched klaxon alarm suddenly began, ear-cracking in intensity.

It was coming from an electric whistle atop the superstructure. *Javelin* picked up speed and began to move away, changing course to port. The firing kept on, even as the two ships widened their distance.

At last, there was no use in shooting because the range was too far.

Michael stood up. Gunsmoke still whirled in the air. He watched *Javelin* hurry across the gray waves. "Who's hit?" he called, and Olaf shouted back that it was the Dutchman, shot through the right wrist. "We held them off!" Gustave Beauchene was on his feet but he was staggering with shock. "We held them off! *Mon Dieu, nous l'avons fait!*" Then he looked to one side and his giddy grin faded. He saw the Spaniard lying a few feet away with the top of his head blown away and glistening bits of brain laid out upon the deckboards.

His eyes narrowed, Michael was watching *Javelin* continue to move away at about ten knots. He saw activity at the stern. A dark shape was rising from the deck. Something covered with another tarpaulin. He wondered if an electric winch was at work.

There was similar activity toward the bow. Something rose up on a platform to a height just above the gunwale. Men moved about in trained and deliberate order. The tarps were removed. Michael realized with a start that he was looking at the steel gun shields and the barrels of two five-inch cannons that had been artfully hidden below the deck.

Javelin was not a freighter. It was a warship.

A wolf, he thought. Dressed in sheep's clothing.

As he stared across the waves in what for him was nearly shock, Michael saw *Javelin* swing into a broadside position.

“Christ!” Billy Bowers said, standing a few feet away. He shouted the next: “*They’ve got big guns!*”

The forward cannon fired with a gout of smoke. There was a thunderclap and a waterspout rose up directly in front of *Sofia’s* bow. The freighter trembled in a sharp turn to starboard. There was the noise of everything loose crashing together and men lost their footing on the rainslick deck.

The cannon toward the stern fired. Hanging onto the gunwale, Michael felt the shell’s impact like a blow to the belly. *Sofia* gave a wounded cry. She’d been hit up near the bow. The forward cannon fired a second time. Michael heard the air sizzle as the shell passed just over the ship, and a waterspout shot up to starboard. Once more the stern gun spoke, and again *Sofia* was shaken by a hit. The ship was zigzagging violently; either the Swede or Medina was putting his back to the wheel.

A shell from the forward cannon punched through the superstructure. Portholes exploded and steel crumpled. “Get down! Get down!” someone was shouting, though it was hardly necessary; men were trying to fold themselves into smaller and smaller targets.

Except for three. Michael remained standing, so did Billy, and Gustave Beauchene aimed his Thompson at the now-distant *Javelin* and opened fire as he shouted blue curses into the rain. The warship’s guns fired almost in unison. *Sofia* lurched, struck in two places. A blaze had broken out toward the bow, the flames leaping up from the deck. Another shell crashed into the superstructure, dangerously close to the wheelhouse. The freighter veered again to starboard, trying desperately to escape the punishment.

“Put out that fire!” Beauchene shouted to his crew, and then he staggered forward across the pitching deck to do it himself.

A shell hit the side of *Sofia* just aft of where Michael was standing. The impact lifted him up and threw him to the boards. The sound of distressed steel screeched in his ears. He lay dazed for a few seconds, feeling the wolf wanting to burst from its soul cage.

When he reached up for the hand that reached for him, he thought his own fingers might already be hooking into claws. But he was wrong.

Billy pulled him up. “You all right?”

Michael nodded. Were his ears bleeding? No.

Another shell struck toward the stern and *Sofia* shivered in agony. Then the rain began falling in sheets. Visibility was drastically cut; Michael could no longer see the *Javelin* through the gray curtains. Whether the lack of visibility affected the range-finders or not, he didn't know, but the guns had ceased firing.

"Damn," Billy said. Michael saw that his eyes were wide and his face bleached. Rain dripped from his chin. He was a kid trying to play a man's part. "I'm sorry," he managed to say, and then he lurched forward and threw up over the side.

A group of men were fighting the blaze and beating it down as Beauchene hollered and raged. Extinguishers sprayed. The flames sank away, and in a moment only black smoke curled up into the rain.

Michael stood over the body of the dead Spaniard. Several other crewmen, including Olaf Thorgrimsen and Dylan Custis, were silently staring down at the carnage. The presence of violent death among a member of any tribe, Michael knew, had the effect of piercing the hardest heart. Rain slashed across the dead man's face and open eyes. "Would someone find a canvas?" Michael asked, and Olaf immediately trudged off to secure one.

The captain appeared on the scene, his hair plastered down and face smudged with smoke. He pushed at the brains with the toe of his shoe. "Somebody get that up!" he ordered. No one moved.

Then someone did come forward.

He bent down. A pair of black hands scooped up the essence of a man, and then Enam Kpanga walked to the gunwale and dropped his burden into the sea. When he turned again toward the ship, his face was devoid of all emotion and his eyes were unknowable beyond the rain-wet glasses. He wiped his gory hands along the sides of his black trousers, and then he passed on by Michael and through the gathering of men like a silent spirit.

"Wrap him up," Beauchene said when Olaf returned with the canvas. "Anybody who wants to say something, say it now. I didn't know him. When you're done, put him over. Somebody pick up his rifle and shells. *Comprenez?*" He swung his gaze upon Michael. "I need you," he said, "to

get up to the wheelhouse. Tell Medina I said to keep the engines at full speed. Tell him I said to come back to course two-four-zero. *Go!*” He may well have been urging himself onward, for he hurried off with a heavy-set gray-bearded man, one of the two engineers.

Michael climbed the stairs to the wheelhouse. The repugnant but obviously capable Swede was still at the helm. Rain whipped against the windshield. Though dawn had broken, visibility was limited only to the foam-streaked gray waves twenty meters beyond *Sofia*’s bow. Medina sprawled in a brown leather chair with his hands to his face. “Get on duty!” Michael snapped at him, and he relayed Beauchene’s commands.

Medina’s eyes had sunken. He’d aged ten years in the last thirty minutes. “We’re all going to die,” he said.

Michael put his hand on the revolver’s grip in his waistband. “Give those orders or you’ll go first.”

The orders were given and carried out. *Sofia*, a tougher lady than she appeared, slowly swung back on her course for England.

“Mr. Medina!” It was the Russian radio operator, calling from his station. “Message for the captain!”

Michael didn’t wait for the second mate to respond. He walked back to the radio room. The bizarre noise of static, bagpipe drone and cat squall was pulsing from the speaker.

Michael asked in Russian, “Still jamming?”

The radioman looked at him in surprise. He was smoking a cigarette, and now he blew smoke through both nostrils. He gave a faint smile and said, also in Russian, “Jamming, yes. They drop the interference a little to send messages and receive from us, then they power it up again. A noise generator. Very wicked device, this one.” He stared at Michael with new respect. “What’s your home?”

“I was born in St. Petersburg.”

“Ah!” He tapped his heart. “Stalingrad. Well, it was Tsaritsyn when I was born. Hey, you speak good English!”

“You also.”

“Yes, we don’t *waste* our Russian on those with inferior ears, huh?” He grinned and reached over to a shelf that held tubes, wires, other radio parts

and various tools of his trade. He flipped open a small leather case and offered Michael a hand-rolled cigarette.

Michael said, "Thank you," as he accepted it. Not because he planned to smoke it, but because it was a comrade's gift.

The jamming noise quietened, if only enough for that clipped voice to come through: "From the German vessel *Javelin* to the Norwegian freighter *Sofia*. Repeating our message. Captain Manson Konnig requests a meeting between brothers of the sea. He regrets your escalation of violence. Captain Konnig requests that you allow him to board your fine ship at your earliest invitation. Captain Konnig will arrive in an unarmed motor launch, with only the necessary crew. He will bravely and resolutely board your ship alone and unarmed. Is this agreeable to the captain of the *Sofia*?"

Michael tapped a finger against his chin.

The jamming was still at a lower volume. They were waiting.

Michael was about to do something that would get him hanged in a naval trial a hundred times over. But as far as he was concerned, and with the lives of the Wesshausers in the balance, at this moment he was in charge.

"Tell them to come ahead," Michael directed.

"I can't do that," the radioman said, still in Russian. "I know you're a big man here, but you don't have the authority." He let his gaze pass over the revolver. "Unless you force the issue."

"All right." Michael drew the weapon and held it between himself and the radioman. "Tell them to come ahead. I presume they're still off our portside. Tell them we'll treat Captain Konnig fairly. But tell them we've set up our own machine guns and if there's any *hint* of trouble we'll blow that launch to splinters. And tell them we're not cutting our speed. Go on."

The radioman sent the message. His German was not excellent, but it was very good.

There was a pause of maybe two minutes, during which the jamming noise increased. Then the clipped voice came back through the aural onslaught: "Agreed."

The static and pulsing noises swelled louder. The radioman again had to dial down the volume.

“On their way,” he said, with the ironic fatalism of a true-born Russian.

EIGHT

The Mellow Moment

"YOU DID WHAT?"

Michael faced Captain Beauchene in the hallway outside the radio room and told him again. It was about twenty minutes after the meeting had been accepted, and Beauchene had just come to the bridge from a variety of tasks designed to keep *Sofia* afloat and the men from casting their lives to the lifeboats.

After the second telling, the captain stared at the floor. Rain dripped steadily from his yellow slicker. "We're not reducing our speed," he said.

"I told them that."

"You had no right."

"I want to see what we're dealing with."

"*Oui*, and what do *they* get to see?" Beauchene glared into Michael's eyes. "That we have a few rifles and pistols to use against their fucking *cannons*? Well, they already know that, don't they? *Merde*, what a mess!"

"We might get some idea how to clean it up by meeting Konnig."

"*You say.*"

“Yes,” Michael answered calmly. “I do say.”

Beauchene held Michael’s gaze a few seconds longer. Then he shook his head and ran a hand through his rain-soaked hair. With a weary sigh, he said, “Come in and get a drink.”

Michael followed him through a door on the other side of the hallway. Beauchene’s cabin had a porthole and would have a nice view of the sea when the weather wasn’t so closed-in. That was the best that could be said for it. There was a bunk, a desk, two chairs in need of reupholstering, a tatty green throwrug, a floorlamp with a crooked shade that had a cartoon of marching tin soldiers upon it like something taken from a child’s playroom, and another lamp on the desk. Newspapers and magazines were piled around. There was a shelf of a few sad-looking books. It was obvious the captain ate alone and sometimes didn’t finish his meals, because the plates and leftovers were in plain sight. The cabin had the musty dirty-socks smell of a cheap hotel room, uncleaned for many a night. There were no pictures on the pine-panelled walls. No excuse was made. Beauchene closed the door and rested his Thompson gun in a corner. He sat behind the desk, opened a lower drawer and brought out a half-full bottle of brandy and a single glass. The glass, Michael noted, had a brown crust of dried brandy sticking to its bottom and was mottled with greasy fingerprints. Beauchene poured liquor into the nasty glass and offered it to Michael, who took it without hesitation because it was not the worst thing he’d ever drunk from.

Beauchene swigged from the bottle. “Five men wounded and two dead,” he said as the fire descended. “We were lucky there. Next time not so much. Some electrical cable damage aft. The engineers are working on it. No hull damage, thank God. No rudder or engine damage.” He drank again. “A shell caused some havoc in one of the staterooms. Not theirs or the children’s. My worst problem is figuring out how to feed my crew. Most of the crockery in the galley broke when we started slinging ourself all around like a maniac with an ass-itch. Got a cook with a broken arm, too. The doctor doesn’t need his heroin today, he’ll patch everyone up. Aren’t you drinking?”

Michael took a sip and managed his initial reaction. It was not exactly France’s finest.

“Sit while you can,” Beauchene suggested, and Michael took the better of the two bad chairs. “There you go.” Beauchene was speaking not to Michael but to the bottle. It was a croon of appreciation, or perhaps dependency. Michael thought that one man’s heroin was another man’s brandy. “Ah, *oui!*” Beauchene took another drink and closed his eyes. He leaned back in his chair. “*Le moment mûr,*” he said.

Michael knew what that meant: The mellow moment.

“Haven’t had many of those?” Michael asked. “Except from a bottle?”

“Not many, thank you for asking.” The captain’s eyes remained shut. Then they suddenly opened and the red glare had returned. “Who the fuck *are* you? Or, rather...who the fuck do you *think* you are? Receiving my radio messages and giving orders? I could shoot you for either one of those!”

“And then,” Michael said easily, as he sipped the mixture of pinesap and hot glue, “you’d have one less gunman.”

“One less pain in my ass, you mean. I ought to forget about the shooting and knock your brains out.” That statement caused him to frown and stare again into the bottle. His swig this time was a long swallow of needful thirst. “Damn, what a day,” he said.

Michael had to ask the question. “Why do you hate him?”

“Him? Him *who?*”

“You know.”

Beauchene grunted. “I told you. He’s a black nigger and he’s a college boy. They put him here to ride my back. Imagine that! After all these years, a nigger on my back! And not just any one, but a college boy! Oh, they’ve got big plans for him, you can count on that.” He leaned forward and planted his elbows on the desktop. “They put him on me to get *experience*. That’s what they said. To get the actual experience of *seamanship*. But you know...you *know*...that’s not all of it. *Non!* They want him watching me. Taking notes. *Judging* me, for any error. Because of my past mistakes, you see. A few errors. A few scraped hulls and mishandled cargo. Always the captain’s fault, *oui?* And now look what you’ve gotten me into! If we get out of this, how will I have a job?” Another swig of deadly brandy went down his pipe. “Two men are never going home. Do you get that? And how

many more will never be going home? Eh? So how will Captain Gustave Beauchene ever have a job after this?" He abruptly slammed the bottom of the bottle down on the desk. "Answer me!" he shouted, his face contorted with pure rage.

Michael was very careful in his reply. "When we get out of this, the British Secret Service will arrange a job for you with any British merchant line you please to approach. I can promise that."

"Oh, can you? Promise me a job sailing a desk through a sea of papers? Or perhaps you can get me a job in a bakery? Making crumpets and little tea-cakes for fags with umbrellas?"

It struck Michael then. Gustave Beauchene bore a hatred not only for Eman Kpanga, but for the entire world.

Beauchene was very intelligent. Michael knew the man must have seen some realization in his face, because the captain smiled grimly and said, "You think you *know* me, is that it? From your little histories and spy papers? Did you know, then, that I was the third generation of my family's bakery in Paris? That this was to be my continuation of the very profitable Beauchene family business? Oh, yes! When I wasn't sailing on the Seine, I was busy doing my part to carry forth the tradition. The great Beauchene *tradition!*" He said it as if it were something dangerous.

He picked up his bottle and stood up and peered out the porthole at the gray banners of rain. The sea had flattened, the waves beaten down by falling water.

"Then," he said, "I met a woman." Something in his voice changed; it deepened, and went dry. "A very beautiful and gracious woman. A woman far above my league. Yet she called to me. And I answered, yes I did. This woman...what can I say?" He put the bottle to his lips but did not drink, and so lowered it again. A sigh came out of him that might have been a whirlwind made small and private. "We were married," he went on. "And she wanted things. *Needed* things. Those beautiful and expensive things a beautiful woman needs. Well...I had to make more money for her, didn't I? I had to give her those things. To *keep* her, you see? Because a woman like that...if you lose her...you will hate yourself every day as long as you shall live. So I began gambling. More and more.

It became a need of my own. I won some, *oui*, but in the end...you know, the house always wins.”

Beauchene was quiet for awhile. Quiet also was Michael Gallatin.

“The house,” Beauchene said, “took my family’s business. And then...I learned about all the other men. Just by accident, the first one. Then...I began watching, and following her. There were so many others. It must have been a thrilling thing for her.

“And I thought...of course a beautiful woman such as she would never be satisfied just with one man. Certainly not just with me. Well, *look* at me! And I was better then, but I was on the downward slide. Without money... how could you keep a woman like that?

“And then...and then...I followed her to a hotel. I followed her upstairs. To a room. I let her go in. She walked as a woman does to meet a favored lover. As she used to walk toward me. And then I waited for awhile, and I kicked the door in.”

Again the bottle went to his lips. Again it was lowered. Strong drink was not strong enough.

“There she was,” said Beauchene, as he peered out the porthole at the rainy gray world. “In the bed. Held in those black arms. And both of them looked at me, as if I was *nothing*. She had no shame. I think she must have known I was following her, because she’d been expecting me. Maybe that was part of the thrill, too. She smiled, just a little bit. Have you ever realized, *Monsieur* Gallatin, how deadly a smile can be?”

The question cut like a terrible blade.

“Oh,” Beauchene said softly, “I loved her more than life.”

Michael couldn’t see the man’s face. He didn’t want to see it.

“And furthermore,” Beauchene said in a voice strained with old agony still raw, “what would the fates decree, but to someday make me the master of a ship that bears *her* name?”

He turned toward Michael. Something of the rainy gray world was in his eyes. “You’re thinking now how much hate is in me. Yes, you’re right. I hate Caucasians, Orientals, Africans, Brits, Poles, Swedes, Norwegians, Dutchmen, Spaniards, Germans, Russians and all the rest of them. I hate Frenchmen and I hate French women. I hate the tall, the short, the plain

and the beautiful. I hate those who frown and those who smile. I hate the lucky in love and the unlucky in life. And most of all, *Monsieur* Gallatin, most of all...I hate—”

There was a knock at the door. “Captain?” It was the young African.

“Most of all, I hate men with green eyes,” Beauchene said, finishing his litany. He aimed his mouth at the door. “What do you *want*?”

“Sir...a motor launch is approaching on the port beam. Its signal lamp is asking us to hold our fire.”

Beauchene tilted the bottle to his lips and killed it. “Lower the ladder. One man should come aboard, and one man only. When he gets on deck, frisk him for weapons and blindfold him. Take him to the mess hall. And tell everyone my order is: no firing upon the launch or the man. Understand that?”

“Yes sir.” Kpanga went away.

“All right, then.” Beauchene came around the desk and picked up his Thompson.

He reloaded it with a fresh clip. “Don’t worry,” he told Michael, who had begun to worry. “I’ll be as sweet as cream cheese. You ready?”

Michael was.

They left the cabin to go meet their visitor.

NINE

The *Javelin's* Master

THE MAN STANDING in the mess hall had been blindfolded with a piece of black cloth. Enam Kpanga, Olaf Thorgrimsen and Billy Bowers were with him when Michael and Beauchene arrived. Olaf, brandishing his pistol, was walking around and around the *Javelin's* captain, as if to examine him from all angles. Billy stood at the door, his eyes dark from lack of sleep.

“May I remove my blindfold?” Manson Konnig asked in English with a crisp German accent. His voice betrayed no emotion, and not a half-quaver of fear.

“Oui,” said Beauchene.

Konnig reached up long-fingered hands, removed his perfectly-white captain's cap with its high top and spread-winged eagle insignia above the Nazi symbol, and then took off the blindfold. He had reddish-blond hair, trimmed short on the sides but thick on top, and a neat mustache and goatee more on the red side. He was wearing a long black raincoat over his uniform. His boots looked to have been recently painted with glossy ebony.

He put the blindfold in a pocket of his coat and returned the cap to his head. Then he adjusted it at a slight, jaunty angle.

The man's cautious dark brown eyes regarded first Beauchene and then Michael.

"Captain?" he asked, and offered his hand to the lycanthrope.

"I'm the master of this ship," said Beauchene, his eyelids at half-mast.

"Ah! Yes!" Konnig moved his hand toward Beauchene, but it was not accepted.

"Well," said the *Javelin's* master, as he closed his hand and dropped it to his side, "pardon me. I was expecting a *captain*, not a garbageman."

Beauchene smiled thinly. He kept his eyes on the Nazi. "You two men can leave. Wait outside. Kpanga, you stay."

"Oh, dear," said Konnig. "Must we have *that* in the room?"

"He stays."

Billy and Olaf left. Michael pulled a chair over and sat down, interested to watch this encounter play out and also to examine Konnig. The man was tall and slender, very fit-looking, and about thirty-five years old. He had a long aristocratic nose with the required pinched nostrils. His chin was square, his teeth well-polished, his demeanor that of German royalty slumming with the fieldhands. His smile was a little oily.

"Would you please not wave that weapon around?" Konnig was referring to the Thompson. "I believe you've already committed an act of war with it, by destroying my searchlight."

"Your searchlight hurt my eyes."

Konnig grunted softly. He put his hands behind his back and locked the fingers. "I'm detecting here a certain level of animosity."

"That may be because you killed two of my crew."

"Really? And how many of your crew are left?"

"Enough to count."

"Count for what? More coffins?"

"You worry about coffins for your own crew."

"Oh, I *surely* will!" Konnig began to stroll around the room, looking here and there. "You did kill one of ours, by the way. A young sailor from

Hamburg with a wife and two daughters. Shot right through the lungs. Died just before I left the ship. Does that make you proud?"

"It makes me wish more of my men had aimed better."

"You're *harsh!*" Konnig said with a small wicked grin. "A Frenchman from...where?"

"France."

"And what about you?" Konnig turned his attention to Michael. "Who and *what* are you?"

"I'm a man in a chair," said Michael.

"No, you're a man in a chair who will be dead before this day is done," Konnig answered. He was no longer grinning. "As all of you will be dead, if you refuse to turn your passengers over." He showed his palms. "Now *listen!* What is to be gained by a show of resistance? Nothing, in the long run. We all know that." He motioned toward Kpanga. "Even *that* one knows it. Captain, why do you wish your crew to be killed? And for a few people you really have no interest in? What should it matter to you and to your crew what becomes of those people?"

"Captain Beauchene," said Michael, "knows you'll kill everyone on board and sink this ship as soon as you get them. That's why it matters."

"*Wrong!*" Konnig stabbed a finger at him. "I am offering this: we receive the Wesshausers, and then we remove your crew. Yes, we do sink this freighter, but...My God, isn't she already half-sunk? Continuing on... we transport you, Captain Beauchene, your officers and your crew to Germany, where we will offer you lodging, food and all possible care. We're not *monsters*, sir! We just want what is ours."

"Lodging?" Beauchene's eyebrows had gone up. "For how fucking long?"

"Until," said Konnig, with a shrug, "we say it is in our interest to send you home. Now...that might be weeks, months, or years. We don't know the future. Who does?"

"Your big-mouthed Nazi boss seems to."

"Well, he's special," Konnig admitted. "One of a kind."

"We're not giving you the Wesshausers," said Michael.

"Pardon me!" Konnig frowned. "Who's the captain here? The dead man in the chair or the French garbageman?"

Beauchene laughed. It was an evil sound.

He walked purposefully toward Michael. With the remnant of that twisted laugh on his face, he wrenched the revolver from Michael's waistband. He cocked it, and then he turned and walked straight toward Manson Konnig, who blinked furiously and took a backward step.

Beauchene was faster. He put the revolver's barrel against the peak of Konnig's white cap. One shot blasted the cap from Konnig's head and made the eardrums sing.

Konnig staggered back and nearly fell before he righted himself. His mouth was open, his eyes furious at this crass indignity. But he was smart enough not to protest against a madman with a revolver in one hand and a Tommy gun in the other.

Beauchene stood over the smoke-stained cap. "I've always wanted to put a hole in one of those," he said, with a huge satisfied smile.

Konnig released the breath he'd been holding. A lock of reddish-blond hair had fallen over his forehead, which appeared to be sparkling with sudden sweat. His smile was less satisfaction and more stupefaction. "With my compliments," he managed to say.

"He's speaking for me, but I can speak for myself," said the Frenchman. "You can go back to your ship. We're sailing on, with our passengers."

"Not sailing very far, I'm afraid." Konnig was inspecting his scalp with the fingers of his right hand. "We'll have to stop you, of course. I will tell you that my mission involves two choices. I was told the first choice was to remove the Wesshausers and take them back alive. The second choice, if the first proved difficult, was to make sure no one on this poor, sad vessel ever passes across the North Sea. It's really up to you, sir."

"It may really be up to me to put this gun against your head and give your cap a twin."

"That wouldn't be wise," Konnig said. "And why not? Because if I am not back on my motor launch within another ten minutes, *Javelin* will start to miss me. And when she misses me, she gets very angry. She begins to shoot incendiary shells, which will burn this ship to a crisp and causes such agonies to human flesh. And my death does nothing for you, because I have three very experienced and capable officers all more than willing

to take charge. Now...we are going to destroy this ship, if you refuse our demands. Yes. But we will not use the incendiaries and we will gladly accept any crewmen we rescue. If *I* am dead, however, *Javelin* will run the survivors over until there is nothing left but a red smear in all this gray sea. So, you pompous little idiot, what is *your* choice?"

The African suddenly advanced on him. "Here!" he said angrily. "You can't speak to my captain like—"

Konnig's right arm straightened. There was a click of metal. In his hand appeared a small derringer, guided along a metal track laced from elbow to wrist. Michael realized it had been overlooked when Konnig was frisked, probably because the concentration was usually on armpits, sides and groin. Michael reached frantically for his pistol, which wasn't there.

There was a single loud *crack!* and Enam Kpanga's head was rocked backward.

His glasses flew off. A small round wound, deadly enough, had appeared at the center of his forehead. Kpanga's knees buckled and he slithered to the floor and twitched as he died.

Konnig stood over the body. "I've always wanted to put a hole in one of those," he said. With a snap of his wrist the derringer was retracted back along his forearm to the inner elbow.

Beauchene gave a shuddering breath and swung both guns up, pistol and Tommy. Michael was on his feet, advancing to pin Konnig's arms.

"Gentlemen?" Konnig said. "I am leaving now."

The absolute, chilling disinterest in his voice caused Beauchene's fingers to freeze on the triggers and Michael's shoes to stick to the floor.

"Honestly, what good would it do to even hold me here, much less kill me?" Konnig stepped over the dying or dead African on his path to the door. "I don't think I'll wear the blindfold out, if you don't mind." He narrowed his eyes at the expression of horror on Beauchene's face. "Surely...that *thing* wasn't worth the price of a funeral pyre, was he? Now, you have my word I won't use the incendiaries. Those are very nasty. Remember, sir, that we will rescue any crewman we find in the sea. You might spread that little bit of information around, to help matters. Oh...and I do have another cap." He paused at the door. "Do the two men outside know our agreement?"

When he received no reply from either Beauchene or Michael, Manson Konnig turned away and left the mess hall as nonchalantly as if he had just eaten a four-course meal and was on his way to take a nap.

They went after him.

Up on the deck, the crewmen who had guns were training their weapons on him. He strode to the port gunwale, where the rope ladder was still hanging over the side. The rain had lessened, the sea flat except for broad-backed rollers, visibility still closed-in. Konnig waved to the motor launch, which had kept pace with *Sofia*. It nosed in at the bottom of the ladder.

The captain of the *Javelin* started over the gunwale. He looked up as Beauchene approached, the pistol and Tommy gun ready to blow him to pieces. Rain streamed from the Frenchman's face and hair and his mouth was a grim gray line.

Konnig hesitated. "Sir!" he called to Michael, who was just behind Beauchene. "Restrain your captain, if you will. There is yet time for a peaceful conclusion to this. And your freighter would make such a lovely fire."

Beauchene didn't stop. He came across the deck like a juggernaut. He reached Konnig and put the Thompson's barrel under the man's chin.

"Surely," Konnig said, with a half-smile, "you wouldn't sacrifice your entire crew for a single nigger?"

Michael saw Beauchene's trigger finger twitch.

But the Thompson remained silent.

Konnig stared into the Frenchman's eyes for a few seconds, and then—satisfied with what he saw there—he pulled his throat away from the submachine gun and began his climb down the rungs.

The motor launch received him and he stepped under the shelter of its canopy. The boat turned to port and moved off through the shifting curtains of gloom.

Beauchene stood alone, as *Sofia* rocked him.

He abruptly turned away and walked quickly past Michael, who followed him because he knew where the captain was going.

In the mess hall, Beauchene approached the African's body. Blood had trickled like a pattern of scarlet lace from the bullet hole. Kpanga's

eyes were open, his forehead misshapen. Beauchene set the revolver and submachine gun on a table and bent down to pick up Kpanga's glasses. As he stood over the body, he wiped the lenses on his dirty once-white shirt.

Michael picked up the pistol and slid it back into his waistband. He said nothing; words were no good in this room.

Beauchene knelt, opened the African's coat and put the glasses in the inside pocket. He remained kneeling for a moment, with his head bent forward. His eyes didn't know where to rest. He made a noise like a gasp, and that was all.

He stood up.

"I'll have to find somebody to say something," he told Michael. "I didn't know him." He went to the door and paused. "We've got to get ready. You coming?"

Michael nodded. "I am."

They left the mess hall and the dead African on the floor and went back to the deck where the crew was waiting to be told.

TEN

Bucket Of Blood

BY LATE AFTERNOON the Wesshausers had been placed in a single stateroom with mattresses padding the walls. They tried to make a joke of it, something to do with a padded cell, but they knew exactly what was coming.

The crew had been fed steaks as tough as boot leather and energized with hot black coffee. Those who wanted or needed Benzedrine tablets got them from the doctor. The rest of the mattresses from the crews' bunks were roped to the gunwales and allowed to hang down nearly to the waterline; it was thin insurance against the five-inch shells, but might prevent a hull breach. Crewmen stood watch along the deck and from the crow's nests atop both masts. The rain fell intermittently, the sea foamed and swirled, and *Sofia* kept on her full-speed course to the land of Shakespeare. The *Javelin* made no appearance from the North Sea mists.

Michael Gallatin was standing near the bow, searching those mists with a pair of binoculars, when he heard her approaching. She stopped on the other side of a lifeboat that had unfortunately been punctured by fifteen slugs from *Javelin's* machine gun.

"You shouldn't be on deck," he said, lowering his glasses.

"I needed to walk."

"Keep walking, then. And get below as soon as you're done."

"You sound like you think you're my father."

"I'm amazed your father would let you out here. Don't you know what's likely to be happening any minute now?"

Marielle peered warily around the splintered lifeboat. She was wearing her buttoned-up overcoat with the collar upraised. Her blonde hair spilled out below a wine-red beret. She had her hands thrust into her pockets; though *Sofia* was rolling, Marielle had found her sea-legs.

"I know," she said, and she let her eyes graze past him. "My father knows, too. He appreciates the effort, but he thinks we'll be on our way to Germany before nightfall."

"Not if I can help it." He brought the binoculars back up and kept searching.

"My father doesn't think anyone can help it," she replied. "They've found us and they're going to take us, and that's that."

Michael grunted. "I wouldn't have thought your father was a quitter. Or you either, for that matter."

"It's not quitting. It's being accepting of reality. That's what my father says."

"Whose reality? Hitler's?" Michael let the question hang. He lowered the glasses again and turned his head so he could look directly into her aquamarine eyes. She pulled back just a little, but not by much. "Your father's been very brave so far. He *must* be a brave man, to have risked his family. To have risked everything, really. Well, I'm not giving up and neither is the captain and crew of this ship. So why should he?"

"He doesn't want anyone else to be hurt."

"Someone's going to be hurt, whether they take you off this ship or not. It's the Nazi way." He gave her a brief tight smile.

She studied him for a moment with a number of sidelong glances. "There's something strange about you," she decided. And amended the word: "*Different*, I mean."

"Possibly so." He wondered if she could sense the animal in his soul cage.

She stared out upon the sea. "I think," she said, "you're a gentleman pretending to be a roughneck."

"That's interesting." Again he scanned the mists with his glasses. "I've always thought of myself as a roughneck pretending to be a gentleman."

"You're hiding something," she said.

"Who isn't?"

"What you're hiding...isn't like anyone else. It's..." Marielle frowned. "Very deep," she finished.

"Not so very deep," Michael said, but he didn't wish to say anything more.

She was silent for awhile. Michael suddenly wished she would go away, because he thought she could see more than she realized.

"Do you think I'm crippled?" she suddenly asked. "Is that why you told me the story about Vulcan? Because he was crippled, too?"

"I told you the story about Vulcan because I could see him working at his forge in the sky."

"No," she said, and abruptly she took a lurching step forward on her high shoe and the sixteen-year-old girl regarded him with the calm and knowing composure of a woman. "Herr Gallatin, I don't ask anyone to feel sorry for me. I don't want that, and I never have. I don't really like being as I am. I don't like the sound I make as I walk. I don't like the attention it draws, because it's always people feeling sorry for me. Either that, or laughing at me behind my back. But I can abide that, better than the other. I can't stand looking into the faces of people and seeing what they're thinking of me, that I'm a poor pitiful child who wears a heavy shoe and can never walk right and can never dance. But I never ask anyone to feel sorry for me, Herr Gallatin. And I saw that in your face the first time I looked at you. I see that in many faces aboard this ship. So, yes, I may be crippled and I may not wish to be around people very much, for just the reasons I've said, but..."

And here she hesitated, as if to draw up from her depths what she really had to say.

"Please," she said, and in her eyes there gleamed the bright shine of tears, "do not cripple my dignity."

He faced her directly. "I would never dream of such a thing," he said. "I told you about Vulcan not because he was crippled, but because he knew

pain. I think *you* know pain, Marielle. I think that's what *you* hide, very deep. And I think you have to find a way to let it go, so you can forge a life."

Her eyes were glassy. Her mouth twisted a bit. "What do *you* know of it?" she asked, in a bitter whisper.

How to answer such a question? he wondered. He realized she couldn't see herself. She couldn't see her potential for beauty, or for joy. She couldn't see how lovely her eyes were, or how soft was her hair. She couldn't see the German roses in her cheeks, or her own svelte slim body beneath the shapeless overcoat. She could only see the malformed leg and the heavy shoe that weighted her like an anchor to the earth. And of all the faces that held pity for her, no one held more pity than the face in the mirror.

A lookout shouted from the aft crow's nest. Another shout replied, over on the starboard side.

The *Javelin* was coming. Michael had expected it from the port side. Even though he couldn't see the warship, he realized from the crew's warning shouts that it had crossed their stern and was probably even now swinging its guns toward the target.

Billy Bowers stood within calling distance. Michael said, "Billy! Come here! Get the girl below!"

Billy hurried over and, though Marielle recoiled in abject fear, he took her hand. "I won't bite you!" he said. She resisted him and jerked free. She tried to stagger away, but she lost her balance and fell against the gunwale. "Damn it, girl! Hold *still*!" Billy told her, and then he scooped her up in his arms and nearly ran with her across the deck.

Michael strode to the starboard side. And there through the glistening mist, just barely visible, was the deadly silhouette of Manson Konnig's *Javelin*.

It was too distant for any bullet from *Sofia* to reach. Michael saw flame gout from the forward cannon and heard the blast, and he realized with a sinking heart that in a few moments *Sofia* might well be reduced to a bucket of blood.

Water shot up just short of the hull. The crewmen with rifles were firing, as if it would do any good. The next shell from *Javelin* sizzled over the deck

and spewed up water on the port side. Getting the range, Michael thought. Where the hell was *Beauchene*? As if he could do any good, either!

Michael cursed Valentine Vivian. One thing was certain: a wolf could drown as easily as a man.

The third shell hit *Sofia* amidships, just above the waterline. The shock may have been cushioned by a mattress, but who could say? A vibration rippled across the deck. Another shell cut a gash across the forward mast. And then both of *Javelin's* guns began firing in rapid succession, and in a matter of seconds the shrieking projectiles slammed one after the other into *Sofia's* hull, her deck and her superstructure.

The freighter heeled to port. Michael lost his footing and was thrown back against a capstan. He went down to his knees, and there felt what must have been another shell rush past him with a high-pitched whine and a smell of burned matches. Behind him, a lifeboat exploded into kindling. Something crashed against metal and screamed off into the air. He heard shells hitting like punches being thrown against human flesh. A figure stumbled past him, holding the bleeding stump of a right arm. *Sofia* pitched back and forth under the barrage, and when Michael looked toward the wheelhouse he saw holes being torn in the superstructure as if it were made of flimsy cardboard. More portholes exploded. The ship shuddered along her length, and still the shells continued to strike.

A lycanthrope could know horror. He knew it, when he saw the glass windshield of the wheelhouse blow inward from a direct hit.

Over the ear-blasting noise of shellfire and the rending of steel he heard a man screaming and did not know if it was his own voice or the voice of a comrade.

He knew only that the ship's wheel was most likely unmanned, or in the best case helmed by a Swede whose eyes had been cut to pieces by flying glass.

He got up off his knees and ran across the deck, which shivered like the spine of a kicked dog. He reached the staircase and climbed up, and as he climbed he saw the red flames spouting from *Javelin's* guns and *Sofia* being torn apart below him.

On the bridge, the Russian radioman was fighting for control of the wheel. The Swede lay with a blood mask for a face and his throat sliced open. Medina had collapsed in his own pool of gore next to the engine order telegraph. Overhead, cables dangled down and electric sparks jumped. A fresh insult of rain swept through the opening where the windshield had been. *Sofia*, gone mad with pain, was turning herself starboard toward *Javelin* as if to end her agonies.

“I’ve got it!” Michael shouted, and he grasped the spokes of the glass-slashed wheel and wrenched it to port. How long did it take for the rudder to respond? *Sofia* went on, heedless of human hands. He thought the rudder must have been blasted away. Under his feet, the bloody planks jumped from the percussion of more shell hits. A hot sizzling thing, smoking like a comet, burst up from *Sofia*’s deck into the air.

Michael felt the rudder bite hold and the freighter begin to turn. He put his back into the wheel. The Russian radioman retreated to give him space. Fire suddenly rippled along the torn electrical cables above Michael’s head. Still the ship was turning, responding by slow inches. Waterspouts shot up on either side of *Sofia* and then through the rain that flew into his eyes Michael saw ahead of them a white mass that hid the sea.

A fogbank, he realized. He glanced at the engine telegraph. The pointer was set to *All Ahead Flank*, the fastest possible speed order. Medina must have rung it before the wheelhouse was hit. The bow was headed right into the fog. So be it, Michael thought.

And then: *Go, you bitch!*

Someone shoved him aside.

Gustave Beauchene, blood streaming from a wound on his forehead and his shirt and yellow rainslicker streaked with it, took charge of the wheel. He, too, had seen the fogbank. Shells crashed into *Sofia*’s stern. The thunder of cannonfire echoed across the sea. Michael smelled blood and gunpowder and the sweat of fear. “Get to the stern!” Beauchene shouted to the Russian. “Find whoever you can and start throwing the ropes and nets in our wake! Go, *now!*”

The Russian ran out and down the stairway. Michael realized Beauchene was desperately hoping something might foul *Javelin*’s props, because the warship was going to be right behind them.

Trembling, *Sofia* entered the fog.

It closed around the freighter like a huge cloud. In a matter of seconds, tendrils of fog drifted across the deck and visibility was cut to maybe twenty meters. The sound of the diesels pulsed against the white thickness. “*Allez, allez!*” Beauchene whispered, as blood ran down through the seams of his face to his chin.

In another moment he turned the wheel a few degrees to port. Then again to starboard. White fog swirled into the wheelhouse, the breath of ghosts. Michael went into Beauchene’s cabin and found a nasty oil-stained rag; he brought it out and gave it to the captain, who silently pressed it against the wound on his forehead.

Beauchene turned the wheel to port once more. He said, “Hold her steady,” and Michael took the helm. Beauchene rang up a change on the telegraph: *All Stop*.

The voices of the big diesels faded to a low rumble.

Then...there was only the hiss of the fog and the sea, the pained creaks of *Sofia*’s injured flesh and bones, and the noise of men calling to each other in the gloom.

Sofia drifted.

Beauchene fetched a fire extinguisher from the radio room and sprayed out the overhead flames. His bloody face stared impassively at Michael Gallatin.

His voice was a dry croak. “I’m going to go find out the damage. If we’re sinking or not. I’m going to go find out how many men have just died. And *your* people may be dead, too. That may be for the best, for *them*. We can’t take another beating like that, do you understand?”

Michael answered, “I understand.”

“She’s been *hurt*,” said Beauchene, as if that explained everything.

Then the *Sofia*’s master, suddenly a very small and weary man, turned away and stumbled down the stairs where his bloody handprints stained the rail.

ELEVEN

The Specialist

TWELVE MEN WOUNDED, four severely. Five men dead, including the doctor when the infirmary was hit by two shells one nearly after the other. The pumps working at full capacity to fight the gushing leak near the stern until a patch could be welded in. Some electrical damage forward. Many new hull, deck and superstructure scars, though nothing critical. Damage to one of the engines due to running at flank speed, but thankfully the engineers vowed to repair it within six hours.

Darkness fell. The fog remained. All of *Sofia's* lights were cut except for a few bulbs belowdecks. Shadows began to claim the ship.

“Not very fucking good,” was Beauchene’s report to the remainder of the crew in the mess hall. A bandage was plastered to his forehead, his eyes puffed with pain. “We’re alive and afloat, but when this fog clears we’re dead, plain and simple. We’ve got three lifeboats left. I’m telling you that anyone who wants to strike out on their own can go. You can take some food and water. If you’re going, dress warm and get out *now*. Maybe you’ll be picked up by another freighter and you’ll live to tell the tale. All right, then. God be with you.”

The three lifeboats stayed where they were.

The night moved on.

Crewmen stood watch in their fields of fog. They listened for the throb of engine noise, but if *Javelin* was out there she was gliding.

They had no doubt *Javelin* was out there.

Beauchene did have a plan, of sorts. Every so often he ordered the engine room to provide enough power to creep forward a few hundred meters, then *Sofia* was allowed to drift again. The intent was to keep the noise down, keep the bow aimed toward England, and maybe—maybe—get out on the other side of this fogbank before *Javelin* could find them. In the meantime, the radio jamming continued and no messages could get through.

Around midnight, as some of the crew came to fill their cups from the bottomless coffee pot, Michael sat at a table with Olaf Thorgrimsen and Billy Bowers. The cook had supplied some raspberry pie which actually tasted of raspberries, showing that pressure was good for the kitchen. Currents of cigarette smoke moved slowly in the air, and all conversation was hushed.

A gaunt, pallid man who entered the mess hall immediately became the center of attention.

Paul Wesshauser, in his black trousers and gray sweater, poured himself a cup of coffee. His eyes were dark-hollowed beneath his glasses. He looked like a man bearing a heavy burden. He sat down at a table by himself, spooned a half-cup of sugar into his joe, lit a cigarette and inhaled to the roots of his lungs.

Michael left his own table and walked the few paces to Wesshauser's. "Do you mind if I sit with you?"

Wesshauser shrugged, and Michael sat down.

"You holding up?" Michael asked; it was a stupid question, from the look of the man.

"I'm all right." Wesshauser drew the smoke in again and let it slowly seep from his mouth. "How many died for me today?"

"Five."

"Five," Wesshauser repeated. He examined the burning end of his cigarette. "My God. I never meant for this to happen."

“Of course not. And you’re not to blame for the deaths.”

“Yes, I am.” Wesshauser’s eyes flashed. “If I hadn’t taken it in mind to leave Germany, then...everything would be as it was.”

“That’s right,” Michael agreed. He took a sip of his own black coffee. “You’d still be in Germany, and you’d be working for the Nazis. A fine future that would be. Making weapons for them? You *do* make weapons, correct?” Michael hadn’t been told exactly what Wesshauser’s area of expertise was.

“I’m a designer,” said the man.

“You make that sound very elegant.” Michael watched the smoke drift from Wesshauser’s mouth. “I think you did the right thing. The *only* thing. If you feel the Nazis would misuse what you design then you had no choice but to get out. And it took a lot of courage to get this far.”

“Yes, I should be proud of myself for killing so many men, and for ultimately killing my wife, daughter and son.” Wesshauser smiled without humor. “Because that’s what I’ve done.” He bit down on the cigarette. “I went to see Captain Beauchene. To ask him to give us up. Do you know what he told me?”

“No, what?”

“He said he would not allow his crew to be killed like sheep. He said they would die as men, and that those who had already sacrificed their lives would not be dishonored. So, he said...no, he would not give us up. I stood before him and begged. And he told me to get out while I could still walk.”

“Good advice,” Michael said. He knew what part of it was: Gustave Beauchene the garbageman versus Manson Konning the aristocrat. Michael found himself staring at the place on the floor where Enam Kpanga had died. A mop had soaked up the blood and the canvas-shrouded body had been consigned to the sea. “My daughter told me you’ve spoken with her.” Wesshauser adjusted his glasses as if to view Michael from a different angle. “That story about Vulcan. She found that very interesting. You know, she keeps to herself quite a bit.”

“Does she?”

“Oh, yes. It’s the leg, of course. And the *shoe*. She’s terribly shy about it. She doesn’t wish to stand out in that way. Her mother and I...we do our

best to keep her from feeling so bad about herself, but...you know...she is crippled.”

“Hm,” Michael said.

“It’s difficult,” Wesshauser went on, “to hold such standards of perfection and have a daughter who...is afflicted. My own father was a perfectionist. He was the great shining example of the German engineer. Everything should fit together just so. And I have led my life the same way. So...it’s difficult... when—”

“Everything doesn’t fit together just so?” Michael interrupted.

“Yes. Difficult,” said Wesshauser. “And difficult for Marielle also.”

“I’m sure.” Michael finished off his coffee. He was ready to rejoin Olaf and Billy.

“But my high standards have suited me well,” Wesshauser told him. He drew deeply again from his cigarette. “That’s why they want to stop me from getting to England. I know what’s coming, very soon. They don’t want the British Navy to have access to my knowledge of torpedoes.”

“Hm,” Michael said once more, for want of a better comment. He thought this man was probably a self-important prick. He pushed his chair back and stood up. “Thank you for your time,” he said, with a chill in it. He took his empty coffee cup back to the big stainless steel dispenser to fill it up again.

But before he got there the words *my knowledge of torpedoes* hit him. He stopped abruptly, with an idea lodged in his mind. A man behind him—one of the engineers—bumped into him and went around.

“Wesshauser,” Michael said when he returned to the man’s table. The eyeglasses peered up at him from behind the pall of smoke. “Could you... *make* a torpedo?”

“Make a torpedo,” Wesshauser repeated, without inflection.

“That’s right. You’re the specialist. Could you make one? Put it together from... well...whatever’s on this ship.”

“I have no idea what’s on this ship. It goes without saying that I’d need high explosives. There would have to be a steel casing and a detonator.” He frowned and dropped the cigarette butt into his cup. “What are you carrying?”

“Machine parts, ball bearings, hardwood logs and fertilizer.”

“Fertilizer,” Wesshauser said.

“That’s right. About three hundred oil drums full. Just common stuff, I understand.”

“Made with ammonium nitrate?”

“I don’t know.”

“And of course you have diesel fuel?”

“Yes.”

Wesshauser nodded. His eyes looked shiny. “Do you realize that amount of ammonium nitrate could detonate and blow this ship into outer space? And that combined with diesel fuel, the explosive compound is made *certain* to blow?”

Michael swallowed. “I...suppose...you’re saying—”

“I’m saying if the fertilizer is made with ammonium nitrate, you are carrying many hundreds of high explosive devices on this freighter. My God! Are you people *insane*? What are your conditions to prevent oxidation in the hold?”

“There are fans,” Michael said lamely. “When they’re turned on.”

Wesshauser stood up. “Listen to me!” His voice was urgent, because he’d realized that here might be—*might be*—a way out. “Do you have a machine shop? A welding station?”

“Yes. Both.”

“No shortage of steel.” Wesshauser was talking to himself. Then, to Michael: “Machine parts, did you say? Of what nature?”

“You’d have to ask the captain. Even he might not know.”

“All right, all right.” Wesshauser ran his fingers across his mouth. “Let’s say a watertight casing can be made and the machine parts would be suitable to form a detonator. Wait...wait!” He shook his head. “No. Ridiculous! There’s no possible way to *deliver* the weapon. No torpedo tube, no way of *aiming* the thing.” His hand crept up and his forefinger beat against a vein at his right temple as if to wake up a sleeping part of his brain. “Mathematics,” he said. “There’s so much mathematics involved in aiming and delivering a torpedo. And even so...the odds are that the weapon will not hit its target. This ship...there’s no possible way to send a torpedo from this ship to strike the *Javelin*. I could make a dozen torpedoes, if I had the time and materials, but without a delivery device—”

Wesshauser stopped speaking. He blinked suddenly, as if startled by a flash.

“You’re carrying logs,” he said. “What length are they?”

“Varied lengths. Five to ten meters. Why?”

“Herr Gallatin,” said the German, “we need to see Captain Beauchene. *Now.*” They climbed the stairs into the wounded bridge, where fog swirled in through the opening where the glass had been. A single low lantern illuminated *Sofia’s* master, who clung to the wheel of the drifting vessel with one hand and held in the other a fresh—or nearly, since it was again half-empty—bottle of brandy.

“What the *fuck* do you two want?” he growled.

In Beauchene’s cabin, revealed by the lantern’s candle, Wesshauser leaned over the desk and on a piece of fly-specked paper drew a diagram with a fountain pen.

“Very well, I understand the torpedo part,” Beauchene said as he and Michael watched the diagram take shape. “I understand about the fertilizer.” The document signed by the cargo master indicated the presence of ammonium nitrate in the black oil drums. “I understand about making a casing and a detonator and all that...but *what* are you scribbling?”

“A design,” Wesshauser explained, with the candle’s glow in his glasses, “to make this *ship* the aiming and delivery device. Look here,” he said, and tapped with the pen’s point. “The bow. We need a steel socket attached to the bow at the waterline. Something with clamps that can hold a ten-meter-long hardwood log. If you have saws, the log itself should be squared off from end to end and reinforced with steel on all sides to keep it rigid. Then...here...you see?”

“I’m looking, but I’m not seeing. *Yet,*” Beauchene added.

“Here, at the far end of the log, another steel socket should be inserted. That should also have clamps to hold the torpedo steady. The torpedo will be underwater, at a depth of possibly a meter or so. You see what I’ve drawn?”

“A ramming device,” Michael said.

“An *aiming* device,” Wesshauser corrected. “A torpedo on the end of a steel-reinforced beam, secured to the ship’s bow. With any luck, the detonator makes contact with *Javelin* under the waterline, and sends an

electrical spark into the explosive packing. Add to the packing a payload of ball bearings, and the potential for damage to *Javelin* is further increased. It's going to be at best an uncertain proposition, because of the imperfect working conditions...but if I can find the right elements on board, I believe I can make this torpedo."

Beauchene frowned. "There is one small problem here, sir," he said dryly. "*Un peu de pas*. We would have to be, as I calculate with my great brain, less than ten meters from *Javelin* to make this work. As you gentlemen may recall, *Javelin* has large fucking guns. So how, sir, do we get within ten meters of *Javelin* without being blown to pieces?" He finished his question with an eye-watering swig of brandy.

"We have to become the hunters," Michael spoke up, seeing the plan. "We have to seek out *Javelin* and go on the attack. It's the only way."

"In this fog?" Beauchene asked. "How do we find a ship in this? And if it clears as we're charging for her, won't she just speed out of danger?"

"We have to hope the fog holds, then," said the German. "No one on *Javelin* will be expecting our surprise. Herr Gallatin is correct; it's the only way."

"If they can't find us—and God, I hope they can't—then we can't find them."

"That may not be entirely true," Michael said. "The continuous jamming signal. Can the radioman determine the direction that's coming from?"

"I have no idea." The radioman had been released from duty for the night, and the radio shut down even as the jamming cacophony shrieked on. "Maybe he could twiddle his dials and his thumbs and make an educated guess, I don't know."

He's a Russian, Michael thought. He remembered a saying from his life in the circus: Russians know from which way the wind blows and from which way the shit flows.

"An educated guess might do," he said.

Beauchene looked from Michael to Wesshauser and back again, searching for either sanity or hope. He took another long drink. "It'll be dawn in five hours," he told the German. "What do you need to get started?"

TWELVE

Dead Ahead

LAMPS HUNG FROM *Sofia's* bow. By their fog-dimmed glow, men worked from three lifeboats in the swells. A cable snaked down to an air-powered rivet gun, which made a tremendous racket in use. The work was charged with tension, because if a watch on *Javelin* heard that noise and the ship followed it, for most men dawn might never come.

A steel cage-like apparatus with a pair of claw-shaped clamps had been riveted in position just at the waterline. Now, moving ponderously and slowly, the men in the boats guided what appeared to be a ten-meter-long gray steel beam into the cage. The clamps were shut down upon it and fastened tight with wrenches. A smaller version of the cage-like device was already bolted to the far end of the squared-off log that masqueraded as a steel beam. There was a groove within the cage for a cylindrical object to be inserted and seized by the second pair of clamps.

A wooden seat descended between a pair of ropes. Dylan Custis came down with a bucket of yellow paint and a brush. He began to paint upon

the bow a pair of female eyes complete with eyelashes, as below him the other men watched and waited.

Custis had approached Captain Beauchene in Michael Gallatin's presence.

You know, cap'n, Custis had said, this ship, she doan got much sense. Doan got what she needs to live, cap'n. Now if she's gone be taking a big fish in her teeth and she ain't got but the one chance, doan you think she better have some eyes to see with? Beauchene had agreed that, yes, *Sofia* did need a pair of eyes to see with.

I'll make 'em so pretty, Custis had promised, you'll fall in love with her all over some more.

They waited on deck for the torpedo that was being put together in a bulb-lit room where the welding torch burned bright blue and a grinding machine thinned small metal parts to nearly perfect specifications. But perfect enough? No one could say.

Michael stood on deck, watching the work at the bow with a group of other men.

Beauchene leaned over the side. There was no need to bark orders because the men knew they were fighting for their lives; perfection in this case might be an impossibility, but the work was going to be damned good enough.

Dawn was about an hour away.

Beauchene went below to find out if the shark had teeth yet.

Michael heard the girl coming. No one even looked in her direction; she was one of them by now. Marielle stood beside him, peering over the dented gunwale. When he glanced at her, she gave him a quick nervous smile and he answered with a nod. Then he noted Billy Bowers come up on her other side, and Billy also leaned over the gunwale to watch.

Michael thought that three was a crowd. He stepped back, and when he did he saw Billy silently slide his hand into hers, and she just as silently accepted it, and Michael wondered at how shipboard romances could even happen on a freighter in a sea chase. Maybe a spark had been thrown from Vulcan's forge, he thought. Falling all that way to earth it had flared with uncanny light, and drifting down upon the *Sofia* it illuminated a boy carrying a girl in his arms to safety. Perhaps, he thought, a future for two

people could be sealed with the touch of a crippled god's fire. He hoped it was so.

As dawn began to lighten the fog, the torpedo was brought up on a handcart.

Following behind the men who pushed it forward were Captain Beauchene, Paul Wesshauser, the two engineers, the mechanics, the electrician, the pump operators, the able seamen and the ordinary seamen. The torpedo was a little over three meters in length and possibly half a meter around at its midsection. From its bullet-shaped tip protruded a trio of metal prongs. Its steel skin was mottled yellow and black, but words were written in white upon the evil-looking hide. Not just words, Michael realized in another moment, but *names*. Everyone who'd worked on the torpedo had written his name on it in white paint, probably waterproof, and it appeared that all the men who followed behind the handcart had added their names as well.

"Come on!" Beauchene told the crew on deck. "Come sign your names!" He was holding a can of white paint with a small brush resting in it, and this he set down on the handcart beside the weapon.

They came. The brush scrawled name after name, until at last Beauchene offered it to Michael.

"Sign it," he said.

It was an order.

Michael dipped the brush into the paint and found a clean place to sign. He noted the names of the wounded and dead written along the torpedo's length. He noted also a particular name: *Enam Kpanga*.

He wrote *Michael Gallatin*, and then he gave the paint can and the brush to the captain, who added the final name up near the detonator.

A portable hoist on lock-down wheels was set at the bow. Heavy cables supported the torpedo, which Michael figured probably weighed in the neighborhood of five hundred pounds. If anything went wrong lowering the torpedo over the side to the men in the boats, the dangerous fish would slide directly to the North Sea's bottom. It was going to be a tricky operation, because if that thing got out of balance and started swinging on the cables its weight could break bones and shatter the lifeboats. Also, nobody

wanted the detonator to hit *Sofia*, though Wesshauser had already told Beauchene and Michael that it would be calculated to explode from an impact at a speed of five knots or above.

“Easy, easy!” Beauchene cautioned as a winch turned and the torpedo went down to meet the upraised arms. “Play out the cables!” he said to the hoist’s operator. Then, louder: “Christ! Not so *fast*!”

The torpedo, still cabled to the ship, was placed across two boats and ferried over the swells to the business end of the steel-reinforced beam. Some of the men from the third boat slipped into the cold sea. Two of them wore frogmen’s masks and fins, used for clearing the props and working beneath the hull. The insertion of the torpedo into its groove and the closing of the clamps to grip it would have to be done a meter underwater.

The hoist operator kept letting the cables play out to give the workers enough slack.

Then the two boats were in position. Working slowly and methodically, the crewmen manhandled the weapon into the water, where its natural inclination was to sink to the mud seven hundred meters below. The winding in of slack in the attached cables by the hoist operator prevented that disaster.

The frogmen guided the torpedo into its steel socket. Tools were passed down from the boats to tighten the clamps. When that was done and a ‘success’ signal shown by an upraised fist, the cables were unhooked. The torpedo stayed fixed in place in its cage and clamps, its detonator almost precisely a meter underwater.

The frogmen and the other helpers climbed back aboard the third boat. The lifeboats came back alongside and the crew, abandoning their craft to the whim of the sea, ascended on rope ladders. The cold and wet were given blankets and hot coffee.

It was a job well done, Michael thought.

Sofia was ready to be a huntress.

Paltry streams of gray light were beginning to pierce the fog. Beauchene told the crew to take their stations and be ready for action. He asked Michael to come with him to the bridge. In the wheelhouse, he rang up

All Ahead Standard on the engine telegraph. The ship began to move through the waves, gradually gaining speed. In the radio room, the Russian was listening to the jamming signal and according to the slight changes in volume trying to triangulate a position of origin.

Michael saw nothing ahead but fog and sea.

“Port, thirty degrees,” the radioman called. Beauchene repeated the call and made the course correction. Then, after a few minutes: “Starboard, twelve degrees.” “Starboard, twelve degrees,” Beauchene called back. The wheel was turned to the right, and Michael watched the needle of the ship’s binnacle-mounted compass move.

The fog remained unbroken.

Twenty minutes passed by on Michael’s ancient pocketwatch. The Russian called out, “Starboard, eight degrees.”

The call was repeated, the wheel turned the rudder and the compass needle moved once more.

Sofia went on, over rolling waves into a realm of softly-floating sea clouds.

Michael felt the tension throb in the pit of his stomach. He took the revolver from his waistband, just to hold something sturdy. If the Russian miscalculated, *Javelin* could sight *Sofia* first and bring those guns to bear at pointblank range.

“Hold steady,” called the Russian.

“Steady,” said Beauchene. His knuckles were white on the wheel.

Salt wind blew into Michael’s face through the rectangular hole where the windshield had been. In it he smelled the ship: oil, timbers, old grease-stained canvas, the burnt odor of shell damage, the rank unwashed flesh of working men and the higher, more raw scent of their fear.

He thought he was sweating under his red plaid shirt, but then he realized the wolf hairs were coming up across his back and chest. Rising up in arcs and swirls and strange patterns like primeval symbols unknown to any modern man, and then falling back again beneath the itchy human skin. He had a compelling urge to either run or pee, and he was reminded after all this time that he’d felt the exact same way after he’d killed Octavius Zloy. In that instance, he’d left a puddle of piss as he was caught between worlds and squatting on the floor.

There was nowhere to run, and he didn't think the captain would enjoy watching him stain the boards.

"Yuri!" Beauchene called. "Do you have a distance?"

"Impossible to be exact, sir."

"Then don't be exact, just give me your best estimate."

A silence followed, during which the Russian must have been either listening or calculating. "I'd say...six hundred, seven hundred meters. That's my best."

"Straight ahead?"

"Yes, sir."

Beauchene said to Michael, "Take the wheel." When Michael had it, Beauchene rang up the command to the engine room: *All Ahead Flank*.

Sofia drove forward, her torpedo thrust out like an iron fist.

"Move aside," the captain told Michael as he returned to the helm.

But before the transfer could be made there was a shout toward the stern. Another voice rose up, unintelligible but urgent. Beauchene peered into the fog along the torpedo's path, his eyes narrowed. Michael kept the wheel steady. The thrum of laboring engines pulsed along *Sofia's* length. Down on the portside deck, someone shouted: "*Ship! Dead ahead!*"

They were upon it before Michael could pull in another breath.

It was not there and then suddenly it was. Beauchene gave a strangled cry of alarm. *Javelin* was crossing their bow at a slight angle toward them. Michael saw some of the enemy crewmen at a rail amidships, pointing at *Sofia*. The deck guns, which must have been constantly manned, began to swivel toward the freighter.

But it was going to be too late.

One of the guns got off a shot that blistered paint along the port side of the wheelhouse. And then Beauchene was standing beside Michael and wrenching the wheel to starboard before *Javelin* could slide past. Michael saw the torpedo strike *Javelin* just forward of amidships on the starboard side.

A deadly pair of seconds passed.

Then came the blast.

The forge of Vulcan blazed along *Javelin's* hull. A huge geyser of white water rose up and spread out, and with it the ear-splitting noise of rending

steel, multiple thunders and runaway locomotives smashing together. The shockwave came back upon *Sofia* and hit her against her prow like Neptune's gigantic shoulder. The entire ship was shoved backward, waves smacking against the hull with the hollow booms of heavy artillery. Beauchene went to the floorboards as Michael clung to the wheel. *Sofia* rose up and pitched downward. Part of the geyser fell upon her deck with enough power to knock men senseless but make them think they were drowning first. Water slammed down on the wheelhouse's roof. The whip-saw motion of the wheel nearly broke Michael's wrists as he hung tight, but *Sofia's* next rise and fall and pitch to starboard jarred him loose and he staggered back and fell as the wheel spun to its own direction.

There was a secondary explosion from *Javelin*. A hot wind shredded the fog. Burning things flew through the air and landed on *Sofia's* deck. Michael struggled up in time to see *Javelin's* length crash against *Sofia*, starboard to port, in what might have been a dance of death.

For then all Hell opened.

A white-hot fireball exploded seemingly from beneath *Javelin's* forward deck. Funnels, flaming rope, parts of bodies and a cannon barrel were blown into the sky. The planking blazed with a violet glow as if from a gas flame. Suddenly the entire forward part of the ship convulsed with a shriek of steel. Bright red and purple objects trailing wakes of sizzling fire began to burst upward through the deck, throwing flame to all sides. They hissed upward into the red-lit fog.

Michael knew. "A spark's hit the ammo! The incendiary shells are cooking off!"

Beauchene leaped to the engine telegraph and frantically rang for *Back Emergency*.

As the fireballs shot upward from the doomed *Javelin* and spread voracious flames over the wheelhouse and deck, a massive wall of gray smoke erupted from the warship and rolled across *Sofia*. In it, burning men desperately scrambled over the gunwales from one ship to the other. Some of them had guns, were firing and were quickly shot by *Sofia's* armed crewmen, but others vanished into the murk. Huge flames were shooting up from *Javelin*. There were screams and pleas for mercy. As *Sofia's* engines

■ Robert McCammon

began to back the ship off from the conflagration, the gap between the vessels widened and more burning men threw themselves into the sea.

Michael watched, his face drawn and tired. The reflection of flame writhed in his eyes.

He thought, grimly, that the sharks today would not have to search very long for good pieces of meat.

Javelin was leaning over on the starboard side. She was afire from stem to stern.

Almost out of sheer damned spite, she shot three more incendiaries at *Sofia* that sizzled over the ship and hit the choppy sea, and then the freighter backed off into the fog.

THIRTEEN

A Good Day's Work

NEARING NIGHTFALL, *SOPIA* was a hospital ship without a doctor.

Beauchene had guided his girl back into the smoke and fire to rescue survivors. They'd pulled from the sea fourteen badly burned men and six more who could at least walk. The sharks were indeed already returning to the sea what had walked on land. There was no sign of Manson Konnig's body. It was going to be a long trip, the rest of the way to England, and there would surely be more canvas shrouds lowered over the side. For some of those burned scarecrows, it would be the merciful thing.

Eight *Javelin* crewmen were found hiding aboard *Sofia*, one of them in the closet of the second of V. Vivian's unused staterooms. Another was hiding down a ventilation funnel. A third had to be shot because he attacked Olaf Thorgrimsen with a pocketknife.

Sofia was a mess. With the crumpled bow that had crossed her eyes, she could barely make four knots. Multiple leaks forward had been contained and the pumps were at work, but she was badly injured. Rough weather, Beauchene told Michael at a meeting in the mess hall, could bring the sea

rushing in through the patches and now they had not a single lifeboat. *Javelin's* heat had scorched the portside of *Sofia's* superstructure and blackened her gunwales. The torpedo's detonation had burst the eardrums and the resultant shockwave had broken the bones of more than one man. Every porthole on the ship had been either blown inward or cracked.

One thing could be said for Paul Wesshauser, in Beauchene's opinion. The skinny bastard knew how to pack a long dick.

Michael suggested the fans ought to be turned on in the fertilizer hold.

Beauchene and Michael took a walk around the singed deck near seven o'clock. The captain carried his Thompson and Michael his revolver, because two hours ago another *Javelin* crewman had been found curled up under a tarpaulin. Most of *Sofia's* lamps that still worked had been turned on. The crew was being fed and food was being prepared for the wounded prisoners, who'd been put into one of the forward holds. A dependable Pole had been named first mate and was manning the helm. A radio SOS had gone out and received a reply, and *Sofia* was meeting with the British freighter *Arthurian* for medical help and supplies around ten. Then the Russian, a good day's work done, went to eat his dinner and get some sleep.

Sofia's smashed nose headed west. Above the sea, stars filled the sky.

"She's not pretty but she's tough," Beauchene told Michael as they walked. "I think we'll make it all the way. *If* we have a calm sea. And *if* those patches hold. Ah, maybe we can get better equipment from your British friends, eh?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Come on, *mon ami*," he said, and he reached up to clap Michael on the shoulder. "I've got another bottle."

They climbed the scorched stairs to the wheelhouse, Michael following the captain. A few low lamps burned on the bridge. The first thing the two men saw was that the wheel was unmanned and *Sofia* was just beginning to drift off-course. The second thing was that the dependable Pole lay on the boards on his face with blood on the back of his sandy-haired head.

The third thing they saw was a ragged and burned figure standing in the corridor.

It still had a red goatee. The ebony boots were not now so glossy.

It also held a Luger, and it fired that weapon twice.

Gustave Beauchene cried out and clutched at his left side. He fell to his knees as the Luger trained upon Michael Gallatin.

Michael had no time to draw his own weapon. He propelled himself forward as the Luger barked and a bullet whistled past his left ear.

He hit the ruins of Manson Konnig in the midsection with his shoulder and drove the man back even as he grasped and held the gun hand. The Luger fired again, the bullet thunking into the ceiling. Konnig suddenly showed his strength and tremendous power of will by striking Michael a hard blow between the eyes with his free fist and then swinging him bodily around as his knees buckled. Michael crashed through the door onto the dirty carpet of Beauchene's cabin.

Dazed, Michael saw the gun rise up again and flung himself aside as a bullet dug splinters from Beauchene's desk. He got his own weapon out and fired a shot, which went wild over Konnig's right shoulder. Konnig stood in the doorway, his teeth bared in the dark and melted face, and fired once more as Michael crawled under the protection of the desk. Then Michael lifted the entire desk up and heaved it at Konnig, who retreated into the corridor as papers flew about him and dirty plates clattered against the opposite wall.

A bolt was pulled back.

Konnig's head swivelled to the right.

Gustave Beauchene, blood blotching his shirt at left side and left shoulder, was aiming his submachine gun. He had a crooked grin on his gray face.

"I've come," he gasped, "to remove the garbage."

He opened fire.

Michael saw the bullets start at Konnig's belly and stitch upward along the chest and into the face. Konnig danced a dead man's jig. A chunk of his head vanished in a red spray. The Luger fired once more from the nerveless fingers, the slug going into the floor.

Beauchene kept firing to the end of the clip, and then Konnig crumpled like a rag doll that had been held over a campfire by a bad little boy.

Konnig's body twitched and twisted, but without much of a head there was not much of a brain therefore he was strictly yesterday's news.

He was red all over.

The body was still. Beauchene lowered his Thompson, clutched at his wounded side again and then he too dropped. Michael emerged from the cabin and went directly to the captain's aid. He tore the shirt open to look at the wounds. Three crewmen alerted by the noise of gunfire, among them Dylan Custis, came rushing into the wheelhouse and gathered around Michael and the captain.

"For Christ's sake," Beauchene asked them, "what's the fucking fuss?" He blinked heavily, struggling to focus. "Haven't you ever seen a man who needs a *drink*?"



It was a sunny morning when *Sofia* made harbor in Dover. The lines were thrown and secured, the anchor was dropped, and the ugliest ship that had ever crossed under the view of Dover Castle was safe. The gangplank went down, and the journey was done.

Several black trucks and ambulances were waiting, as well as two polished black sedans. Another crew came on to unload the cargo. The cranes moved and the hoists rattled. Blinking in the English sun, the men walked off *Sofia* carrying their duffel bags and strode off along the pier either alone or in groups: Olaf Thorgrimsen, soon to be bound back to Norway on another ship, and Dylan Custis, eager to visit his wife in Croydon; the engineers, electricians, mechanics, carpenter and welder; the able seamen and the ordinary seamen; the men of many nations but now the rather proud owners of one citizenship.

The freighter trash.

Marielle Wesshauser and her family had been met by some men she knew must be important. One of them was very tall and boyish-looking, though he was probably in his late forties. He had silvery-blond hair and pale blue eyes. He had a high forehead, so he must be smart. Freckles were scattered across his cheeks and the bridge of his crooked nose. He talked quietly to her father and kept eye-contact. He seemed very cool and collected. She'd seen that same man speaking to Captain Beauchene on deck

not long ago, and he'd spoken that very same way. Afterward, he and Captain Beauchene had shaken hands and then Marielle had watched the Frenchman wander around the ship. It seemed he was touching everything he could, as if saying goodbye to someone he'd once loved.

But she understood now that one had to look ahead. Always ahead. And that one had to keep working at life. Working at it, all the time. Working and working, like Vulcan at his forge.

For how else would anything beautiful be created?

They were leaving now, she and her family. The important men wanted to put them in one of the black sedans and take them to a hotel in London. That would be very much fun, Marielle thought. It would be very exciting, to walk around in London.

But first...

She searched and searched. Then she searched some more.

She looked everywhere.

But the gentleman was gone.

"Come on, Marielle! It's time!" said her father, who offered her his hand as usual to negotiate any precarious path, such as the gangplank.

But she decided she didn't need his hand today. Today she felt the sun on her face, and today she felt so light.

Because Billy was standing at the bottom, waiting for her, and when he saw her he smiled and came up to meet her halfway.

THE
WOLF
AND THE
EAGLE



ONE

“BUCKLE UP, MAJOR.”

The major was already buckled up.

“Short flight today, sir.”

“If you say so,” said Michael Gallatin, who occupied the rear seat of the RAF Westland Lysander aircraft. He was wearing his khaki British Western Desert Force uniform, sun-bleached and dusty, consisting of a sweat-damp short-sleeved shirt, shorts, gray knee-socks and tan-colored ankle boots. Around his neck and into his collar was tucked a dark blue scarf. It was meant to keep out the chafing grit that could lead to not only great mental distress but to serious infection, particularly if the flies got their diggers in the wound. His officer’s cap was the same color as the Libyan wasteland, the hue of the endless sand and the countless stones. Crammed into the space under his boots was his kitbag. It held a change of clothes, his canteen, his shaving accoutrements and his dependable American Colt .45 automatic. He wore his insignia of rank at a slight angle, which did him no good with superior officers but earned the silent approval of those below; in any case, the superior officers had been informed to leave him alone by the letter he carried from a very important man in London.

“Weather’s fine for flyin’ this mornin’, sir,” said the young Cockney pilot, whose sidelong grin displayed his crooked front teeth. He was enjoying an obvious moment of mirth concerning his rather nervous passenger. “No reason to worry.”

“Who’s worried?” Michael fired back, a little too quickly. In the North African desert in mid-August a clear sky could never be called upon to lift the spirits. It might be cloudless but it was often a pale milky color more white than blue, as if that cruel sun had burned all the beauty even out of Heaven. “You just tend to the flying,” Michael said, and told himself to relax. Easier told than done. He didn’t relish flying very much; it was a combination of his distrust—one should not call it *fear*, of course—of confinement and heights, and the whole idea of sitting in a sputtering machine many thousands of feet above the earth seemed even more unnatural to him than a sea voyage.

But it was the aircraft that really bothered him. This thing, with its stubby nose and thick-waisted bulk and clumsy-looking fixed landing gear, seemed to Michael a relic more suited to the last world war than the one in the unfortunate present. As Michael understood, the Lysander had been an antique even on its maiden flight in 1936. This was the year 1941, and what in the world was this thing even doing on a landing strip, much less about to take to the air as soon as the three Spitfire fighters went up. Michael shifted his bottom in the hard leather seat, whose rips were oozing cotton, and mused upon the fact that the Lysander was named after a Spartan general.

He knew what Spartan soldiers said about their shields: *With this, or upon this.*

Somehow, it was not comforting.

The airfield at the Bir Al Kabir oasis was a slapdash construction of tents and prefabricated buildings brought in by cargo planes from Cairo, two hundred and twenty-four miles to the east. The scraggly palm trees around the waterhole were not pretty and the water was not sweet, but even water that smelled and tasted of rotten eggs was life in this climate of a hundred and twenty-two degree days. A hot wind sometimes blew in, nagging at the tents and hissing through the aircraft engines to find their

weak places, as more spinning sheets of dust painted machines and men alike the blanched shade of misery.

There was a war going on, and it was not always necessarily Churchill's British versus Hitler's Germans and Mussolini's Italians; sometimes it was the Brit versus the invasion of a hundred thousand biting flies, or the Brit versus the month of burning days so stunning saliva dried within seconds to white crust on the cracked lips, or the Brit versus the empty horizon upon which heatwaves threw mirages of huge lakes that shimmered like molten vats of white glass.

The first of the Spitfire fighter planes was taking off. Woe to the other pilots behind him, including the Cockney kid at the Lysander's controls, due to the amount of dust the takeoff stirred up. "You must be an important chap, sir," came the next comment. "Three Spit escort and all, beggin' your pardon."

"I have my uses," Michael answered. The way the Lysander's engine made the plane vibrate did not make him talkative. The pilot would be throttling up and rolling out onto the runway when the third Spit took to the air, any minute now.

"Roger that. We're waitin'. Over," said the pilot through his headset microphone.

The second Spitfire roared off into the sky. The third was taxiing into takeoff position.

Michael checked his Rolex wristwatch. He figured he'd be in Cairo in time for a debriefing meeting at HQ and then on to lunch on the shaded veranda of the Piper's Club. He hadn't realized how much he missed their small filets, a platter of orange rolls and a fine cold beer. Two beers would be doubly fine. Then on to sleep for about twelve hours, on sheets of Egyptian cotton.

The third Spit took off, trailing dust. "Here we go, sir," said the pilot cheerfully, and Michael thought he must be a budding sadist, for the kid gave the plane a little jerk as it rolled forward onto the strip, as if it wanted to leap into the air without benefit of a proper sprint. The noise of the engine was like hammers beating hollow metal drums to a madman's rhythm, and over that unholy racket Michael could hear what sounded to him like loose bolts jumping in the wings.

“Roger, on our way,” the pilot told his controller. “Over.” He throttled up and the Lysander began to roll.

The Lysander’s chief talent was that it didn’t need a very long runway. They were off the ground in about ten seconds, and Michael placed his hands on his knees and squeezed the blood out of them as the craft rose quickly to meet the three Spitfires circling above the field.

“Goin’ up to fifteen thousand today, sir,” the pilot told him. “Get yourself a good look at the desert from way up there.”

Another look at the desert was the last thing Michael Gallatin needed or wanted.

His entire four-day mission out here had involved looking at the desert. He knew what they’d called him at the airfield: Majorly Strange. That was because after every sundown he drove through the guards’ position in an open-topped Morris truck and drove back in an hour before sunup. They knew that he was a reconnaissance officer, but they were puzzled as to why he went out alone. What they didn’t know was that, once out in the desert at a distance of a couple of miles or more, the recon major stopped his truck, took off his uniform, folded it and put it away, and then Majorly Strange became a creature that the word ‘strange’ utterly failed to describe. Over the sand and fist-sized stones of the hammada he ran westward on four legs, and cloaked by the night he travelled mile upon mile to make note in his human mind of the brutal landscape: the soft pits of sand that could swallow a truck or a tank, the series of dunes that would turn a soldier’s legs and willpower to jelly, the vast flat plains stubbled with cactus that rose to mountains and fell off again into chasms of jagged red rock. He was searching also for the German mines that lay in their thousands under the sand or the stony crust, and these he could smell by the metallic tang of danger that thrust at him, snake-like, as he approached. So much metal, and so much high explosive. The air reeked.

He used his heightened sense of direction to place these minefields on the map he’d learned to carry in his head, and so on he went alert for German patrols or the movement of troops and armored vehicles or the almost imperceptible blue lamps of an enemy outpost whose machine guns were trained on a maze of barbed wire, tank traps and Bouncing Betty

mines designed to burst up from the ground and explode red-hot shrapnel into a man's groin.

His job was to find a path for the British Army to move westward and destroy the Afrika Korps' seige of Tobruk, which had trapped over twenty-four thousand Commonwealth soldiers in a ring of steel since the tenth of April.

At the airfield on his return, Majorly Strange would retire to a radio room and send his findings to his contact in Cairo in a code based on British nursery rhymes. Therefore the future of the war in North Africa and the lives of many thousands of men hung on the likes of Old King Cole, Strutting Cock Robin and the hungry wolf at the door.

"Easy peasy," said the pilot. "Lemon squeesy."

They had taken up their position just behind and below two Spitfires with the third guarding their tail. They flew east. The Lysander's engine noise became a dull rumble. Michael did not care to sightsee what his sight had already seen, so he closed his eyes and tried to rest.

Yesterday had happened one of those rare encounters that made life, to Michael, such an interesting mystery. Such things could not be written in books and be believed.

He'd been walking to his quarters after he'd sent the radio codes when someone had fallen into step beside him.

"Excuse me, sir. *Major?*"

"Yes?" Michael was tired and ready for sleep, his senses a bit dulled. He saw the young man in the dusty Western Desert Force uniform and the two-bar chevron of the corporal's rank. The corporal saluted, Michael returned the salute and then smiled and offered his hand. The young man took it.

"I thought it was you, sir!" said the young man, with an equally dusty smile. He'd been wearing goggles and around his eyes was the only area the desert hadn't gotten to.

"Our company pulled in for water awhile ago, sir. May I ask...what you're *doing* here?"

"On duty," said Michael.

"Oh...yes, of course. Well..I felt I had to do my duty too, sir. What with all this going on. She asked me if I wouldn't rather have joined the Navy,

but I told her I'd had enough of the sea." He paused to make sure the major understood. "We were married last April, sir. Marielle and I. Three years to the day we met."

"Billy," Michael said, "that's wonderful to hear."

"Thank you, sir. I think *she's* pretty wonderful, myself."

"I have no doubt. Your company's heading east?" Michael saw some of the trucks around Bir Al Kabir's pool, and he noted the direction they were facing. "Yes sir, we're being pulled back. Last night we ran into some pretty stiff opposition. A few Jerry tanks out looking for trouble."

Michael nodded. Whatever had happened, Billy's story was an understatement. When he was on his recon runs, Michael never failed to see the flash of artillery on the horizon, and sometimes he heard gunfire and the hollow *whump* of grenades going off as close as two hundred meters. There might be a lull between official Army battle operations, but there was never a lull in the small battles that went on between companies and platoons out on the raw edge of reckoning.

The major and the corporal talked for a few minutes and then it was time for Billy to return to his men. "Goodbye, sir," he said, and Michael wished Billy Bowers and his bride all the good fortune in the world. They saluted each other, and they went on.

At fifteen thousand feet above the desert, Michael had a dream of a wolf tumbling from the sky. He opened his eyes with a jolt. "Everything all right?" he asked the pilot, in a voice more reedy than he would have wished.

"Fine, sir. Just relax."

Michael checked his watch. A grand total of nineteen minutes had passed since they'd left the airfield. He gave an inward groan and shifted again on the seat as much as the belt would allow.

"Oh, *Keyrist!*" whispered the pilot, and Michael's heart jumped because he knew something had just gone terribly wrong.

One of the Spitfires veered away and dove to the right. Through the plexiglass canopy Michael saw the glint of metal rising from the earth. Two airplanes? They were coming up fast, from about twelve thousand feet. He made out the shapes of German aerial predators: Messerschmitt Bf 109s,

painted in desert camouflage hues. The one in the lead had a solid black tail with the Nazi symbol painted in white upon it.

“Jesus! Jesus!” said the pilot, whose head was on a swivel searching for more enemy fighters. To the credit of his nerve, he kept the lumbering Lysander steady. Then the black-tailed 109 flashed past between the Lysander and the second Spit, on its way to a higher altitude. The Spitfire behind Michael’s plane took after it. “*Steady!*” the young man said suddenly, and very loudly; he was speaking to himself.

The second Bf 109 came up firing. Tracers zipped across the sky. The remaining Spitfire on point tipped its wings over and fell away. Michael saw it roll in order to get a position behind the 109 as it passed. The Spitfire’s wing guns sparkled, and again tracers reached out for their target but fell short. Michael looked out the canopy to his left and saw that the black-tailed 109 had gotten on the rear of the first Spitfire and was gaining on it. The Spit jinked to the right; the Messerschmitt followed. German tracers shot out in a pattern that might be called beautiful in any other situation, and as the Spit jinked to the left the bullets caught it and tore pieces of metal from the fuselage. The Spit dove and the black-tailed 109 dove after it, even as the third Spitfire got on the 109’s rear and hung there at incredible speed.

“That’s Rolfe Gantt’s 109,” the Cockney pilot said, his voice thick with both fear and awe. “We’re gettin’ out!” He throttled up, the engine screamed as much as a sand-scraped antique engine could, and the Lysander nosed down with an effect that lifted Michael off his seat and made the belt feel as if it were slicing him in two. He had no inclination to scream, but the desire was there.

They went down fast.

Suddenly something was coming down faster. The burning front half of a Spitfire, its wings and fuselage pierced by machine gun bullets and fist-sized twenty-millimeter cannon rounds. It fell past the Lysander, its control cables dangling from the torn-away rear half, and the black-tailed 109 turned away from the tumbling wreckage.

Michael watched the Messerschmitt evade tracers from the Spit on its tail. The aircraft was ascending again, and suddenly it cut its speed

and rolled to the left and the Spit went past it just a little too far. As the Spitfire tried to correct its course, the black-tailed 109 made a complete roll and came up shooting at the Spit's belly. Pieces of metal flew. A bright red flame rippled along the right wing. The Spitfire turned over on its back and the 109 raked it with a burst of cannon shells. Ebony smoke and crimson flames erupted from the Spit's engine, the prop froze and the aircraft went down to the desert ten thousand feet below.

Michael craned his neck to see the third Spitfire fighting for its life in a battle with one German eagle, and then the black-tailed ace joined the fray. Tracers flew in every direction. The planes crisscrossed each other. But in a matter of seconds, the 109 with the camouflage-painted tail made a mistake of timing and ran into a line of slugs that floated sinuously across the sky. Black smoke bloomed from the engine. The prop spun off, one blade missing. As the 109 started to fall in a slow spiral, the canopy was pulled open and the pilot jumped with his parachute pack on his back. He disappeared from view.

"Down, baby, *down!*" the Cockney pilot shouted, about to tear the Lysander's wings off. In the rear seat was a man who was bracing himself with hands, elbows, knees and feet and seeing his thirty years of life pass before his eyes.

The remaining Spitfire and the Messerschmitt came down twisting and turning around each other. Michael watched, transfixed, as their pilots battled for position. Tracers hit empty air that had not been empty the second before. A collision was narrowly missed. One plane zoomed upward and one shrieked down. Michael realized, with dry mouth and feverish brain, that the black-tailed 109 was turning toward them in an elegant curve, and it was going to get them in its gunsights.

The tracers reached out. Slowly, it seemed. With great, deadly and terrible grace.

The Cockney pilot abruptly chopped the throttle and turned the plane on its side to fall to the left, but the tracers were upon them and there was nowhere to hide.

The feeling, to Michael, was as if the aircraft had run over a cobblestoned road.

It was a rough shake. Amid the shake, the windshield popped and cracked as at least one slug passed through it. Holes punched through the bottom of the plane and then through the roof. The pilot gave a strangled cry. Michael smelled scorched metal and fresh blood. A red mist swirled in the air before it was sucked upward. Then the 109 streaked past and the Lysander rolled over in its wounded agony, its engine cylinders gasping for air.

Michael Gallatin was stretched up against the belt one second and the next he was smashed into the seat. The Lysander was tumbling down. The pilot was slumped forward. *God save the King*, Michael thought crazily as sky became earth became sky became earth. He clasped hold of two rubber handgrips on the back of the pilot's seat and thought how utterly ridiculous it was trying to brace himself from an aircrash at roughly two hundred knots per hour.

Metal flashed alongside the Lysander. The Spit and the black-tailed 109 were fighting on their way down. The Spit had taken some damage and smoke was curling from the engine, probably blinding the pilot. Rolfe Gantt's plane bore a dozen bullet holes along the fuselage. The two combatants went at each other again, head-to-head and guns blazing. In the middle of another roll Michael's bloodshot eyes saw Gantt's 109 lose a section of its right wing in a burst of flying metal, but an instant later the German's bullets hit home. The entire front of the Spitfire exploded. The Spit seemed to collapse on itself, the wings folding, the fuselage crumpling like a tin can that had been stepped on. It simply fell apart, and what might have been a burning body dropped away with arms and legs outspread.

"Got it, sir! Got it, sir!" the Cockney pilot moaned, as he fought against unconsciousness and the violence of the spin to gain control of his aircraft.

Michael was near passing out himself. The blood swelled in his face and roared in his ears. He hung onto the handgrips with desperate and perhaps terrified strength.

"Got it, sir! Got it, sir!" the pilot kept repeating, over and over, in a voice that sounded mangled.

And then, quite suddenly, he did have it. The Lysander righted itself. They were still going down fast, onto a terrain of yellow sand and black

rocks about a thousand feet below. The pilot pulled back on his yoke and the nose came up. "Got it, sir!" he said, with bloody triumph in his mouth.

Something huge and dark swept over them. An extended wheel hit the Lysander's left wing and knocked the bulky airplane through the sky. Michael saw the belly of Gantt's 109 pass overhead. Fire was licking around the motionless prop. The Messerschmitt headed down.

Again the young pilot fought for control. This time it was obvious he was almost done. When Michael dared to look to the left, he saw the wing on that side torn to tatters.

"Can you get out, sir?" the pilot asked, which demonstrated his state of mind since Michael wore no parachute.

"Put us down!" Michael told him.

The pilot nodded. He coughed from deep in his chest and blood spattered the cracked glass before his face.

"Yes sir," he managed to say.

The Lysander slipped to the left. The pilot corrected. The Lysander slipped to the right. The pilot corrected. He cut all power and lowered whatever flap was still working. He moved with slow and maybe dying deliberation. The Lysander began to turn on the side of its disabled wing. The ground was rising to meet them; it was all sand-shiny and hard angles of rock. Michael judged a hundred feet to go. He braced, if bracing would do any good.

"We're in for it, sir," said the pilot, in a voice that now sounded distant and almost childlike, as if he were falling down through time itself.

Fifty feet, Michael thought. The beads of sweat on his face were sweating.

Thirty feet.

"Yes sir," said the pilot, answering some unknown command.

They hit.

There was a bone-jarring *crunch*. Michael was thrown against the side of the plane so hard he heard his left shoulder either separate or break with a noise like the pop of a broomstick being snapped. His cap flew off. The left side of his face smashed into the canopy, which surprisingly did not shatter. Maybe his cheekbone and jaw had shattered, he didn't know.

Pain fogged his vision. His left arm had gone cold. He lost his handgrips. There came a sound of metal being ripped away, and the Lysander was skidding on its belly because its wheels were gone. It went on, banging into and over stones and across the slithering sand. In its progress the Lysander turned to face the way it had come, and when at last it ceased its motion Michael Gallatin sat facing westward, bleeding and groggy amid a symphony of metallic moans and creaks and ticks and muffled thumps like a dying heartbeat.

It came to him, sometime in the next few seconds, that he smelled the hot sweet friction of sheared-off metal and the bitter aroma of smoke.

He blinked. Was his jaw even still connected to his face?

Smoke was starting to fill the cockpit.

He had to move.

His left arm would not, and pain speared from shoulder to collarbone when he tried. He got his seatbelt unbuckled with his right hand. Blood was in his mouth. He spat it out. He unlocked the canopy and shoved the cracked plexiglass open. He flung his kitbag from the plane. Then he climbed up and tumbled over the side onto the stony ground, an effort that again sent vicious pain through his injured arm.

Small flames were starting to curl up around the engine from beneath the wrecked plane. "Get out!" he called to the pilot, but the young man didn't move.

Michael pulled himself up and instantly fell to his knees again, his balance for the moment a matter of past history. He realized the fire was growing, and he had to get the pilot out. He stood up, stumbled and righted himself. The sun's power beat down upon his skull and he was nearly blinded by the glare. Blood was trickling from both nostrils. His left eye was rapidly swelling shut. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and got hold of one of the metal reinforcement strips that ran along the pilot's canopy to flip it up. His right arm strained, but the thing was locked tight from within. He banged on the blood-spattered plexiglass. The pilot stirred, turned his head to display the gore that had streamed in a torrent from his mouth, and stared numbly at Michael Gallatin. The front of the pilot's shirt was red where at least one bullet had hit him in the chest.

“Unlock it!” Michael shouted. And then again, if the young Cockney hadn’t heard: “Unlock your canopy!”

The pilot just stared at Michael, his swollen eyes heavy-lidded.

With a flash and a low hollow *whump* the engine burst into flames.

“Unlock your canopy!” Michael urged, and began to beat against the plexiglass with his useable fist.

Fire rippled from the engine toward the cockpit. The heat staggered Michael back.

A gout of red flame jumped into the pilot’s cabin. The young man continued to stare without speaking at Michael Gallatin, and even as he caught fire and began to contort into a shape no longer human he made no sound. Before Michael’s eyes he became a blaze, and one crisped hand reached up to press feebly against the blackening canopy. Then it fell back into the flames, and what looked like a swarm of a thousand glowing red bees swept around and around at the center of ashes and smoke.

The Lysander was being consumed, sending up a black smoke column. Michael backed away from the heat. The canopy exploded with the noise of a shotgun going off.

At a distance away from the conflagration Michael sat down on the ground, like a boy before a summertime campfire. He felt himself let go, because he had nowhere to get to in a hurry. Then the darkness came upon him as suddenly as if the sun had gone out, and when he fell onto his injured shoulder he gave a small gasp of pain but his eyes were already closed and he was for the moment also extinguished.

TWO

“HEY, ENGLISHER!” SAID the voice, speaking English. “Are you dead?”

The toe of a boot prodded Michael’s side.

He heard the voice and felt the prod, but it took him a few more seconds to fight up from the dark. When he opened his single working eye, he was in a world of blinding white light and dry heat that baked the lungs with a breath. He sat up and saw the gun pointed in his face.

“Easy,” cautioned the man behind the Walther P38 pistol. “Do nothing fast. As if you *could*. Friend, you are in one hell of a condition.”

Michael looked up at his visitor.

The man wore a tan-colored short-sleeved shirt open to show his white undershirt and a pair of tan-colored trousers tucked into dusty black boots. On the pocket of his shirt was pinned his Iron Cross and his Luftwaffe airman’s badge. He was an example of the handsome Nordic breed, with the touselled blonde hair of a wild little boy and sardonic amber eyes that belonged to a worldly-wise man. He was of compact, powerful build with a chiselled face, a hooked nose and a firm jaw, and he stood about five feet ten. Across his right cheek the slash of a fencer’s scar showed pale against his desert tan. A second smaller scar divided the left blonde eyebrow into two halves. Michael thought that this man had definitely seen his share of

action, and perhaps another man's share as well. The way he held the gun said he knew how to use it and *would* use it at the slightest provocation. The amber eyes focused fully on Michael and the pistol was unwavering, yet the man had also today seen his share of injury. Blood from a gash at his hairline had coursed down his forehead and along the right side of his face. His lower lip was split open and blood had dried on his chin. A blue knot swelled over the left eye. He had been through some rough weather.

Behind the man, maybe two miles away, Michael could see the black smoke rising from another aircraft wreck. This pilot had not come down with his ship, however, for he still carried his parachute pack slung over one shoulder and folded up within it could be seen the white chute itself.

"Name?" the man asked.

"Gallatin," Michael answered. His jaw felt dislocated, but so be it.

"Gantt," the pilot said. "This is yours?" He motioned quickly with a tilt of his head toward the open kitbag on the ground a few feet away. Michael figured the man must have carried it over from beside the still-burning Lysander, since it was scorched by flames.

Michael nodded.

It had been gone through. Michael noted his Colt automatic in Gantt's waistband under the outer shirt. Michael's change of clothes was scattered around, and the canteen with its black leather shoulder strap lay atop his second pair of shorts. He could not fail to see the three bullet holes in the kitbag's canvas and the bullet hole about midway up the canteen. Gantt had pushed a knot of cloth into the hole. "Unfortunately most of the water was lost," Gantt said, "but I did squeeze some back into the canteen from your clothes." He frowned and glanced toward a third plume of black smoke many miles away. "The talented bastard who shot me down had a superb Immelman, but he was not quite so good at his snap roll. What was his name?"

"I don't know. I'm not a flyer."

"No, you're a *faller*," came the reply. "You should feel lucky you're not dead. Most who tangle with me end up that way."

"Do most who tangle with you," Michael said carefully, "not have guns on their planes? What was the point of shooting down the Lysander?"

"You got between me and a Spit. The bullets go where they go." Gantt quickly scanned the horizon. "Now it's time for *us* to go. They'll see the smoke and come looking. Stand up."

"No," Michael said.

"What did I hear, Englisher?"

"I said...*no*. Meaning I'm not standing up. You go where you please, but I'm staying here."

"Are you?" Gantt stepped forward and placed the gun's barrel against Michael's injured shoulder. "I can hurt you a little more, you see."

"Go ahead. I'll just bleed some and wait for the RAF to arrive. As you say, they'll see the smoke and come looking."

"I didn't mean your *air force* will come looking," Gantt said. "You're too far from your base and you're off the regular patrol route. I'm talking about the Dahlasiffa. The Death Stalkers. You *have* heard of them, yes?"

Michael had heard rumors. Supposedly the Dahlasiffa was a warlike tribe of scavengers who stripped corpses of anything valuable after a battle. They knocked out gold and silver teeth, took money, watches, medals, helmets, boots, and it was speculated they were likely stockpiling rifles, pistols and grenades to use against enemy tribes. Michael had never seen a Dahlasiffa or met anyone who'd seen one, but the word at HQ in Cairo was that the Dahlasiffa not only stripped corpses but also made short work of the wounded.

"They're real enough," Gantt said. "They usually travel in packs of six or seven. We're in their territory. They'll see the smoke and they'll come looking to strip corpses. And they won't care who's wearing what uniform, either, or how close to being a corpse you are. They'll finish that job. What's the brand of your watch?"

"Rolex."

"Breitling." Gantt showed Michael the watch on a brown leather band on his wrist. "I intend to keep it, *and* my arm. Shall we go?"

Michael thought about it, but not for very long. The Lysander, burned to its metal framework, cast no shade. The world was made up of yellow sand, black rock and white glaring sun. It was a furnace. He stood up.

“Carry your bag,” Gantt told him. “And...oh, yes...I have your nice straight razor in my pocket, if you’re wondering. I’ll carry the canteen. But you should put those clothes back in your bag, as well. They might be useful.”

Michael did what he suggested.

“Your left arm’s broken?” the flyer asked.

“Possibly. Whatever, it’s not working.” Michael had already considered his situation regarding a change to wolf form and tearing this man into pieces even the Dahlasiffa could not loot. The problem was, he couldn’t run on all fours. He couldn’t leap to avoid a bullet. So in this particular instance he had more power on two legs, as a man.

Gantt nodded. “Bind it up,” he said, as he once again cast his gaze along the horizon.

Michael spent a moment getting the dark blue collar scarf tied around his neck and then forcing the arm into it. The pain made him growl deep in his throat. When he was done, fresh sweat stood out on his face. He picked up the kitbag, moving as slowly as a hobbled old man.

“Go!” Gantt pointed to the west. “This way!”

It was no surprise to Michael that Rolfe Gantt, the German Messerschmitt ace who since the beginning of his career in the 1939 invasion of Poland had shot down forty-six enemy planes—and now added four more credits to that number—wished to head toward the German lines instead of toward the British in Cairo. Michael was more versed in the ground war but he’d certainly heard and read of Gantt’s prowess. There were other Luftwaffe aces in North Africa, among them Richard Thess and Franz Ubevelder, but it was Rolfe Gantt who’d appeared on the cover of last month’s German *Signal* magazine, standing with his arms crossed and a wide grin on his face in front of the black-tailed 109.

Michael walked, carrying the kitbag. Gantt held the pistol on him for a while, but then lowered it to save his arm strength.

Michael knew exactly what Gantt wanted: to find a German patrol or outpost as soon as possible, to give up his prisoner and maybe get a truck ride back to his airfield.

Then it was off to a POW camp for Michael Gallatin, and it would be a very long war for a caged lycanthrope.

They crossed a landscape that seemed to have no beginning and no end. It was a world apart in its solitude, its merciless fury, its silence but for the hissing of a sudden wind that brought a further blast of heat and a scatter of sand thrown into the eyes.

They hadn't gone very far when it was obvious to Michael that they weren't going to get very far. His shadow upon the stony hammada was the blackest ink. The sun drove a white-hot spike into his head, he was already craving water and the flies had found them. Found their *wounds*, to be more exact. First one or two came to feast upon the crusted gashes, and then they summoned others to the banquet. Within thirty minutes of leaving the Lysander's charred skeleton, Michael was the victim of a moving mass of flies that clung to a cut above his left eye. A score of flies tried to get up his nostrils at the tasty gore he was breathing around. They fastened themselves to his lips and crawled into his mouth, and no amount of head-shaking or slapping them away could keep them from their food. Also, they did have a taste for sweat. Likewise, Rolfe Gantt's forehead wound was the focal point of a fist-sized clump of flies that writhed and rippled in nearly orgasmic delight to get at what he was made of. They got hold of his split lip and tried to winnow into the fissure, to break it open so more blood would flow. They dashed themselves against his eyes as if to blind him and make him drop. They spun around his head like a dark halo, and settling down into the thick blonde field of his hair they sucked at his scalp for salt.

Michael spat out a few flies. "The survival manual says the first thing to do is get your head and face covered. Then only to travel at night."

"The survival manual doesn't have Dahlasiffa in it," Gantt replied. Squinting against the midday glare, he looked back the way they'd come. "We'll keep going for awhile." As they walked, he opened the canteen and took a quick drink. The disturbed flies buzzed with indignant anger. "Here," he said. "One swallow only."

Michael took the offered canteen. The water tasted of his laundry soap. He returned the cap to the canteen and the canteen to Gantt, who returned the strap to his shoulder.

"Keep walking," Gantt told him, and motioned with the Walther.

“You’re sure you’ll find anything out there?” The *out there* Michael referred to was the shimmering wasteland that stretched before them, mile upon empty mile.

“I have a very good sense of direction.”

“So do I, but that doesn’t mean you’ll find an outpost before you run out of water.”

The canteen had held maybe enough for each of them to have two or three more swallows. Flies whirled around Michael’s face and darted at his good eye, trying to get the moisture there. He suddenly decided he’d had enough of this, and if the German ace wanted to shoot him it would be a bullet put to good use. He stopped walking.

“Go on! Don’t stop!”

“I’m putting something over my head. And *you* stop waving that damned gun around. Does it look like I’m in any shape to give you trouble?”

Gantt had lifted the pistol to take aim at Michael’s battered face. Now he slowly lowered it. “No,” he said, with the hint of a smile. “I suppose not.”

Michael put the kitbag down amid the stones and knelt beside it. He found his small bottle of Trumper Lime aftershave, thankfully neither broken by a bullet nor the impact, which had enough alcohol in it to heal small razor cuts. It would do as well as anything on wounds suffered in an aircraft crash. Working with one hand, he got the bottle open and splashed liquid on the cut over his eye. It stung like the devil’s own joyjuice, but surely it would do some good. At least the way the flies buzzed meant they didn’t seem to like the smell. He rubbed more of the liquid all over his face and felt small stings from chin to forehead.

“You *English*,” said Gantt, with a note of disdain. “That’s why you won’t win this war, you know. You’re too addicted to your comforts and your little...what is that? Aftershave lotion?”

“That’s right.” Michael screwed the small crown cap back on. “*Here*.” He threw it to Gantt, who caught it by reflex in his left hand. “The alcohol will help.”

“I don’t choose to smell like a small British island in the Caribbean,” Gantt answered, but he didn’t throw it back. “Don’t you people take this war *seriously*?”

Michael decided to ignore the man. He brought a tan-colored shirt out of the kitbag. Shaking the flies off his wounds, he tore the shirt in a couple of strategic places and began to wrap it around his head and face in his best approximation of a desert tribesman's keffiyeh. "Take, for example, your tea breaks," Gantt went on. "Why does everything stop at a certain hour for you people to drink *tea*? You even stop during an advance to drink tea. Don't you understand the value of discipline?"

"I don't stop for tea breaks," Michael said as he continued to adjust his head covering, "but I think they *are* a form of discipline."

"You Englishers are children living in a dream world."

Michael got the shirt arranged so he had a torn slit he could see through. Otherwise, everything was covered. He tucked in a bit of cloth here and there to make sure it stayed on. "And I suppose you Nazis are living in the *real* world?"

Gantt frowned, his eyes darkening. "I'm not a Nazi." He opened the bottle of aftershave with his teeth and splashed some on the flies that feasted at his forehead wound.

They lifted up with a noise like little airplanes and flew wildly in search of another landing strip. Gantt winced at the pain but poured some more of the stuff on for good measure. "Never a Nazi," he continued, as the liquid ran down his face. He glanced quickly up toward the burning orb of the sun, measuring its force upon his skull and his willpower. The flies were already coming back, one by one. He shrugged off the canteen and the parachute pack.

"What's your first name?" he asked.

"Michael."

"All right, Michael. I will shoot you if you move in any way in the next two minutes. The bullet will go into your knee, and it will be a crippling shot because I am a *very* good shot. Then, though I desire to take you back as my prisoner, I will leave you here to die. Do you understand that?"

Michael nodded. He had no doubt the man would do exactly as he said. It was best to bide his time, to wait for an opportunity, and to seize it when it came. The problem was going to be seizing it with one good arm.

Gantt removed his shirt and pulled his undershirt up over his face. He positioned it so he could see through the neckhole and his head was covered, and then he put his shirt back on and retrieved the other gear. He recapped the Trumper bottle and slid it in his pack. "Very obedient of you," he said, "and very smart. You're a major, I see. But you wear no other insignia. What's your speciality?"

"Reconnaissance."

"Ah. So you're used to walking the untrodden path, is that correct?" Gantt motioned with the pistol toward what the Berber tribesmen might call the plain of sorrows. "After you."

They went on.

The sun was their enemy. Scorpions scuttled amid the stones at their feet. The sky was burned white, and the earth the color of ashes. The land broke into ravines and descended nearer to Hell. Sand began to pull at their boots and the dazzle tortured their eyes. The hot wind came up and tore at their makeshift keffiyehs. As he trudged onward, Michael realized only his physical training—and perhaps his supernatural training—was keeping him on his feet. He thought that Rolfe Gantt must be in excellent physical shape too, or maybe it was the sheer force of will that kept Gantt going.

The wind strengthened and swirled sand before it. Grit stung the eyes like sharp bits of glass. They kept their faces lowered. Michael began to think that the time to act was approaching. One false stumble might do it. One stumble and sidestep and then...what? An elbow to Gantt's jaw? A knee to the groin? He doubted he would be fast enough to get through the flyer's guard; after all, Gantt was an expert at recognizing a developing danger, and it was likely he was expecting something right now. But how much longer did Michael dare go before he tried to overpower the man? He didn't have a lot of strength left and it was ebbing fast in this heat. Damn the arm! he thought angrily.

If he had full control over his limbs, this scenario would have been finished to his satisfaction hours ago. But no, no...it was pointless to moan over a broken shoulder. He had to try *something*. He slowed a step.

"Don't slow down," said Gantt, indicating his level of awareness even with sand in his eyes.

"I need some water."

"So do I, but we don't get any. Not yet."

Michael continued to slow his pace and put a small stumble in it for effect. "Water," he said, calculating inches. If he could manage to knock that gun from Gantt's hand...but there was the Colt automatic in the man's waistband. Whatever happened in the next few seconds, it was going to be a dirty, close-run...

Gantt aimed the pistol at the ground between them and fired. The bullet ricocheted off a stone and screamed away. Then the Walther took steady aim at Michael again.

"Don't try what you're thinking," said the flyer, his voice unnervingly calm. "You would be much too clumsy. So just keep walking, like a good obedient—"

He suddenly spun to the right and held the pistol out before him.

Michael looked in that direction.

A figure stood up on a slight hill at the edge of the curtains of blowing sand.

It was a small figure, dressed in dirty clothes that may have once been white. They were really not much more than rags that flapped in the wind. The figure wore a brown keffiyeh and on top of that sat a khaki-colored Scottish Tam O'Shanter cap, which Michael knew was a common headdress among Commonwealth soldiers.

"Come down here!" Gantt ordered.

The figure did not move.

Gantt glanced quickly at Michael. "Do you know the language?"

"A little." He was limited, but he did know a bit from dealing with tribal scouts.

"Tell him to come down here."

Michael spoke the command—*Come here*—in first Tamazight and then Tuareg Berber. The figure turned and ran and in a few seconds was gone from sight.

Gantt kept the Walther aimed into the swirling sand for awhile longer before he lowered it. "What do you make of *that*?" he asked, probably directing the question to himself. When Michael had no reply, the pistol

found him once more. "Keep moving. And no more playacting, please. You're no stumbler."

Michael walked forward, with Gantt a few careful paces behind. The lycanthrope had decided to again bide his time, because surely an opportunity was coming. If not, he would find a way to create one before they reached the shadow of an Afrika Korps flag. Behind him, the flyer scanned left and right for more figures in the wind but none emerged.

Michael figured Gantt must have been spooked by the strange encounter, because a few minutes after the incident the ace said, "Entertain me. Tell me about yourself."

"I wouldn't care to waste my breath."

"Fair enough. I'll tell you about *myself*, then. Did you know that I've shot down...well, it would be fifty planes including the ones today. *Fifty*. Do you know how many pilots have never shot down even one plane? And here I have fifty chalked up! What do you say about that?"

"I say you're walking through the desert, the same as me."

"Yes, but there's a very big difference between our futures. You'll be a prisoner of war and I'll be up there again. I *belong* up there, Michael. It's where I truly live. Is there a place you truly live?"

Michael grunted quietly. The hunter from the woods is a very long way from home, he thought. "No particular place," he replied.

"I'm sorry for you, then. All men need a place where they truly live. Where their souls and spirits are free. The sky is my place. I find it beautiful, even on a stormy day when the planes are grounded. It is a woman with a thousand faces, all of them exquisite. Are you married, Michael?"

"No."

"Me neither." He gave a short laugh. "As if I should ever wear such a chain! The first thing a wife would say to me is, *don't fly so high or so fast*. And listening to her, and wanting to please her, would kill me as it has killed so many other pilots with..." Gantt searched for the right word. "Attachments," he finished. He laughed again, only this time Michael thought it sounded a little forced. "Men like us don't need attachments, do we?"

"Men like *us*?"

“The risk-takers. The men who *must* be on the battlefield. Take you, for one. Your reconnaissance work. That puts you at great risk, doesn’t it? And you’re out front, blazing a trail through the mines and tank traps? Don’t tell me you’re simply a desk jockey, because I won’t believe it.”

“I’m not simply that,” Michael said.

“A man of action can recognize a man of action,” Gantt told him. “It’s in the way you move. And you’re confident, even now, even with your broken shoulder, that I’ll never get you to that outpost, aren’t you? Even with a pistol at your back, you’re confident. You think I’ll make a mistake you can take advantage of. Yes? And I’m confident that I will *not* make a mistake. So what does that make us?”

“Two confident fools in the desert with a couple of swallows of water in a shot-up canteen,” Michael answered.

“No! It makes us comrades of sorts! Like chess players, you see? Two men of action, reduced to the barest minimum to survive! A challenge, to be overcome.”

“I think you need some more covering for your head.”

“Maybe I do, Englisher, but I’ll tell you...I find your confidence in this situation to be very interesting. *And* entertaining. I’m just waiting to see what you’re going to do to keep yourself out of a POW camp. Because I *know* you are going to try.”

“You would,” Michael said.

“Of course I would! I’d never give up trying. And that’s why we’re comrades of sorts, isn’t it?”

“If you say so.” A movement to the right caught Michael’s attention. When he looked, he saw across the white plain the small figure in the dirty rags and the khaki tam about a hundred meters away, keeping their pace.

“Ah, there he is again,” said Gantt. “Now...he’s not a Dahlasiffa scout, or he’d be on a camel. In fact, why *isn’t* he on a camel? I make him out to be...about four feet six? A small boy, I’m thinking? All alone out here? And why might that be?”

“If you want to find out,” Michael said, “offer him water.”

“And use up even a swallow of what we have? *Now* who needs his head covered a little better?”

“If he’s a native, he might know where a well is. In fact, he may be on his way there. So...one swallow of water for him could wind up filling the canteen. Once we get a decent plug in the hole,” Michael added.

They walked on in silence, but Michael could tell that Rolfe Gantt was thinking.

The wind had died and the sand had spun down but the sun had grown hotter. Michael’s mouth was parched. He figured the air temperature had to be at least a hundred and ten, and then the sun’s heat was intensified off the desert’s surface. Still, he was sweating and that was a good sign. When the sweat stopped...not good.

“All right,” Gantt said at last. “Tell him we have water.”

Michael abruptly stopped and Gantt pulled himself up short, then backed away a couple of steps. Out across the plain, the small boy also stopped and stared in their direction.

Michael made the declaration in, again, both Tamazight and then Tuareg Berber.

There was no response. “Hold up the canteen,” Michael said, and Gantt obeyed. Then Michael called out once more. His voice rolled through the silence, and the silence closed up in its wake.

No response. The figure just stood there, staring.

“He’s not coming in.” Gantt opened the canteen, put it under his head covering and took a quick sip that he let linger in his mouth for a few seconds before he swallowed. “Here.”

Michael sipped and also let the water, a warm yet delicious nectar, sit in his mouth. He sloshed it around and then, reluctantly, downed it. Gantt put the canteen’s strap back over his shoulder. “Let’s go,” said the pilot.

For the next hour, the figure stayed with them at a distance of never less than a hundred meters. They came upon an area of sand dunes that rose up in tremendous golden waves. What looked like piles of burned black rubble lay about, the perfect shelters for horned vipers and the three-inch-long scorpions they’d seen crawling around. Michael and Gantt at the same time saw the footprints leading from the hard stony surface up one of the dunes and over. Someone was walking ahead of them.

The small figure had vanished.

When they reached the top of the first dune, a hard slog for anyone no matter how physically fit, they saw the person who'd made the footprints struggling onward about two hundred meters ahead. It was a man in tan-colored clothes and wearing black boots. He had wrapped a dark green kerchief around his head. He fell and stood up, fell again and stood up again, and kept going.

"Oh my God," Gantt said softly. "I think...that's Hartler. My wingman. He's wearing on his head the scarf his wife sent him." He cupped a hand to his mouth to shout for his friend.

Before the shout could emerge, a piece of black rubble hit Gantt on the right shoulder. At nearly the same time, Michael saw six men on camels come up over a dune and surround Gantt's wingman. Hartler fell to his knees. All the six men carried rifles, and one who seemed to be in the lead—a man wearing robes dyed bright crimson and a keffiyeh the same vivid hue—aimed his rifle at Hartler's head.

"Get down," Michael quietly told Gantt, who was already lowering himself to the sand. Michael got down on his stomach. Both of them watched over the dune's rise at the scene as it unfolded, and both knew they were in the presence of the Dahlasiffa.

Two of the other men threw ropes around Hartler. One of the camels made a braying noise like harsh laughter, and two more got into an argument that involved the snapping of teeth until a short whip settled the disagreement. The man wearing the crimson robes and keffiyeh shot Hartler in the head at close range. The green kerchief took flight. When the rifle went off, Gantt shivered. Hartler pitched forward. His body was dragged between a pair of camels off across the sand and away.

Neither Gantt nor Michael moved for some time. Gantt's breathing sounded like a key trying to turn in a rusted lock.

The Walther was clutched in Gantt's hand and the hand was there within Michael's reach. But first things first.

Michael grabbed up a handful of sand and flung it into the flyer's eyes. Then he went after the gun hand, even as the blinded Gantt clubbed with it at Michael's injured shoulder.

Grappling for the gun, they slid halfway down the massive dune. A blow from the Walther hit Michael's collarbone on his wounded side and sent pain tearing through him. In that instant of agony his teeth began to lengthen; he could feel them bursting free from the gums. Small hairs rose up on the back of his right hand and along the arm, and the fingers began to change their shape.

Gantt's knee crashed into his jaw. Michael fell backward, sliding away. Lights of every color glittered behind his eyes. He felt his spine contort as the change gnawed at him from the inside out. He got up on his knees and was met by a boot to the ribs. The pain of that, and the certainty that Gantt would shoot him if this meeting of men of action were to continue much longer, caused Michael to slam and lock his soul cage. The enraged green-eyed wolf held its anger in check. It slinked back into the dark. Then it settled down again to wait for a more opportune moment in which to sink its teeth into Rolfe Gantt's throat.

"Do you think you're *clever*? So damned *clever*? You're a fool, is what you are!" Gantt, his makeshift keffiyeh nearly torn off, was standing over Michael with the pistol aimed at his enemy's head. "I should shoot you!" he seethed. "One bullet to your brain and I'm finished with you!"

Michael looked up at the man with his single good eye. His own keffiyeh had come undone and his face was exposed. He spat out some fresh blood, the smell of which made his thirst and hunger explode. He managed a tight smile, but he had some trouble drawing enough breath to speak. A couple of broken ribs was all he needed. "If shooting me...is...worth bringing them back...after they hear the noise, then go ahead."

Gantt's finger twitched on the trigger. But when nothing happened during the next three seconds, Michael knew the shot would not be fired. His shoulder was killing him. Currents of heat and cold coursed through his arm. It had come out of the scarf and Michael had to ease it back into place, his teeth gritted against the torment. So much for the man of action, he thought grimly.

Gantt's attention was suddenly diverted from Michael Gallatin. "What the hell do *you* want?" he asked someone, and Michael turned his head to see the boy in the dirty clothes, the brown keffiyeh and the khaki tam

standing there next to the rubble pile he must've been hiding in. Michael surmised that the boy had seen the Dahlasiffa first, and he'd thrown a piece of rock at Gantt to keep the flyer from calling Hartler and getting them all killed.

"Ask him what he wants," Gantt directed. Michael did, in the two languages, but he got no answer. "What's wrong with him? Can't he *speak*?"

You can't speak? Michael asked, choosing the more common Tamazight.

The boy didn't move at first. And then he lifted his right hand and made a chopping motion across where his mouth would be under the keffiyeh. He repeated it a second time, with more vicious emphasis. Michael thought he understood. Painfully, he got up and walked to the boy, who began to retreat.

No danger here, said Michael. *Let me see*.

The retreat ceased. The tam and the keffiyeh came off. The boy was about ten, with curly black hair and olive-hued skin and dark sunken eyes that had seen things no boy of ten should have ever witnessed. They were so full of misery and the shadows of sadness that they were frightening to peer into. The boy opened his mouth.

"His tongue's been cut out. Looks recent," Michael said to Gantt. Then, to the boy: *Your tribe did this?* That got a shake of the head and a hand pointing toward a bloody green kerchief that lay in the sand two hundred meters away.

Dahlasiffa? Michael asked. The boy nodded once and closed his mouth. He wrapped the keffiyeh around his head and face, leaving a slit for the haunted eyes to stare through. The jaunty tam went back on, a soldier's cap for the walking wounded.

"What do you think happened to him?" Gantt asked, standing behind Michael.

"War between tribes, I'm supposing. Maybe the Dahlasiffa raided his village. Could be they left him alive and removed his tongue as a warning. Maybe he'd befriended a Commonwealth soldier and the Dahlasiffa didn't like that." Michael rubbed his ribcage and thought it must be bruised instead of broken. He had gotten his wind back. He looked at his hand and saw no trace of the wolf. For now.

“Damn it,” Gantt said, but whether he was saying it for the sake of the boy’s plight or the fact that they had a straggler in their charge was unclear.

Michael noticed something the boy was doing with his left hand. It was balled up and he kept shaking it back and forth. There was a clicking sound. Michael reached out and prodded the hand to get him to open it. The boy resisted for a few seconds, the solemn dark eyes revealing nothing.

Then the hand opened.

In the palm was a pair of yellowed dice with red pips.

The boy closed his hand almost at once, and kept shaking the dice within it.

A gift from the same soldier who’d given him the tam? Michael wondered. “Give him some water,” he told Gantt.

“Hey, you don’t order *me* around!”

Michael turned to face him. The green eyes were hard and, as Gantt would have put it, supremely confident. “*Water*,” he repeated. The flyer muttered a curse that would have knocked down a B-17, but the canteen’s strap came off his shoulder. He uncapped the flask, stepped forward and gave it to the boy.

Drink, Michael told him.

The boy did. One sip under the keffiyeh, and one sip only. He knew from the amount of water in the canteen how desperate their situation was. He handed it back to Gantt, who had already gotten his head covering back into an orderly position.

Michael was running out of his knowledge of Tamazight. He asked the boy, *A well nearby?*

The boy made a motion with his right hand like a bird taking flight. He ended it with a finger pointing to the southwest. Michael took it to mean: *A distance*.

Which, to these people, could be many, many miles.

“What are you saying to him?”

“Asking him if there’s a well anywhere near. He’s saying...I think... that it’s a distance away, to the southwest.”

“How far?”

“He couldn’t tell me.”

"I intend for us to continue our present course."

"All right," Michael said. "We probably each have one swallow remaining." He began to work his shirt back into position over his head and face. Had he ever been so feeble in his life? he asked himself. Everything was such a damned labor. The heat was sapping even the will to move. "Continue your present course. I'm going with the boy to find a well."

"Pardon me?" The Walther pointed at Michael's midsection.

Behind him, Michael heard the dice clicking together in the boy's hand. What numbers were coming up? What pips of fate? Lucky sevens, or snake-eyes?

Michael had made his decision. If he could not overpower Rolfe Gantt, he was going to die here in this desert. It would be a death of his own choosing, at least a freedom of sorts, and not a miserable wasting-away behind coils of barbed wire. Besides, when they found out what he was they would likely fly him directly to Berlin, give him over to some bald-headed mad doctor with magnified lenses for eyeglasses and a thirst for dissection, to find out how the creature ticked. He would not tick for anybody. He listened to the dice, and then he spoke.

"Use the gun or put it down," he said. His voice was calm and even, perhaps a little weary, but strong with the resolve of a man who does not fear the end. "I'm going with this boy to find a well. Maybe there's one out there, maybe not. But I'm not going to let you walk me into a POW camp. Yes, I thought I could get away. Now I know I can't trick you, or beat you. My compliments. But my time is running out. Yours also." He paused to let that settle. The Walther did not move an inch.

Michael said, "I suggest you take the last of the water and continue your course. You might find a patrol or an outpost later this afternoon, or tonight, or tomorrow. You might run right into the Dahlasiffa. You have two guns, you can hold them off for awhile. Or you might run into a British patrol and then you can sit out the rest of the war but unfortunately the sky will not wait. Whatever you decide to do, Rolfe. It's *your* day." Michael dared to glance quickly up toward the sun. "Isn't it *lovely*?"

"You're out of your mind," Gantt answered.

■ Robert McCammon

“I’ve come to my senses. No man will force me to do anything. Certainly not on what may very likely be the last day of my life. So, as they say: lead... follow...or get the hell out of the way.” Michael turned his attention to the boy: *The well. Take me there.*

The boy looked from one man to another. The dice kept clicking together in his hand. Then he stopped shaking them, opened his palm and regarded the number of pips revealed there. Michael thought that he too knew the great and mystic meaning of Fate in the lives of human beings.

The boy began to walk toward the southwest.

Michael followed.

Gantt stood at a crossroads, though beneath him there was only shifting and uncertain sand.

He watched the two figures, the small and the tall, walk away from him. He gazed along his present course, further to the northwest where he hoped he might find his brothers-in-arms. He looked at the canteen, and putting it alongside his ear he listened to the meager amount move within. Hardly enough to fill three thimbles.

It was a huge desert. Sometimes an eagle who flew so high could not realize the immensity of the earth below, for he was fixed on sky and currents of air and the desire to remain in that beautiful realm forever.

But he was fallen now, and he was just a man.

He let the pistol drop to his side.

His thought was: If they run into the Dahlasiffa, they’re going to need me.

Because he was a man of action.

He drew in a long breath from the furnace. Then he began to follow the two figures, the small and the tall, across the golden dunes toward the far horizon.

THREE

IN THE SHADOW of a rough mound of red rock carved by the Sahara's wind into a spidery shape more suited for an exhibit of Picasso's bronze sculptures, the three wanderers rested.

The sun sat at the position of late afternoon. It, too, was turning red, and the desert landscape itself had taken on a bloody tinge. Silence reigned, but for the soft clicking that came from the dice in the boy's left hand.

"Does he have to do that?" Gantt asked irritably, as he sat with his back against the rock. He had removed his head covering to let the sweat dry from his face. He was aware that he'd stopped sweating so much. Their water was gone.

Michael didn't reply. They were all arranged in various positions on the parachute, which had been laid down to shield their bodies from the heat radiating off the hard surface beneath. Michael, lying on his back with his eyes closed, saw no point in answering. He thought the boy might be a little insane.

He, too, had removed his keffiyeh. The boy, sitting a distance away with his knees up to his chin, stared straight ahead through his slit of brown cloth, the tam on his head pale with dust.

There was no longer a need for Gantt to brandish a gun. The Colt had gone into his parachute pack and the Walther into his waistband. They were all equals now, and all equally tired and thirsty.

Gantt scanned the sky once more, as he had so many times. Searching for the aircraft—preferably German—that were never there. Then he focused his attention on the landscape, looking for six men on camels. Thankfully, they were never there either.

“Hartler was a good man,” said Gantt. His voice was husky, his throat scratched raw by the fine grit that had gotten through his undershirt and into his mouth a few grains at a time. This was the third time he’d said Hartler was a good man. Gantt closed his eyes, his head lolling. “He was a very efficient wingman,” he said, repeating himself. “Trust is an important quality, isn’t it, Michael?”

“Yes, it is.” Michael’s eyes opened; this was a new avenue of approach.

“I trusted Hartler with my life. Many, many times. He had a wife and two beautiful daughters. I told him...Hartler, give this up and go home. Tell them you have a family that you wish to live for. And do you know what he answered?” Gantt’s eyes, as bloodshot as the sun, opened to take Michael in. “He said he would go home when he was as big a *hero* as me.”

Again, Michael felt no need to respond. But he was listening, because he’d heard something different in the flyer’s voice.

“A *hero*,” Gantt repeated. “And I am, I suppose. No...I *know* I am. The letters and the newspapers...they say I am. *Signal* said it, in three issues. Yes, I am a hero. A shining light for the youth of Germany. For her future and her aspirations.” He once more looked to the empty sky.

“But let me tell you...let me please tell you,” he said quietly, “what the life of a hero is.” He swallowed grit and tried to gather saliva in his mouth. “It’s a hundred flash-bulbs going off in your face, but not one light on in your apartment when you get home.

“It’s vows of undying love, faithful loyalty and reckless sex, but not one plate of a home-cooked meal. It’s the look on a young man’s face when he tells you he too wants to be an eagle, and you have already seen so many faces of young men burned beyond human recognition.” Gantt was silent for awhile. The dice continued to click together in the boy’s closed hand.

"I am the hero," he went on, quieter still, "who finds the weakness in weaker men. I am the hero who strikes from below, who gives no quarter and expects none. And to tell you the honest truth, Michael, I smile a little bit when the chutes fail to open. For the hero has done his work that day. He has done his work. But oh dear God, I do love the sky."

Gantt shifted his position against the rock. Michael saw him lift his left arm and regard his wristwatch.

"Your Rolex," said Gantt, with impudence returning to his voice. "A nice playtoy, but it can't compare with a Breitling."

"Is that so?"

"Absolutely so. Well, just look at the difference! Mine has a much larger face with clearer numbers, in my opinion, since yours does not have numbers but difficult-to-read bars where the numbers should be. Mine has an automatic winder and a chronograph. In fact, it's been created specifically for use by aviators. I've had not a bit of trouble with any part of it in the four happy years of ownership. And your Rolex may be very handsome, if that's what you feel you need to project, but it doesn't have the pedigree of the Breitling."

"Hm," Michael commented.

"The Breitling brand dates from 1884. I believe the Rolex name was trademarked in 1908. If you care to calculate the difference between those years, you'll find that Breitling has twenty-four years of experience on the Rolex. What do you say to that?"

"I'd say Rolex caught up very quickly to Breitling and surpassed that brand in short order. They learned from Breitling's mistakes."

"Oh, *really*? And how exactly has Rolex surpassed Breitling?"

"In the areas of waterproofing and shockproofing," Michael answered calmly. "A Rolex was worn by the first British woman to swim the English channel, in October of 1927. You can imagine how cold the water was."

"Yes, unfortunately I can only imagine," said Gantt.

"After ten hours in the water, her Rolex was still performing perfectly," Michael continued. "As for the area of shockproofing, my Rolex is still performing perfectly after—you may recall—this morning's airplane crash."

“Ah! *Touché*,” said the flyer, with a narrow-eyed smile. He held out his wrist for Michael to see. “But my Breitling still beats your Rolex. Beats it by far.”

“And why is that?”

“Because of the band. This leather band. You see it?” It was simply a brown leather band, nothing special about it that Michael could tell. “This band,” said Gantt, “is made from the leather on the instrument panel of my father’s Albatross fighter plane, from 1918. He died in action but he set his plane down first. A perfect landing, they said, and him shot full of holes. His wingman sent my mother a drawing of him that one of his squadron members had done. It was framed in the plane’s wing fabric and panel leather. After my mother passed away I decided I wanted my father to be closer to me than a picture on the wall. I decided I wanted him to fly with me.” Gantt turned his wrist before Michael’s face. “And here he is.”

Michael realized why Gantt feared the Dahlasiffa so much. They would certainly try to take the watch, and they would likely succeed. With it would go the band, which was actually the most valuable part of it to Gantt. And he would die knowing his father’s memory was lost to the hands of the Death Stalkers. Lost, never to be found. It was time, Michael thought, to start moving once more. He sat up and rubbed his injured shoulder. The boy’s hand kept shaking the dice, and occasionally he opened his fingers to see what the pips read. Gantt leaned back against the red rock, his face painted crimson by the setting sun, his eyes not on the gleaming watch but on the plain brown leather band.

Michael had never had such difficulty getting to his feet, but he made it. “I think we should—”

“Ow!” said Gantt, wincing. He had jerked his head away from the rock and grasped at the back of his neck. “*Scheisse!* Something stung me!”

Michael looked at the rock and saw a trace of movement in a shadow pool. Peering closer, he made out the three-inch-long black scorpion that sat there, king of its domain, its stinger coiled back and ready to deliver another strike.

“Scorpion,” Michael said. *The poisonous kind*, he did not say. *The deadly kind*, he did not say.

The kind whose venom could kill a man within several hours, he did not say. He didn't have to, because Gantt also saw the scorpion. Gantt drew the Walther and smashed its grip into the shadow pool until the scorpion was a mass of milky paste.

Then he looked at Michael with terror in his eyes.

The boy's hand stopped.

"Razor," said Michael.

Gantt pulled Michael's straight razor from his pocket and gave it to him. He leaned forward. Michael opened the razor and found the sting just to the right of Gantt's vertebrae. It was a small red puncture wound already becoming ringed with white.

Michael cut an X across the wound and squeezed the blood out of it.

"Did you get it all?" Gantt asked hoarsely, still leaning forward.

Michael didn't know. He wasn't sure how deep the stinger had pierced, or how much venom had been delivered. He got down on his knees beside the flyer. "Hold still," he said, and he sliced another X into the flesh beside the first. Gantt made no sound. Then Michael put his mouth over the wound and sucked the blood like any good vampire in a Bram Stoker horror story.

He spat blood out and repeated the indelicate task. The smell and taste of it made the animal part of him salivate. He realized that the wolf could have a feast right here on this parachute dining-cloth. A third time he sucked at the wound and then spat out the fluid, and then that was all he could do.

"Thank you," said Gantt. He put his fingers to the back of his neck and then held them, bloodstreaked, before his face. "Thank you," he repeated.

"I don't know if I got all of it."

"All right. Thank you. You tried."

"We'd better stay here awhile longer," Michael decided. He noted that the boy had begun shaking his dice again. The boy's eyes darted between Michael and Gantt. "Just be still," Michael told the flier.

"Yes. As you say. Yes." Gantt crawled away from the rock. He lay down on the parachute on his right side, trailing blood as it dripped. He curled up into a fetal position with his hands folded under his right cheek.

An hour passed, during which the sun dropped to the horizon. The light turned deeper red with blue shadows. The air cooled as night came on.

"I'm burning up," Gantt suddenly said. His voice sounded thick. "Burning up," he repeated. He sat up, and in the red gloom Michael saw the glistening of small beads of sweat on the man's ashen face. "Can I have some water?"

"We have none," Michael said.

"I must have water. My mouth...it's not right."

"We have *no* water," Michael said carefully, for Gantt's eyes were bright and wild with fever.

The ace put a hand to his forehead. "I'm burning up," he said, as if this were news.

"Rolfe? Just lie down and be—"

"I must insist on water." It had been spoken in German. "Would you deny a thirsty man?"

"Listen to me. Do you know where you are?"

"I'm...I'm...yes, I'm in the infirmary." He nodded, verifying this illusion to himself. Again, he was speaking his native tongue. "I remember...I was flying. Then...there was oil on my windscreen. I couldn't see. I knew I was going down. I jumped, and my parachute opened. What happened to my plane?"

"It crashed."

"The lights," said Gantt. "Why are the lights so dim?"

"Lie down," Michael instructed. He decided to add, "Right there, on the bed." He heard the clicking of the dice at his back.

Gantt looked around, obviously confused. He felt for something that was not there. "I don't like it," he said, in almost a child's voice. "So dark in here."

Some of the scorpion's poison had gotten into his system, Michael knew. From what he'd read, there were thirty different varieties of scorpions in the Sahara and four of them were lethal to humans. The one that had stung Gantt was as toxic as a cobra. The venom could cause first high fever and hallucinations, then convulsions, and finally heart failure. It just depended on how much Michael had been able to get out of the wound.

“Yes,” Gantt said. “I think I *will* lie down.” He curled himself up again on his side on the parachute, and he closed his eyes.

Michael waited. He caught the boy watching him as the dice went back and forth.

A few minutes passed. Gantt appeared to be sleeping, his chest rising and falling.

He twitched suddenly, but it was a passing muscle spasm. Then he opened his eyes and sat up again, and now he glowered at Michael with an expression nearing rage.

“I *said* I need water. It is very uncivilized to keep water from a thirsty man. Do you hear me, sir?”

“Rolfe, there’s no more water.” Even as he said it, Michael knew it was hopeless.

Gantt was a wanderer in the desert beyond reason.

Gantt was silent.

And silent still, his dark-hollowed eyes fixed upon Michael Gallatin or whoever he thought Michael Gallatin to be.

“You can’t treat your patients in this manner,” Gantt said quietly. “These men here...they all deserve better, sir. They shouldn’t be so disrespected.”

Michael had no idea what situation the flyer thought he was in, or whether it had really happened in some way or was strictly fantasy. He saw Gantt’s hand go to the Walther’s grip.

“I want water. For all of us. *Now.*”

Michael spoke German: “Very well, then. You’ll get it. There’s a jug under the bed. Right there.” He pointed at nothing. “Reach under and bring it out.”

Gantt stared blankly at him.

“Under the *bed*,” Michael repeated firmly. “Right there.”

The dice stopped clicking.

“Thank you, sir,” said Gantt, and he leaned over to get the imaginary jug under the phantom bed.

Michael moved as fast as he could. He plucked the Walther from Gantt’s waistband and when the man looked at him, puzzled, Michael hit him as lightly as possible across the back of the head with the pistol’s

grip. Lightly as possible, but hard enough to put him to sleep and quench his thirst.

Gantt lay on the parachute. His body began to convulse, the arms and legs twisting. For a moment it appeared as if, even unconscious, he was about to get up and go for the waterjug, but then he collapsed again and lay thrashing. Michael put the gun aside and got his sweat-stiff shirt. He knelt beside the man, and with difficulty due to the one hand forced the cloth between Gantt's teeth. It might prevent him from biting his tongue off, or not, depending on how strong the convulsions became.

Then all Michael could do was crawl away and sit with the Walther in his hand.

He watched Gantt suffer, as the last of the light faded.

The convulsions became more violent. This hideous phase lasted about fifteen minutes before Gantt suddenly became still.

Michael checked his pulse. Weak. But the man was alive.

The night turned cooler. A group of jackals came nosing around, until Michael stood up and ran them off with a few stones. His Rolex showed the passage of almost three more hours before Gantt stirred and spat the cloth out and got slowly up on his hands and knees. He retched so hard it seemed his guts would spill out. Then Gantt moaned and cursed and said in a voice barely intelligible, "Damn, my head hurts." He had spoken in English. After that, he curled down again in a fetal position and went to sleep.

Michael also slept. His last impression was of the boy, sitting cross-legged under the starry sky, the Commonwealth soldier's dusty tam on his head and his face hidden by the keffiyeh. Whether he was asleep sitting up or not was anyone's guess, but at least for the moment his left hand was motionless and the dice were silent.

FOUR

THEY REACHED THE well when dawn was a thin streak of red across the horizon and the world was made of different depths of darkness.

How far they had come this night, Michael didn't know. His legs felt ragged. His left arm was a dead weight. He had left his kitbag behind, to save his energy, but he carried both guns in the parachute pack and Gantt—weak and dispirited—had not protested. Every step Michael took might end in a stumble. But he'd kept going, one of three, walking right behind the boy and following behind him the Messerschmitt ace.

The well was not pretty. It lay up under an outcropping of rock and so was shielded from the sun. Uneven stones were built up around a small pool the size of a bathtub in a cheap hotel. Dried animal dung was scattered about where the jackals and wild dogs had unsuccessfully tried to mark their territory.

Pretty or not, the well was full of gorgeous water. Gantt's cracked lips parted in a gasp of need and he flung himself forward past Michael and the boy.

He hung over the stones and pushed his face into the water. He reached in with both arms and splashed water over his head. He reached down deeper, into the cooler depths, and when his hands came back up

Michael saw the entrails roped around them, and suddenly the gashed-open bloodless torso that the entrails had spilled from surfaced in front of Gantt's face, and also bursting to the surface was a decapitated human head, mouth and eyes open, that bore the purple hole of a rifle bullet.

Gantt shrieked; there was no other way to describe the sound. He fought out of the blue entrails that bound his wrists, and staggering back he nearly fell over the boy, who also retreated—but in utter silence—from the grisly mess that fouled the well. Gantt went down to the ground among the animals' leavings and clawed frantically at his own mouth until the blood ran from his lips.

Michael approached the well. He had already smelled the beginnings of putrefaction. Desert heat was not kind to a corpse. By the end of another day, the odor would even keep the animals from coming near. There was another scent in the air also: salt. He figured the water had been salted as well as fouled by human remains. He walked a few paces away and knelt down on his haunches to think.

He thought he understood the motive for this brutality. "The Dahlasiffa," he said to Gantt, who had crawled on his belly a distance away and lay with his hands to his face. "They've poisoned this well to keep other tribes from drinking." In the strengthening light, he found the camel tracks that led southward. "Their own village must not be far. They've likely got a well there. They're probably demanding tribute from other tribes." He stood up and looked over the hammada toward the south. A muscle worked in his jaw. "We need water, or we're going to die." He spoke to Gantt not harshly but firmly: "Stand up."

"I can't." The other man's voice was almost gone. "I can't."

"If you won't stand up, I'll stand you up."

"Please...let me lie here. I can't...dear God...I can't—"

Gantt was interrupted by the hand that reached down and grasped the back of his collar, pulling his face out of the sand.

"You hear me," Michael said. "Loud and clear." His eyes gleamed bright green in the dawning light. The sun was a red semicircle rising over shadowed mountains to the east. "You can handle a gun. So can I. The guns can get us some water. That means we live, at least for another

day, unless the Dahlasiffa kill us first. But I'm thinking they're not going to be expecting two men with guns. I told you to *stand up*."

"I'm done," Gantt gasped through his bloodied lips, his eyes swollen from the horror of what he'd just seen. "You go."

"The odds are not good for one man. Not much better for two, but they *are* better. Now...you're a soldier and so am I. We go out fighting. Do you hear me?"

"I can't make it. Please. I'm done."

"I'll tell you when you're done or not." Michael gritted his teeth and tried to haul the man up but for all his best effort he didn't have the strength. "Rolfe," he said, "don't die on your belly." And he decided to add, "Your father didn't."

Gantt didn't respond for a few seconds. Then he reached back and roughly pushed Michael's hand away. He slowly rolled over and sat up. He pressed his hands to his face once more and rocked back and forth.

Michael heard the noise of the dice. He saw that the boy was throwing them onto the ground and then leaning forward to read the pips before they were collected and the process repeated.

"We have to try," Michael said, though he himself was unsure they could even get close enough to the Dahlasiffa village to try. "We can think of *something*."

"I'm too weak. I can barely walk."

"Can you *crawl*?" Michael asked.

Gantt lowered his hands and looked up at Michael Gallatin. His eyes were deep sunken, dull and lifeless. It was a bad sign, Michael thought. A sign of giving up. He reached into the parachute pack, got the Walther P38 and offered the weapon to its owner. "Take it," he said when Gantt hesitated. "Go ahead and blow your brains out, if you want to. I'll bury you out here or you can join Hartler for a long bath."

Gantt stared fixedly at the pistol. He frowned, searching for solid ground in this desert hell. The sun was rising quickly now, and the air was already hot. No breeze stirred a particle of dust.

At last Gantt spoke. "Why would I want to commit suicide?"

“It would be faster than dying of thirst. You still have some strength left. The village may be only a few miles away. Their well will be clean.” Something Michael had read suddenly came to him. “If I have to die today, I want to die fighting to live.”

“That makes not a bit of sense,” said the pilot.

“I know. It’s one of your quotes from your last article in *Signal*.”

In spite of his raging thirst and deadening fatigue, Gantt summoned a weak smile. “You’re a strange bastard.”

“Save your insults for tomorrow. For today, take this pistol and stand up. I’m thirsty enough to kill for a drink. Are you?”

Gantt gingerly rubbed his raw mouth. Then he reached out and took the pistol. “Yes, I am,” he said, and with the greatest effort he got himself to his feet.

They aimed themselves along the camel tracks, with Michael leading the way, the boy next and then Gantt. As the sun steadily rose and the heat intensified the Englisher and German stopped to put on their face and head coverings, and then they continued southward.

They passed into a surrealistic landscape. The hard-packed crust of sand was brown with streaks of yellow. Emerging from the earth were huge ridges of wind-sculpted sandstone rocks standing twenty and thirty meters tall. Michael kept to the camel tracks, which led them through winding passages in the rocks.

It was difficult for even Michael to keep moving as the heat grew, so he knew Gantt was struggling. Every so often Michael looked back at the others; the boy was all right, though moving slowly, but Gantt was losing ground. The scorpion’s venom was surely still affecting him. Couple that with the shock of seeing Hartler, and it amazed Michael that the ace could put one foot in front of the other. They were helped by the find of some spindly cactus plants, which when cut open by the razor afforded a small amount of liquid squeezed from the stalks. Still, the need for water began to take over every thought for Michael, to push everything else aside, and he was fully aware that both Gantt and the boy were kindred sufferers. They did not possess the animal drive that kept Michael directed on his path to survival.

Water. One might imagine it in the mouth. One might imagine its cool flow streaming over the head and face and chest. One might imagine lying in a chill pool of it, regaining the strength that the sun had stripped away. *Water.* At this moment of heavy silence and scorching fire, the dream of drinking it, of getting one swallow through the cracked lips into the dry mouth, was the only thing that could possibly lead them on for endless mile after mile. *Water.*

At last, as the sun began to sink down again toward the blue world of another night, as the jackals that followed them came sniffing in close for the smell of impending death but did not find it yet and so retreated to wait a few hours more, the three figures crouched on a ridge of rock and surveyed what lay ahead. Michael had seen it first, and cautioned the others to be careful in their approach.

He didn't want the watchman atop the wooden tower to see them. The man, wearing the traditional robes and a keffiyeh, held a pair of binoculars. The man stood beneath an awning of tan-colored cloth that might have been the shirts of several dead soldiers stitched together, and hanging on a rope behind him was a horn he could blow into to alert the inhabitants of the village at his back. The horn, Michael noted, was a brass cornet probably once owned by some poor dead Commonwealth trooper whose commander valued the stirring music of a military march.

But for the camel trail that passed alongside the watchman's tower, the village was encircled by a waist-high barbed wire fence. It was a village of many tents, many camels in a corral and many goats wandering about. Michael had already counted thirty-five people, most of them men but a few women and children. At the center of the village a dozen palm trees stood around a waterhole the size of a small swimming pool, which was obviously very jealously guarded. On the far side of the village was a second watchman's tower. A nice secure setup, Michael thought. Especially since he knew one of those tents down there surely held an arsenal of weapons and ammunition stripped from dead soldiers.

"How the hell do we get into *that*?" Gantt asked.

Michael had already considered that question.

"After nightfall," he said, "one of us walks in. He allows himself to be captured. He causes some kind of disturbance while his mission team gets through the wire. It's up to them to find the tent where the guns and ammo are stored. If there are grenades, the place can be blown. Then everyone's on their own to get their water."

"Mission team," Gantt repeated.

"That's right. You and the boy."

"You are *mad*," said Gantt.

"You'll know the time to cross the wire." Michael kept his intense gaze fixed upon Gantt, not allowing him to look away. He gave him the parachute pack. "Take both guns. I won't need one."

"You're going in without a gun." Gantt grinned crazily. "Ah, *ja*! An Englisher's plan! Make sure you douse yourself with your aftershave and have a spot of tea before you go in!"

"There's no other way," said Michael, "but *my way*." He caught a faint aroma, drifting in with the cooling air. "Can you smell that? The scent of sweet water?"

"I can't smell anything and neither can you."

"Oh, yes." Michael nodded. "I can."

They waited behind the rock ridge as the sun went down. When the light faded and the gaudy stars emerged in their millions, torches flared in the Dahlasiffa village. Upraised voices could be heard: shouting, mixed with raucous laughter. Michael looked up over the ridge and saw a group of robed Dahlasiffa standing around what appeared to be a rectangular pit dug into the earth near the waterhole. It looked to him, from this distance at least, that two figures were balanced on some kind of beam across the pit and were grappling with each other.

"What's going on down there?" Gantt edged up beside Michael to make his own assessment.

"I'm not sure. A celebration of some kind?" It sounded so, from the noise. Though the figures were fighting—or wrestling, to be more precise—there was no anger in the voices of the onlookers. Then suddenly one of the figures fell into the pit, there was an uproar of hollering and laughter and people jumped around with joyous abandon. The man who'd fallen into the

pit came out of it, scrabbling up a ladder just for the purpose, as if hellfire had scorched his bottom.

Which was exactly in line with Michael's plan.

Two more men got out on the beam and started wrestling. Again, the onlookers went a bit wild. "A sporting contest," Gantt observed. "Maybe they're gambling on who's going to win."

"Hm. Well, *we're* going to win," Michael said. He eased back down to where the boy sat, and Gantt followed. The boy was rolling his dice on the ground, again and again. Michael snapped his fingers in front of the boy's eyes to secure his attention. *Follow him*, he said, and pointed at Gantt.

It was time to go get some water.

The hollerings and laughter intensified again. Now a pair of musicians had joined the throng: a drum began to beat and a high-pitched flute began to whistle. The air was fragrant with the aroma of grilled goat. They were having a regular party down in Dahlasiffaville.

Gantt caught Michael's good wrist. "You can't be serious. About walking in there without a gun. Even you Englishers can't be *that* insane."

"I was born in Russia," Michael said, as if that explained it all. He pulled free. "I can promise you that I'll be attracting all the attention, but you'll have to be fast and careful getting across the wire. Find that weapons tent as quickly as you can and if you have the chance and means blow it to blazes. Take care of the boy and take care of yourself."

"They'll kill you first thing," Gantt told him. "We'll never even get down to the wire before you're dead."

"I say you will. Look for your opportunity and take it." He spoke to the boy again:

Remember. Follow him. The boy nodded, the dice gripped in his hand. Then Michael crawled up to the top of the ridge again. He stood up and started down on the other side.

He didn't look back.

He was apprehensive about what might happen in the next few minutes, but he was not afraid. He was prepared, and he was ready.

The music and the shouting went on. Michael reached the bottom of the ridge and began walking directly toward the watchman's tower. The

■ Robert McCammon

watchman had a small oil lamp up there, and a torch had been set beside the entrance to the village through the barbed wire. Michael strolled along as if he owned the desert and knew every scorpion by name.

Then a rifle barked and a bullet kicked up dust in front of him. The watchman hollered at him, probably a command to halt, but Michael kept walking. A second bullet hit the ground close to Michael's left boot, so this time he decided it was in his best interest to stop.

The cornet was blown several times. A very sour note. The music, laughter and shouting from the village immediately ceased.

It seemed the party was over. Or perhaps, Michael thought, it was just about to begin.

FIVE

THE ROBED WATCHMAN came down a ladder, pointing the rifle at Michael Gallatin's midsection. Now would be an auspicious time, Michael thought, for Gantt and the boy to start their journey to the wire. *Who is your shade?* Michael asked. He had to ask the question again, in Tuareg, before he got an expression of semi-comprehension. He got no reply, but his meaning was: *Who is your leader?* The chief of a tribe was always known as its 'shade', for the amount of protection he offered his people.

Within a few seconds, other Dahlasiffa came running to answer the call of the cornet. Pistols and rifles—British, German and Italian—were in evidence. Some of the robed men carried torches or oil lamps. They got around Michael to keep him from advancing or retreating. They brandished their weapons and hollered at him as if each man fancied himself the shadiest one in the village. Rifle barrels began to push at Michael's ribs and one brought a hiss of pain from him by touching his injured shoulder. But he kept the pain out of his face, and with great effort he maintained a calm half-smile.

A figure in crimson robes pushed his way through the growing crowd, though when they realized he was there they quickly moved out of his way. He got up close to Michael and stopped. The man had arranged his

keffiyeh into a turban, revealing a handsome though somewhat vulpine face. A pair of black eyes under thick black brows glowered at him. He was in his mid-thirties, his flesh burnished dark brown. He had high cheekbones and a long elegant nose that any high-bred Englisher might have envied. In some other world, the man in the crimson robes could have been a Libyan film star. He was cleanly shaven and bore in his deep-set eyes a sharp and cunning intelligence. He spoke to Michael in a smooth voice that carried a quiet threat, using a language that had some elements of Tuareg but was not entirely Tuareg and so was foreign to Michael.

Michael didn't respond. The man in the crimson robes reached out and plucked at their visitor's uniform.

"Brit," said the man.

"An English uniform, yes," Michael corrected.

"Brit," the man repeated, because he could. He tapped his chest. "Nuri." And he added in the King's tongue for Michael's enlightenment, "Meaning *fire*."

"Interesting," Michael said. That spoke for the crimson robes. The Dahlasiffa's shade was a showman. A rifle barrel pushed against Michael's neck and another one pressed against his spine.

"Who is *you*?" His King's tongue was not altogether perfect.

"Me?" Michael kept his half-smile. "Oh, I'm the Devil and I've come to destroy you."

"Destroy...*me*?" asked Nuri. His eyebrows went up. His face was solemn for a few seconds. Then the mouth opened and he began to laugh. As he laughed, so laughed the others. In fact, the others laughed loudest even though they probably had no idea why they were laughing. Such was the power of the Fireman, it seemed. Nuri turned and announced in their language what Michael had said, and then the bottomless pit of laughter stretched wide. Some of the others began to dance, they were laughing so hard.

Some, it appeared, wept tears of laughter.

Michael waited for all the mirth and hilarity to die down. When Nuri ceased laughing, the others stopped too. He said something, very rapidly in his harsh language, that Michael failed to understand. "Say you Devil," said Nuri, "yet you know not my speech? How is this?"

“Everyone knows the Devil is an Englishman,” said Michael, and when Nuri translated this the crowd went as crazy as any audience at a West End vaudeville show.

But this time Nuri only smiled; he did not laugh. He motioned for quiet and got it.

He examined Michael’s bruised face and swollen left eye at a distance of a few inches. He looked at the arm in the sling. He shook his head sadly. “You no Devil. You hurt, maybe crazy headed fool.”

“This is my disguise,” said Michael. Nuri didn’t seem to understand, so Michael amended it. “My mask.”

The Fireman reached under his robe and brought out a knife with a curved blade. He put it to Michael’s jawline. “Nuri cut your mask off,” he said, his eyes glittering in the torchlight. “Then know your real face.”

Michael had to brace himself. He had to hold himself steady. He had the feeling that now was not the time. The time was coming, very soon, but this was not it.

He said easily, “I’ve come all the way from Hell, Nuri. A long way. Won’t you show me a little of your village before I destroy you?”

The tip of Nuri’s knife dug into Michael’s flesh, but not quite hard enough to draw blood. Nuri began to laugh again. It was a low laugh, a dark and twisted laugh, and it was echoed by only a few of the others. Nuri lowered the knife and grinned. “*All Hell*,” he said, opening his arms wide to encompass the world. “*Everywhere*. Me. King of Hell. Me. King of all devils. You only fool with madness *here*.” He touched his own skull with the handle of his knife. “Where you from come? Do not know. Where you go...Nuri *do* know.” He called out what sounded like a series of commands. A rifle barrel came up between Michael’s shoulderblades and a pistol was aimed at the side of his head. Nuri turned away and walked through the throng. The rifle barrel shoved Michael forward. A man with three teeth darted in, chattering, and looked to be measuring Michael’s boots against his own well-worn sandals. Michael let himself be moved, as the crowd moved around him. At least, he thought, he was headed in the right direction, toward the waterhole.

He noted that the watchman had returned to his post and that Nuri, certainly no fool, had sent a trio of men with rifles out into the

dark to see if any more devils lurked nearby. Gantt and the boy were on their own.

Michael was paraded through the Dahlasiffa village. Women, children and dogs kept pace with the knot of armed men who surrounded him. One dog in particular came running up and started barking and spewing spittle with such abandon that Michael thought it was going to take a bite from his leg, and then a man gave it a kick that sent it reeling back amid its more reluctant brethren. These were not gentle people. Michael knew that whatever was in store for him would be a kind of Dahlasiffa hospitality that he might not appreciate.

He was stopped somewhere within the village. Torches and oil lamps ringed him. The guns were everywhere, and they were all pointed at him.

The crowd parted once more as Nuri the Fireman approached. He again got up almost face-to-face with Michael. "Village mine," he said. "People mine. Nuri rules here. You say different, Devil?"

Michael stared into the man's eyes without flinching. "I say Nuri will soon be on his knees. I say Nuri will soon be begging for mercy."

That brought a huge smile and a clap of the hands. Evidently Nuri was enjoying the baiting, as Michael had hoped a hardened killer would. He doubted that anyone in this world had ever spoken to Nuri thus. And who else would have the courage to say this to him, but the Devil himself?

"Devil," said Nuri, "meet my son."

A boy about fourteen appeared, hobbling on sticks covered with gauze bandages likely scavenged from a dead medic's pack.

The boy, wearing a loosely-fitting white shirt and a pair of red-dyed trousers, resembled his father. Except his right leg was gone at the hip, and there was only enough remaining of his left foot to grip a small piece of ground. It was, really, the shape of a cloven hoof. Michael recognized the injury. It was what happened when you stepped on a mine. Even if you survived the blast, some body parts did not. Looking into the boy's sunken eyes, Michael wasn't sure how much had actually survived. The right eye was a white, rolled-back orb, sightless. That side of the face kept twitching violently as injured nerves spasmed.

“Hasib mine,” Nuri said quietly, up close to Michael’s ear. “Eldest son. Such *pride*. Is handsome boy? Say speak, Devil.”

The boy stared at Michael with as much hatred as Michael had ever dreaded to see. If this boy had a gun, the little play would be over. The hate was a living thing. It felt like a lizard with a skin of spines, and it smelled like a world on fire. Michael knew this boy. He knew him well. This boy was every sufferer that war had made, every orphan, every widow or widower, every amputee, every brutalized corpse in a shallow ditch, every piece of flesh that used to be a man, every silent scream.

He knew this boy well, and he felt terror to his soul.

“Handsome,” whispered Michael Gallatin.

“Ah!” said the Fireman, smiling. “Thank you so.”

Michael felt a night breeze blow past. He heard the rattle of the palms and he smelled the enticing perfume of the waterhole. The urge to drink fell upon him, and still stunned by this vision of war’s corruption he was seized by a moment of rare weakness.

“I would like some water,” he told Nuri.

“Thirsty is the *Devil*? How this?” Nuri’s head cocked to one side. In his eyes evil festered. “Drink,” he said, and he spat into Michael’s face.

The crowd shouted its sincere approval. They hollered and danced, and some of them fired their weapons upward into the night. It seemed to Michael that it was nearly time indeed.

Nuri spoke another series of commands. Hands grasped Michael by the arms—both arms, which caused him to grit his teeth and put his head down so they might not see him on the verge of crying out—and half-pushed, half-dragged him along. The entire Dahlasiffa nation seemed to be out in force, and like a sea in the desert they moved along with him in dusty waves.

They took him to the pit.

He lifted his head and saw that it was about six meters long and three meters wide. Across its length was the trunk of what had been a sturdy palm tree, secured on either end by piles of sandbags. Various clay jars stood alongside the pit. The crowd was festive, the musicians began playing once more, and Michael wondered what the hell he’d gotten himself into.

He was able to have a look into the pit. By the light of the flickering torches, he saw it was about a meter and a half in depth and had a short ladder leaning against one side. At the bottom, some scurrying around and others sitting deathly still, were perhaps three hundred scorpions. Pale brown ones, Michael noted. Those gave a nasty sting but were not poisonous. He was pushed and dragged along to one end of the palm log, and standing there with his right hand on his broken shoulder he saw Nuri take up position on the far end.

Nuri motioned to the crowd, and they were quiet. "Devil!" he called out. "Have we a contest!"

Michael remained silent. Two dozen guns from three nations were aimed at him.

Nuri stepped out onto the palm log. His balance was sure. He was grinning broadly. "Devil!" he said. "Meet us in..." He was having trouble with the translation.

"There," he said, and pointed at the log's center. "Have us...what call you...a cheerio little war. Me. King of all devils. You. Spit-faced fool." He translated that to his people and they laughed so uproariously Michael was certain some had peed in their robes. It didn't take much to keep this crew happy. Reading Michael's silence as fear, Nuri asked, "Has Devil no brave?"

Michael was watching the scorpions. Maybe more than three hundred in there, he decided. But not poisonous. He knew he had to do this. "The Devil has brave," he replied.

"Ah! Then well!" Nuri gave an order. One of the men picked up a clay jar and upturned it over the pit, and venomous black scorpions by the dozens began to slide out.

The audience had begun to dance and clap to the rhythm of the music. Nuri reached under his robes and brought out in his left hand the knife with the curved blade. The right hand gripped a piece of iron pipe with a half-dozen short chains attached to its end and a nail fixed on the end of every chain.

A second jar was upturned. Dozens more black scorpions slid into the pit. Some of them had obviously expired during what might have been a long stay in the jar, but enough crawled around twitching with anger to

let Michael know the man who fell among them was not going to be loved to death. Another robed Dahlasiffa reached in, pulled the ladder up and threw it aside.

“Devil!” Nuri shouted. “Come, come!” He started out along the log, the knife low at his side and the chains already swinging over his head.

Michael nodded, if only to himself.

It was almost time.

Now...the question was...where were Gantt and the boy?

With extreme caution and in no particular hurry, Michael walked out foot-over-foot above the scorpion pit. This action received a roar of enthusiasm from the Dahlasiffas, who obviously had seen other uneven contests play out over this pit and knew what the final result must be, but surely it was never a dull moment when a hapless enemy either fought for his wretched life or begged for it. Either way, he was going to become a stinger’s pincushion.

“Come, Devil!” Nuri shouted, swinging the chains. “Come, come!” He walked along the palm log as if he could do this in his sleep. When Michael got within range, the nails came whistling at his face and he had to jerk back to keep his nose. His left foot slipped. He was aware of all the small darting movements in the dark piles below him. Now he had to focus on the task and that alone. Nuri walked forward with no fear and no reason to fear. The chains and nails went over Michael’s head as he ducked, and then the knife was coming at his stomach in a glittering blur. Michael retreated, to a chorus of what could only be derisive catcalls. But Nuri was quick and relentless, and with a savage grin on his face he flailed at Michael with the chains and caught him across the left bicep, tearing his shirt and flesh and throwing droplets of blood into the air.

The audience cheered for their hero, the Fireman in red.

Michael dodged another swirl of the chains but now the knife was driving in at his right thigh. He moved the leg in time to avoid the stab but caught a graze, and at close quarters he stepped into Nuri and headbutted the man. Nuri’s nose burst open, and the crowd went silent. Nuri staggered back, almost toppled off the log but regained his balance, and now with blood streaming from both nostrils he gave an animalish snarl and

swung the chains and nails across Michael's chest on the left side. Shreds of bloody cloth whirled up. The knife flashed, but Michael had already shifted his position and was ready for it.

He caught Nuri's wrist and held it.

They stared at each other, man against man.

Nuri reared his right arm back to strike with the chains.

And Michael knew the time had come.

He opened the soul cage, just a crack, to let some of it free.

His hand, holding Nuri's wrist, rippled and began to change. Michael directed its transformation, he willed it and controlled it and owned it. Within seconds the hand had darkened with hair; it had altered its shape, and its fingers had curved into the claws of a killer. Black wolf hair ran like strange vines up his arm, twining around and around.

And so too did Michael direct the transformation to his face.

Nuri's movement with the chains had already frozen, for he saw the commingling of human hand and animal claw that seized his wrist. Blood was already being drawn. The pressure was about to crack his bones. His eyes widened and his mouth opened, but no sound emerged and certainly no laugh to be echoed by his people. The face. The face was what caused Nuri to give a choked cry that flew toward a scream.

For Michael's features distorted in the space of a shuddered breath.

With the crunch of bones and the moist slippage of sinews and muscles changing their human position, they submerged and reformed and rearranged themselves like mystic continents on the map of a foreign world. A shadow seemed to pass over Michael's face, and from its darkness emerged the maw of the wolf, the green eye that was not a swollen slit glaring without mercy into Nuri's face, the wolf's new and bleeding fangs promising agony upon agony. Or, at the very least, the Devil's own justice. Michael held Nuri fast. He swept his one-eyed wolfen gaze across the crowd as the black forest of hair burst free from his facial flesh and flowed along his throat. He felt his back aching to bow down, and his limbs—even the broken one—yearning to take their primal shapes. The Dahlasiffa were, as one, riveted in place. Someone dropped a torch, and an oil lamp shattered on the ground. A woman screamed and a child

yowled with fear. The voice of a man—no, several men—rose up gibbering to the night.

Michael Gallatin balanced not only on the palm log but between worlds. The werewolf's green eye peered into Nuri's face once more and saw the horror become madness; it happened in the stutter of a heartbeat. Saliva bubbled from Nuri's mouth and dribbled down his chin. His eyes were scorched. He had truly seen behind the Devil's mask, and now he was destroyed.

Michael let him go.

Nuri retreated. He slipped and fell. He landed on his back down amid the scorpions, both brown and black, and as he rolled in a mad and entirely useless attempt to avoid being stung the things got into his crimson robes and onto his keffiyeh and onto his hands and his face and delivered enough venom, Michael thought, to kill even the self-proclaimed King of Hell several times over.

Then the crowd of once-gleeful Dahlasiffa turned their faces away from Michael, and though some fell to the ground on their knees to beg for mercy from the merciless, the great majority of them fled for their lives.

An explosion across the village sent up red and white fireworks. Or, rather, pieces of shrapnel. A secondary blast held within it maybe four or five smaller explosions merged into one thunder. Gantt and the boy had obviously found the correct tent. But the work was mostly complete, because now even the Dahlasiffa who'd been on their knees were scrambling up and running. The mass of people ran shrieking and screaming toward the other side of the village. Anywhere, if they could escape the Devil. Even the dogs were getting out. Michael gazed down into the pit and saw Nuri on his stomach, trying to claw his way up the side. His hands had a number of scorpions on them.

Michael decided to leave the Fireman to his impending state of peace. He edged back from the wild just as he edged back along the palm log, and by the time his boots touched earth he was once more only a man. But, as sometimes happened, his teeth ached fiercely and he had to pee in the most pressing way.

The village seemed to be empty. Maybe the Dahlasiffa would stop running when they reached Cairo, or when they ran across the nearest minefield.

Michael walked toward the tent that was burning brightly and sending up deadly fireworks fit for the grandest holiday. Another explosion shot up a plume of orange flame and shook the ground. Mortar shells, perhaps? Other tents under the rain of burning munitions were catching fire; it was going to be a festive night after all.

In the glow of the flames, two figures were approaching. One tall, one small.

“My God!” said Rolfe Gantt when the distance closed between them. “What the devil did you do?”

“Exactly that,” Michael told him.

“Exactly *what?*”

“Never mind.” He scanned their surroundings and saw no other humans. The boy had begun shaking his dice again; it seemed that Fate knew no resting. “We’d better be careful,” Michael advised. “I think everyone’s gone but for the watchman and three men who went out to look for you two.” They hadn’t witnessed the performance, so they might be still lurking about. “Give me a gun.” He held his hand out.

Gantt started to give him the Colt and then suddenly paused.

The German flier had both pistols. He was weak and unsteady, but he was still in control of his senses. Michael knew what he was thinking.

“You’ll have to kill me,” Michael said, and he meant it.

The dice clicked...clicked...clicked. The boy opened his hand and stared at the pips.

“A fine pistol,” Gantt said, with a brief nod. “But not of German quality.” He put the Colt into Michael’s outstretched hand. Gantt’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve been cut up a little. We might find a medical kit somewhere.”

“Later. First...the water.”

The three of them walked through the village toward the waterhole. A few either very brave or very stupid dogs skulked around. The flames were still burning high, and every so often there was a *boom* and more shrapnel flew up.

“I suppose I won’t ask,” said Gantt as they walked.

“Ask what?”

“What you really did to frighten everyone out of here. I suppose I won’t ask. And I suppose...I really don’t want to know.” He gave Michael a

sidelong glance, and Michael wondered if one of his fingers had not entirely been changed back when he'd first offered his hand to take the Colt. No, no; of course not. But...he *was* so very tired.

No, of course not.

They were almost to the waterhole when a figure on crutches emerged from between two tents and aimed the pistol he had somehow gotten hold of. Maybe it had fallen to the ground in the flight of the Dahlasiffa. Maybe he'd taken it from his father's tent. In any case, Nuri's son Hasid was armed and dangerous. First he aimed the gun at Michael but something on the boy's firelit face and in the eyes that glittered with such venomous hate said it was useless to shoot the Devil, so he altered his hand toward Gantt. Two bullets were fired even as Michael shoved the flier aside.

Hasid fired once more as Gantt fell to his knees. Then Michael shot twice at Nuri's son, and he didn't know if the bullets had hit or not because Hasid was already hobbling on his crutches into the shadows, his cloven hoof tossing up a spray of sand.

In another few seconds, the Fireman's son was gone.

"Ah," said Gantt, in a weary voice. "Ah, *verdammen Sie alles dieses.*"

Michael knelt beside him. Gantt had both hands pressed to his mid-section. The blood was rising on the front of his shirt. Shot twice in the stomach, Michael saw. "Move your hands," he said, but Gantt would not. "Come on, let me see!"

"*Jeder moglicher Dummkopf kann sehen, dass ich sterben werde,*" Gantt answered, with a crooked smile. He'd said: Any fool can see I'm going to die.

"Not if I can find a medical kit." Michael started to stand up.

Gantt grasped his wrist with bloody fingers. "Save your strength. Are you a surgeon? No. As they say...*ich bin kaput.*" He winced. A thin thread of blood broke over his lower lip. "Would you help me...get my back against something?"

Michael helped him up but couldn't get him too far because Gantt began shuddering with pain. Michael eased him down so his back was supported against the side of a tent away from the danger of catching fire.

“Better,” Gantt said. “Thank you.” He was not sweating, but his eyes were wet. His hands pressed to his stomach as if to keep his insides from oozing out.

The boy knelt to the ground a distance away and began throwing his dice.

“Must he...do that?” Gantt asked. He waved a gory hand to dismiss his own question. “Ah, let him alone. I suppose it’s the only pleasure he has. Eh?” Moving with painful slowness, he withdrew the Walther from his waistband. Michael offered no help, thinking Gantt was still capable of his own actions. “German quality,” Gantt said, as he placed the pistol at his side. “Cannot be bested.”

A movement to the right caught Michael’s attention. Two Dahlasiffa men with rifles were coming their way. Maybe they were part of the trio who’d gone out hunting.

Michael fired a shot at them and they were gone like desert hares.

“Can you protect yourself while I get you some water?” Michael asked.

“I can. But...it’s very interesting, Michael. I am no longer thirsty. Please...go ahead...for both of you.”

Stay here, Michael told the boy. In the second tent he entered he found a suitable water vessel, a German canteen stamped with the palm tree and Nazi symbol seal of the Afrika Korps. He went into several others in search of a medical kit, but had no luck. He walked on to the waterhole. He got on his knees, cupped his hand and drank a few swallows that went down like the sweetest wine ever pressed from the most luscious grape. Then he filled the canteen full, and while he was doing this he had to interrupt the task to shoot at a man who was coming across the oasis from the opposite direction. The intruder turned his robed tail and ran. It seemed that without their ‘shade’ the Dahlasiffa fled from their own shadows. Which was fine with Michael. He spent a few more seconds to splash water into his face, and then he took the canteen and walked back the route he’d come. He knew he couldn’t give Gantt any water; the stomach cramps would only add to the man’s agony, and without professional medical attention Gantt was, as he’d said, *kaput*.

So, all he could do now was make Gantt as comfortable as possible and keep him company. He’d known stomach wounds like this to kill a man

within an hour or so, and on the other end of that a man might linger for a day or more. It was, after all, up to Fate.

The dice were still being rolled, back and forth. Gantt picked up the Walther at Michael's approach and then set it aside again. Michael gave the boy the canteen, and at last the dice were still while the boy drank.

Too fast, Michael cautioned. *Too much*. He took the canteen away. He sat on the ground a few feet away from the flier, at an angle so he could watch for more Dahlasiffas creeping back in. If they dared.

It seemed they did not. No more returned, as first one hour and then a second passed. The boy slept curled up with the dice in his hand. Gantt's eyes grew heavy-lidded and closed, but Michael Gallatin remained vigilant. After a while Michael got up and went searching through the nearby tents for a medical kit. He found a box of British bandages and a box of Italian condoms, but not an ampule of morphine. He took the bandages and was able to pack Gantt's wounds while the man slept. The front of Gantt's shirt was a bloody mess. The two bullet holes were spaced about four inches apart and the slugs were still in his intestines.

At last, the sky began to lighten to the east. It was the beginning of another day.

Red shards of sunlight burst from behind a mountain range. The shadows shrank. The heat began to grow.

The boy awakened. Michael gave him a little more water. He sat cross-legged, staring at the sleeping Gantt. The dice were quiet in his fist. Michael leaned forward to check Gantt's pulse and the man's eyes opened. "I'm not dead," said Gantt, but his face seemed to have taken on a certain gaunt and toothy quality Michael had seen before. It was amazing, how quickly that happened.

Gantt felt the bandages. "Nice work," he commented. He looked at the sky. "Oh...it's getting light."

"Hot day coming," said Michael.

"Is there any other...in the *desert*?" Gantt smiled at him, and then pain made the smile crimp and vanish. "*Scheisse, die verletzt!* Ah...I'm all right

now.” He breathed shallowly, taking sips of air. “Michael,” he said after another moment.

“Yes?”

“I want to...apologize. For the...destruction...of your aircraft. I would not have wished...to have shot down...an unarmed plane. It was not...*chivalrous*.”

“I think chivalry has nothing to do with war.”

“True...but...there is...the *ideal*.” He had to stop speaking for awhile, to deal with the pain. Michael wondered if he should knock Gantt out... but what would be the point?

The boy’s dice were rolling once more. “In any case...sir...I apologize.”

“It was your duty,” Michael said.

“Yes. That.” Gantt winced and closed his eyes. For an instant he resembled a mummy, the cracks in his gray face full of dust, his mouth a grim pain-drawn line.

His eyes opened again, but Michael saw that they had dimmed. Their color was no longer amber, but a pale sun-bleached yellow. “I have always... loved...the dawn,” Gantt said, with an effort. “The cleanest air, you see. The aircraft performs...best...at the dawn. Oh, Michael!” He gave another tight smile. “You should have been with me...up there.”

“With you or against you?”

“With me. Oh...you wouldn’t have lasted...an instant...*against* me. Did I tell you...my count is now...” He was silent, figuring the numbers. “Forty-six. No. That’s not right. *Fifty*. I think. Yes, fifty.”

“An impressive number,” said Michael, who saw the boy leaning over the freshly-thrown dice to read the pips.

“Did we ever find...water?” Gantt asked, his eyes narrowed against the rising sun.

“Yes, we did.”

“*Sehr gut*.”

Gantt’s eyes slid shut again. Michael and the boy waited.

Perhaps ten minutes later, Gantt looked into Michael’s face and said, “You *English*. Playing at war. With your...tea breaks. Your...what was that? Aftershave lotion? Oh, my! Well...you...shall go down to defeat...smelling like gentlemen. For that...I salute you.”

“Many thanks,” said Michael, who didn’t think he could look into Gantt’s face much longer, for the man was fading away minute by minute.

And as time was of the essence, suddenly the essence became time.

Gantt held up his arm and began to remove his wristwatch.

“What are you doing?” Michael asked.

“This.” Gantt got the Breitling off. He regarded not the timepiece itself, but the plain leather band. “I want...you...to have it,” he said, and he offered it to Michael.

“I can’t take that.”

“If you don’t...*they* will.”

True enough. Eventually the Dahlasiffa would come back, Devil or not.

Michael accepted the watch. “I will take care of—”

“You’d better,” Gantt interrupted. “It’s come...such a long way.”

The dice were rolling, back and forth.

The sun was coming up. A hot, clear dawn. Flying weather, Gantt might have said.

“Michael?” Gantt whispered, his voice nearly gone.

“Yes?”

“We...men...of action,” he said, and then he smiled. “Must never...stop...*trying*. Eh?”

“Never,” Michael agreed.

“Good man,” said Gantt, and then he watched the sun as it rose higher.

Sometime during the next few minutes, he left this world.

Michael felt it, and saw the empty stare in the man’s eyes, and when he checked the pulse and heartbeat he verified what he already knew. The boy stopped rolling his dice and he sat looking at the body of Rolfe Gantt, the famous Messerschmitt ace, the shining example to German youth, the celebrity, the great lover, the man of action, the hero.

After a while the boy crawled forward. He put the pair of dice in Gantt’s right hand, possibly for luck in the afterlife, and then he closed the fingers and he stood up and stretched as if awakening from a long sleep.

Michael put the Breitling in his pocket. There was no need to bury Gantt; the Dahlasiffa would just dig up the body. But it was only a suit of flesh, and the bird had flown.

It was time to find another two or three canteens, fill them up and find a way back home.

The boy motioned him to the camel corral.

Michael had no idea how to handle one of those creatures. How to saddle them up and get the bridles set. But fortunately the boy did, and he was very efficient about it.

They wet cloths and wrapped them around their heads and faces. They hung the canteens by leather cords from the saddles. They headed off in the direction they'd come, the boy leading the way on his camel and Michael just along for the ride. His camel seemed to hate him, and spat and fumed like a vindictive old man. Probably something in the way he smelled, Michael thought. But the camel moved onward, and so did the day.

On the second morning, with a hard hot wind blowing from the southwest, the two riders came across a platoon of soldiers escorted by a pair of tanks. The soldiers wore British khaki, and the tanks were Matildas. When Michael had made the platoon's lieutenant understand who he was and where he'd come from, he and the boy were placed on one of the tanks and driven to a small air base called Al Massir, about twenty kilometers to the east.

The base had a hospital. It wasn't much, but they had soft beds and cooling palm-frond fans that turned at the ceiling. Michael's broken shoulder was set and put into a cast and his cuts swabbed with iodine. He decided not to look into any mirrors for a while, because he'd seen the expression on the face of the young and attractive brunette nurse. Then Michael and the boy both slept more than twelve hours, and when they awakened they were given glasses of orange juice and plates of scrambled eggs, figs, and olives. An apple-cheeked, serious red-haired captain named Findley-Hughes came in with a clipboard to ask Michael questions and take notes, and this went on interminably until Michael asked the young man if he'd had his eighteenth birthday yet.

After that they were pretty much left on their own.

Except for the attractive brunette nurse. She came in quite often to see him, and to fuss over him, and to smooth his hair and once even to sit by his bed and sing to him.

She just couldn't seem to leave that boy alone.

She brought him some jacks and a ball. Michael watched him shaking the jacks in his hand, and he saw the boy cast them on the floor and bounce the ball. And as he scooped up the jacks in the hand that used to hold a pair of dead man's dice the boy smiled, and from then on the brunette nurse had him running errands around the hospital and the base. The doctor gave him a nickname: Jacky. Then one afternoon Michael heard the brunette nurse call him *Jack*, and the boy looked at her as if all his life he'd been waiting to hear that name spoken by a voice just like hers.

Michael learned that the nurse's husband had been a Spitfire pilot who'd lost his life over Dunkirk. Her infant son had been killed in a German bomb raid in London in 1940. He didn't ask her what the boy's name had been. He didn't think he had to.

Even the roughest road led somewhere, he thought.

On the morning of the fifth day, two officers in clean uniforms with polished buttons arrived at the base in a Douglas Dakota transport plane. Michael knew one of them as the man sometimes called 'Mallory', who wore a Colonel's insignia. It was explained to him, as they sat under a striped awning facing the airstrip and drank Guinness Stout brought in a keg with the Dakota, that it was imperative he return to Cairo and, as Mallory put it, "get back on the horse".

It was explained to him that he could fly back with them in the Dakota or, if his recent experience had somewhat sullied his desire for air travel, he might be driven in a truck back to HQ in Cairo. Of course, there was a very large difference in travel time between plane and truck, but it was his decision.

Not to put any pressure on him, of course.

Michael Gallatin sipped from his glass of Guinness and listened to the noise of an aircraft's engine revving across the field. The sky was clear and untroubled by German fighters, yet who could say where the next Messerschmitt ace lurked? Michael had been dreading this moment, and

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his heart had begun beating harder. Perhaps, too, a fine sheen of sweat had risen at his temples.

He drew from his pocket a wristwatch.

He examined its face only briefly. It was the plain brown leather band that drew his attention. He thought of the old planes of the Great War, and how they were put together with wires, fabric, leather, and wood. How also they were taken up, as flimsy as they were, into the huge sky by small men with large dreams and the bravery of giants.

He ran his fingers across the brown leather. He listened to the engine revving, and heard it miss a beat.

They were still brave giants, in those cockpits.

Maybe it was time for him to grow a little larger, too.

He gave his answer.

“I’ll fly.”

THE
ROOM
AT THE
BOTTOM
OF THE
STAIRS



ONE

Gone Too Deep

WHEN MICHAEL GALLATIN could force himself to meet his own eyes in the mirror, he opened the flawless silver case that lay atop the blue porcelain sink. It was monogrammed, in simple capital letters, with an H and a J. He removed from the case the two pieces of the Solingen travel razor. The Germans made such beautiful instruments, especially those that could kill.

He put a fresh blade into its resting place and screwed the pieces of the razor together to make a whole. He turned on the cold water tap and ran the blade's edge beneath it. Then, completely naked, he stared into his face as if looking for recognition there. He was no longer sure what he was seeing, in those green eyes that held secrets even from himself. To him they looked smoke-hazed, bloodshot, weary from the constant war.

But a gentleman must be well-groomed, and so with just a few seconds' decision to employ no lather he began to shave the stubble from his right cheek. On the first stroke his hand betrayed him. He went too deep, felt first the nick and then the heat of blood rising from the cut on his cheekbone.

Michael watched the drop of blood roll down through the small hairs toward his jawline. Another followed, and then a third. They smelled of blood sausages in the Paris market, fresh after midnight. He was hungry, roused to appetite by his own juices. But he continued to shave, stroke after stroke—some smooth, some ragged—and when he was done with the massacre of his face he began to shave his throat and down across his chest, cleaving the field of black and gray hair, cutting himself here and there, no matter, no matter at all, for this little pain was nothing, and what would his Russian family think of him if he could not stand a little pain?

When he finished this task, he was going to have to decide what to do about the dead woman in the bed.

So he kept shaving, and he kept cutting.

Here and there, but this little pain was nothing.

He regarded the first nick he'd made, on his right cheek, and thought he fully understood his problem. He had certainly gone too deep.

So he stood in this bathroom, in room number 214 of the Hotel Grand Frederik, with its gold-colored walls and blue porcelain and its matching gold-and-blue tiles on the floor, and he dripped blood from seven cuts and mused on how his odor of wounded weakness would have had him torn to pieces in a certain area of Russian wilderness very distant from this dying city of Berlin. They would have consumed him, eaten his lungs and heart and all the meat that meant life for the strong, and they would have left his bones for the little scavengers who hid in the rotten logs, and all would be right with the world.

Michael Gallatin, born Mikhail Gallatinov in St. Petersburg thirty-four years ago, was no longer sure he was fit.

Nothing had changed about him, except for the slips of the razor. Except for the haze in his eyes. The tightness of his mouth. He was lean and healthy, his shoulders were broad and his waist narrow and he had enough muscle to get his work done. His thick hair was black, streaked with gray at the temples and cut short in the military style. Across his left cheek was a scar that began just under the eye and continued back into the hairline, the gift of a would-be assassin in North Africa in 1942. He

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bore other scars, nothing too ghastly, nothing that could not be explained to a woman between the damp sheets, with her head leaning against his shoulder and her fingers wandering the fields of his flesh, as the demands of a soldier.

He was going to have to go and look at her again. He steeled himself for it, but his metal had become tin. He wondered, as he put the bloodied razor away into the beautiful silver case she'd bought for him two days ago, if after he drank the last glass of champagne and put on his uniform of a German major he should set fire to the bed and send her to Valhalla in the proper fashion.

It had begun barely a month ago, when Michael had returned from an early-morning run through the cold January sleet of Wales and found a black Bentley Mark V in front of his proudly isolated house. At its wheel waited the older man Michael knew as Mallory, who said he would wait while Michael put on some clothes, and then they needed to take a drive and have a chat.

"The Inner Ring has been penetrated," Mallory said as they drove along the tracks that passed as roads and sleet slashed across the windshield.

Michael knew, of course, about the Inner Ring. The group of Germans who were still doggedly fighting Hitler and the Nazis from within. They were scientists who did their best to delay or sabotage weapons projects. Secretaries and aides who made notes on overheard conversations or intercepted messages. More than one railway dispatcher who sent a munitions train onto a track laid with explosives. A priest or two who kept a radio tuned to the British secret service wavelength, and a codebook hidden where only Christ might find it. Prostitutes and pickpockets, old white-haired soldiers who carried scars from the first Great War, and ordinary citizens with extraordinary courage who had come over to the hope that Germany would surrender to the British or Americans, and that it would happen before the Russian wave smashed over the crumbling rock of the Fatherland.

"A woman has penetrated the Ring," said Mallory. "She has seduced her way in. Her name is Franziska Luxe. She's a photographer and a journalist for *Signal*."

Signal magazine, as Michael also knew, was the glossy, lavishly-illustrated propaganda magazine of the German armed forces, enjoyed—if that was the right word—at the height of its popularity by over two million readers.

“The Ring is being taken apart,” Mallory went on. “Person by person. They are disappearing into the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin. Fraulein Luxe is a bit of a . . . I would call her a *huntress*. She’s gotten on the scent of the Ring through a stupid, love-stricken man, and she is working with a Gestapo official named Axel Rittenkrett to uncover and destroy—a kind way to put it—every member of the Ring and their families. Out of a hundred or so, there are maybe fifty left. We’ve been helping as many as we can, but some have complications and can’t get out. Some refuse to leave, they consider themselves martyrs for a cause. This is why you’re needed.”

“I knew it was coming to that,” said Michael, as he stared at the black briefcase that lay on the biscuit-colored leather next to him.

“We’re trying our best to get everyone out. We won’t be fully successful, but we need time. And we need *you*, Major, to give Franziska Luxe something to think about other than tracking down members of the Ring and sending them to be tortured to death at the hands of the Gestapo.” He paused for a few seconds, during which only Michael saw the pack following along, just loping easily through the sleet, almost grinning in the cold bracing air with lung-steam curling from their snouts. “Do you understand the mission?”

“Go into the chaos of Berlin, masquerade as a German—an officer, most likely, and a man with an interesting back-history—to seduce a rather nasty female Nazi? I’m flattered, but I believe there are other men who are better suited for this job.” *And who most probably would die trying*, he thought.

“Read her dossier, there in the briefcase,” Mallory instructed. “She’s thirty years old and quite beautiful. She’s a champion skier, an expert marksman and driver of racing cars as well as being fluent in French, Italian and English. Her father was a daredevil pilot who ended his life last year testing the new German jet aircraft. Her mother at seventeen was a circus lion-tamer, has been an Olympic swimmer and a member of the most recent German expedition to Antarctica in 1938. Here, now . . . what’s

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this?” He put his foot to the brake and stopped the car. He leaned forward, peering through the windshield as the wipers scraped back and forth. “I presume that’s one of your companions standing on the road? Am I in some kind of violation I need to know about?”

“A precaution,” Michael said. “No one can take me beyond this point without my agreement. And theirs, also.”

“My God, that’s a big one,” said Mallory, still looking forward. “Um... may I ask...?”

“Animal,” came the response. “As far as I know, there is no one else...” Michael looked at the briefcase and put two fingers against it. “Like me,” he finished.

“One never knows what the Germans, if not stopped, might try to create in their laboratories.” Mallory winced a little, even before he’d finished saying it. “Oh, my. That didn’t sound right, forgive me.” He cleared his throat and put the stick into Reverse. “I’ll back up, shall I?”

It was very important that Michael do this, Mallory told him on the return drive. By diverting Fraulein Luxe’s attention and managing to stay at her side for one week in February, Michael might save the lives of twenty people...a dozen...five or six, but at least the Inner Ring would not be, so to speak, thrown to the wolves.

The German Army was reeling back from the Ardennes in the aftermath of Operation *Wacht Am Rhein*, Mallory said. Divisions would be refitting, restaffing and waiting for further orders. There would be some confusion to take advantage of. This mission involved no parachute jump, just a truck trip in the company of British commandos and a river to be crossed at night by rubber raft. On the other side would be some soldiers of the Inner Ring, to get him into Berlin by staff car. He would have a solid identity, papers made up by someone who made real papers, and a safe house to go to if things went wrong. He would be contacted as when to end the mission, and leave the same way. What made him so valuable was that he knew his way around Berlin.

And around and around, Michael thought, recalling a certain train trip he’d taken there on his last visit. “All measured out,” Michael said as they neared the house. “So simple, in theory. I understand the capture of the

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bridge at Arnhem was also a simple theory.” He expected no response on that one, and got none. “How am I supposed to meet Franziska Luxe?”

“I said the German Army was reeling back, and there’s confusion to be used in our favor. I said nothing about the end of parties and merrymaking in Berlin, did I?”

Michael nodded. They would carry on their parties in Berlin until their world was on the verge of destruction. Then, if the Russian tanks rolled into what was left of that city before the Americans or British got there, it would be a party in a vast blood-drenched boneyard. Even the remaining members of the Inner Ring would be crushed beneath the treads...if any still remained by then.

“Can I count on you?” Mallory asked as he stopped the car. It was a polite question, from one gentleman to another.

Michael took the briefcase, and got out.

A river to be crossed, he thought. And leave the same way.

But it occurred to him that no river could be crossed twice by the same man, because the river was never exactly the same, and neither would be the man.

TWO

The Hunter Who Lives In The Woods

MICHAEL GALLATIN WALKED out of the bathroom, stood over the bed and stared at her body.

The lights flickered. A power interruption, somewhere in the grid. The slow blinking of the eyes of a groggy leviathan. Did she move, in that brief loss of light? Did she stretch her long taut legs and open her own smouldering gray-hued eyes, and whisper up at him in her low voice rasped with passion, *Come to bed again, darling. Come crush me into wine and drink all of me, every drop.*

She did not.

Michael wondered what would become of himself, at the end of his life. What was beyond this existence, for a creature such as he? Would he sleep among the angels, or would he just go on fighting the demons in a flame-lit room at the bottom of the stairs?

Dressed in his uniform as a German major of the 25th Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion, 25th Panzer Grenadier Division, Michael had seen her across the dance floor at the Grand Frederik's Regal Room. A

foursome band in tuxedos was playing on stage, not the oompah-pah stuff of old Germany but the new Swing of the Jazz Age. Red balloons drifted along the vaulted ceiling, which was painted with the faces of ancient kings and emperors looking down through the pastel clouds of heaven to see what a mess they'd left behind.

It was his third night in Berlin, and this party was his reason for booking a room at the hotel. Every so often the golden-globed lights faltered, and with them the babble of conversation, the sometimes strident voices struggling to sound unconcerned, and the laughter too loud for the bad jokes of matings between American jackasses and Russian goats. But even in the dark the music kept playing, and even in the dark Michael watched her move amidst the men and other women like a torchflame amidst sad candles, and as he sipped from his glass of 1936 French Armagnac and the lights came up again he caught the glint of her eyes for the briefest of seconds passing across him and he felt the quick exhilarating celebration of being noted like a knight on his knees before a queen.

Not all the men in the room wore uniforms, but most did. Not all the women in the room were beautiful, but most were.

But none like her.

Not one.

He felt a man whose belly was about to burst his polished gold buttons coming toward him, possibly to ask some inane question about troop dispositions or what action he'd seen, or to voice some wine-odored opinion about the next thrust against the Russians, who in this first week of February were forty-some miles away from the city. Therefore Michael took another drink of his excellent brandy, squared his shoulders and gathered his courage and made his way across the dance floor to the woman in the long flowing crimson dress who was speaking to two other men, and when the men looked at him and the woman turned because she already knew he was coming he said into her face which was almost level with his own, "Pardon me," in his best Westphalian accent, "but you are nearly the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

She just stared into his eyes for perhaps three seconds. Three very long seconds.

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Her red lips parted.

She said, with a hint of a smile that was not quite there, “*Nearly?*”

“Well,” he answered, and he gave her his own most disarming smile, “I haven’t seen all of you yet.”

He hadn’t known what he was going to say until it was time to speak, but as these words passed through the air she lifted her chin, almost as if to taste them. Her throat was offered to him, for a heartbeat. They stared at each other, as the two men behind Franziska Luxe seemed to Michael to diminish in size, to become cardboard cutouts, citizens of a world where passion grew pale for fear of failure. And so went the entire room and all its other inhabitants: sickly, small, and impoverished. If this Regal Room was its own jungle, the two greatest animals of the night had found each other.

And then Michael again said, “Pardon me,” to her, and to them, “Gentlemen,” and with a nod he moved away into the underbrush.

She did not follow. Nor did she track him very long with her gaze. Instead, she returned to her conversation, and a third man brought her a crystal glass of Picardon Blanc. In another moment a huge white buttercream-frosted birthday cake was wheeled out on a cart from the kitchen, and the jazz band—*Die Vier glatten Klagen*, printed across the bass drum in black letters—took up the universal ‘Happy Birthday Song’, and the room sang out loud as the figure of the hour, a big man wearing a white suit, a white shirt and a red tie stepped forward to try his lungs against thirty-seven candles, his face already flushed before he even began blowing.

Michael watched the festivities from the edge of the room, sipping slowly at his drink and avoiding the occasional glance from anyone else. His mind held the image of Franziska Luxe’s face: her strong jawline and classic Roman nose, her delicious-looking lips ripe for the kiss but perhaps with a twist of cruelty in them, her gray eyes almost luminous in this golden light, the arch of her black eyebrows and the mane of ebony hair that framed her face and fell about her bare shoulders and down her back. The grainy photograph of her had failed to fully prepare him. She was not the German Nordic ideal. She was not a pin-up fiction for the German troops to salivate over. She was a real woman of flesh, sinew, blood and bone. The heat that rose from her was, to him, an intoxicant far stronger

than the vintage Armagnac. The aroma of her body beneath the floral Houbigant perfume—*Quelque Fleur*, he knew it was, from experience—was more wild and untamed forest than sculptured Paris garden.

Which suited him. After all, they'd given him the name of Horst Jaeger, the 'hunter who lives in the woods'.

Her name was interesting as well. Franziska meant 'free'.

But he thought that many men must have paid dearly to whisper it.

As the cake was being cut into pieces, a tub of ice cream was wheeled out. More bottles of wine and various liquors appeared. The Four Smooth Suits began to really—as the Americans would say—jump the blues, with the tenor saxophone wailing away and the drummer pounding a powerful beat. 'Boogie-woogie', he thought it was called. A slender young woman in a black dress, her hair red with coppery highlights and her face lovely if a little vapid, drifted out from the dancefloor and came directly toward Michael, offering him her cigarette to light. He'd picked up a packet of matches from the lobby for just such a moment—ten flimsy matches to the pack, the chemicals being in such shortage, yet the cigarette smokers were legion.

Michael struck a match and held it out, and as the red-haired woman grasped his hand to guide the flame, a breeze blew from the southeastern quadrant, the match went dark, and a hand took the cigarette from the woman's lips.

"Go back to your husband, Bette," said Franziska Luxe. She put the cigarette into Bette's hand and closed the white fingers around it. "He's about to be cornered by the most infamous homosexual in the room."

Bette left, drifting along like someone who was already dead but didn't know it.

"There," Franziska said to Michael, with a faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "I just saved you from a boring encounter with a nymphomaniac."

Michael lifted his eyebrows. "Thank you?"

"I am Franziska Luxe," she announced, and offered her hand not to be kissed or merely limply held in that most gratuitous of gestures, but to be gripped and shaken. He did. She gave his hand a crush before she let him go. "I'm a photographer and writer for *Signal*. You may have seen my work."

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“Possibly,” he replied. “I haven’t had much time for the reading of magazines.”

“You’re a major?” Of course she’d already seen the insignia of rank. “Reconnaissance?” That was clear, by the badge. His Iron Cross was also on full display. Now came what she really desired to know: “What’s your name?”

“Horst Jaeger, fraulein. At your service.” He gave her a little bow of the head.

Her smile, cautious as it was, seemed to deepen. “Why do you presume I’m not married? I could have chosen to leave my ring at home tonight.”

“No German husband,” Michael said, “would not be cleaved to the side of a woman like yourself.”

“Really? Why is that?”

He shrugged and took a sip, the last of his Armagnac. “To protect her from men like me.”

“I need no protection,” she said, and he could tell she meant it because it wasn’t softened with a further smile. There was a pause of a few seconds, during which Michael thought he might have lost her. He was expecting her to turn away, but when a man in the uniform of a Luftwaffe captain touched her shoulder and murmured to her and she did not respond Michael relaxed, just a bit. The Luftwaffe man glanced at Michael, gave him a look that said *good luck*, and moved away.

“I’m interested in you,” Franziska told him, as the band quietened into a slower, softer number. “Major Jaeger, have you ever been professionally photographed?”

He returned a quizzical expression.

“My intent,” she explained, drawing a little closer to him, “is a photographic piece on the faces of the noble warriors. Those who haven’t surrendered. In your *heart*,” she said. “I can tell, in this room, who has surrendered in the heart and who has not. No, I’m not saying that anyone here is a coward, or a doom-sayer, or treasonous. But there is a difference between the noble warrior who still believes in the German future, and the rabble, whether they wear uniforms with polished gold buttons or not.” And at this point she cast a sidelong glance at the fat-bellied officer, who

staggered around behind a half-empty glass of some liquor that had for a while dulled the knife's-edge prickling at the back of his neck.

Michael was impressed by her intensity. She was standing right in front of him now, filling up his vision. Completing it, in a way. She was almost six feet tall, and he'd already seen that her heels were not very high. Again he caught the wild forest under her perfume. In her eyes lay a controlled wildness, a calm before the storm. He thought her fierce beauty was breathtaking, almost other-worldly, and he had to remind himself that he was here in enemy territory on a very dangerous and important mission, and the smallest mistake—the smallest slip of accent or attitude—could end his life before the stroke of midnight.

"I'm not sure I'm so noble," he answered, and for once in his life he had to look away from the searching eyes of a woman because he feared they saw too much.

"And an essence of humility too," said Fransizka, who had almost breathed it as a sigh. Her voice had changed; there was a girl in there somewhere, who perhaps once had dreamed of meeting a knight on bended knee. "My God, where have you *been*?"

"Now who is *this*, Franziska?" came a man's voice. "An uninvited guest, I think?"

THREE

I Don't Fear

IT WAS THE birthday boy, in company with the two men who'd been conversing with Fraulein Luxe when Michael had first approached. Both the men wore dark suits with swastika lapel pins, white shirts and dark ties. One man was husky, with a frizz of curly black hair and the sunken eyes of a common thug, while the other wore wire-framed spectacles and had thinning reddish-brown hair and the look of a worried accountant who has misplaced the key to his master's deposit box.

The birthday boy, however, was a formidable presence. In his polar-white suit his shoulders looked to be five feet broad, and he was easily as tall as Michael, at about six-two. He had a little snow-cap of white hair atop the mountain peak of his head, his hair cropped right to the scalp, sandy and sparkly, on the sides and presumably also on the back. He had the round face and full cheeks of a cherub, a boyish grin on his wide mouth and pale blue eyes that did not quite complement the grin. What immediately struck Michael—along with the aromatic impressions that this man smoked cigars, had recently ridden a horse and had just finished a bowl

of vanilla ice-cream—was that his face was as red as if he'd been weaned on tomato ketchup, and it had nothing to do with blowing out candles. It was a startling sight, really, like seeing a fireball sitting atop the body of a snowman. Michael wondered if the man wasn't in need of a heart specialist close at hand. At the center of the red necktie was a swastika stickpin with a small diamond set into each of the four arms.

A white suit in winter? Michael thought. It was obviously some attempt at a throwback to Viking furs or else simply to make a statement that this man was too large to be concerned either about proper fashion or God's weather. The German word for that would be *barbarisch*.

Michael got his mouth in gear, careful with the Westphalian twang. "You're absolutely correct, sir. I'm staying here and was passing by when I heard the music. I...um...don't know anyone here, but I thought—"

"You'd walk in and help yourself to a drink or two, Major?" the man interrupted. He was still smiling, but the blue eyes in the ruddy face were dangerous. "At my birthday party? That takes some cheek, sir."

"I didn't know. No one stopped me at the door."

"There's a sign on the door that says 'Private Party'. Did you not see that? What's your name and your division?" Still the blaze of his smile had not cooled.

"His name is Horst Jaeger," the woman spoke up, and Michael saw the man's eyes go to her and fix there. "He's a friend of mine, Axel."

"A *friend*? Of how long? Five minutes?" Now his smile did hitch and sputter. The gaze swung back upon Michael Gallatin. "Your papers, please."

Michael stood very still. His heart was hammering. He was, as the British would say, close to slipping in it. But by force of will he kept his expression blank. He cocked his head to one side.

"I'll see *your* papers first, sir," he said.

There was a silence. How long did it stretch? From here to London, it seemed.

"You wish to see *my* papers? My papers?" It was not a roar, as much as it was the sound of steam escaping an injured boiler.

"I know who I am," Michael said calmly. "I have no idea who you might be."

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The man pushed Franziska aside and came up upon Michael like an Alp. The Four Smooth Suits were playing a midtempo jump, the dance floor was crowded, the drinks flowed and laughter rose up like the chatter of machine guns. The heat from the scarlet face almost seared Michael's brows, and down in the man's eyes burned small vicious cinders.

Michael stood his ground and made himself larger, swelling out his chest and shoulders. A whipstrike of bloodlust hit him. Oh, he was so close—

A hand plunged down into an inner pocket of a white jacket. It returned gripping a leather wallet covered with white horse hair, which Michael realized he'd mistaken as the scent of a saddle.

"I," said the man's mouth, "am Axel Rittenkrett, senior investigator with the—" The wallet opened to display the square brass badge with the German eagle stamped above the Nazi swastika and along the bottom the words *Geheime Staatspolizei*. "As you seem to disregard plain writing, Major, I will tell you that this is all the paper I need to put you in a car in the next moment and carry you with great glee to Gestapo headquarters."

Michael felt sweat at his temples, but after all it was warm in this room, with all the heat of dancing roiling around. Rittenkrett also was sweating; it wouldn't have surprised Michael if the man's face leaked blood. He had to say something—right *now*—and it had to be impressive because his life depended on it.

"Herr Rittenkrett," said Michael, staring calmly into the man's furious eyes, "I have been with the 25th Panzer Grenadier Division since France in 1940. My companions and I were sent to the Russian Front in 1941. We fought at Minsk, Kiev, in the blizzards before Moscow, over the minefields of Kursk and through the inhuman butcheries at Smolensk. We fought our way out of the encirclement of Army Group Center, with heavy loss. We were sent to the Western Front after the invasion, undermanned in the hedgerows with mostly green replacements. Most recently—was it just in December?—we were holding the Bitche sector in the Ardennes. Herr Rittenkrett," he said, "I appreciate the weight and power of your Gestapo badge, but I have seen men gutted, disemboweled, beheaded, cut in half, reduced to jibbering torsos that beg for death, crushed flat and unrecognizable as anything ever human under tank treads, blown into glistening

shreds by artillery shells, burned alive by flamethrowers and—worse—not completely burned alive by flamethrowers, frozen solid into snowbanks, killed in ridiculous accidents by comrades too bone-weary to check their weapons, and drowned crossing rivers because they were too proud to tell their sergeants they never learned to swim. I have seen a young man turn eighty years old in a matter of minutes. I have seen the handsome pride of a loving mother lose his face like a mask being torn away, so much garbage for the summer flies.

“So, Herr Rittenkrett,” Michael said, thinking that some of these things—too many of these things—he *had* actually seen in his duty in North Africa, except it was British young men bearing the agonies, “I appreciate your position and I congratulate you on your birthday, but I am expecting to be ordered eastward again any day now, with the 25th Panzer Grenadiers for the glory of the Reich, and so until then I will walk through any door I please and take any *drink* I please because, Herr Rittenkrett, I walk and drink in the company of many hundreds of ghosts, and we have earned that very small privilege, even from the Gestapo.”

And though Herr Rittenkrett did not move an inch, Michael felt him draw back.

The music played and played. Above the dance floor the old dead regals peered down upon the lively celebration.

Rittenkrett slowly released the breath he'd been holding.

He said, “I have one question for you, Major. Answer it very carefully.”

“Go ahead, sir.”

Rittenkrett's snow-capped head nodded. One hand slowly came up to grip Michael's right shoulder. The blue eyes crinkled.

“Would you like ice cream with your cake?”

“Yes,” Michael replied, holding back his sigh of very huge relief, “I would.”

“Ross, go get it for him,” Rittenkrett said into the air, and the thuggish one moved to obey. “I suppose it's unnecessary to surmise that you've given back to the enemy double or triple what you and your brave comrades have endured? No answer needed there, I can see for myself. Otherwise, you wouldn't be *alive*, yes? Franziska! Why isn't our new friend a *colonel*?”

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"I was going to ask him the same question." She wound her arm around Michael's in a smooth, beautifully sinuous motion.

"There are already many talented and able colonels," the wolf in the room answered. "I prefer to be nearer the action."

"Ah!" Rittenkrett beamed. "Spoken like a man who *ought* to be a colonel. Your accent... is it...?"

"Westphalian," Michael responded. "My hometown is Dortmund."

"I've had some dealings involving the Hadamar hospital there. A shame your fair city has taken so much damage from the bombers. But that will be reckoned with, very soon. I presume you were here last night? During the air raid?"

"I was, yes." It had been around eleven o'clock when the sirens had begun to shriek, and Michael had been in bed resting for the day to come. He'd gone down to the cellar with the other guests, maybe seventy or so people in the entire hotel. The lights had flickered and vibrations had pounded through the floor and the walls and a few of the women had begun to sob as they held their children but the night bombers had left smoking craters and fire-scorched ruins in another part of the city.

"Prepare for more," Rittenkrett cautioned, his smile now gone. "But don't fear, our courageous Luftwaffe is steadily rebuilding. I know of some tricks up their sleeves, yet to come."

"I don't fear," Michael said. *Tricks up their sleeves?* He didn't like the sound of that. "I have the utmost confidence in the Luftwaffe and in the ultimate destruction of all our enemies." He decided to add, "If the Fuhrer says it will happen...so it shall."

"Exactly." Rittenkrett leaned in toward him and said, *sotto voce*, "But in the meantime, Major, make sure you get your ass to the cellar when you hear those sirens." Then he winked and laughed and clapped Michael hard on the arm that Franziska wasn't holding, and Michael allowed a smile and a nod.

The thug returned with a plate of cake and ice cream and both a fork and spoon engraved with the name of the hotel. As Michael accepted the gift and wondered where he was going to dump the sugary stomach-clogger, the man who looked like a distressed accountant whispered something

into Rittenkrett's ear and the big red-faced man grimaced. "Well, Sigmund reminds me I have business to tend to even on the night of my own party. Franziska, I'm sure you'll be in your element as a gracious hostess in my absence. *Oh...*" That last word, Michael realized, was meant as a bridge between party-talk and more serious matters, for Axel Rittenkrett's eyes sharpened again as he regarded the lady.

"Our continuing project requires your special enthusiasm," Rittenkrett told her. "Your invaluable communication skills. We have some new clients on the list. Shall we talk in my office tomorrow morning? Around nine o'clock?"

"Absolutely," she said.

"She warms my cockles," Rittenkrett replied, speaking to Michael. "Major Jaeger, eat and drink to your heart's delight and walk through any door that pleases you. It was an honor to meet you. Good luck and good... I'm sure you must hear this quite a lot...*hunting*. Heil Hitler." He put up his right hand in the salute.

"Heil Hitler," Michael replied, lifting his hand with the fork in it and on the fork a little bite of cake with buttercream icing.

The white, mountainous shape of the Gestapo investigator and his two assistants moved away through the throng. He had trouble getting out, as people converged upon Rittenkrett to clap him on his back, speak in one of his flaming ears and otherwise brown-nose him all the way out the door and beyond.

FOUR

The Battle Is Life

“INTERESTING MAN,” SAID Michael in the rippling wake of Rittenkrett’s departure. “May I ask...why the white suit in winter?”

“His *persona*.” There was a note in the woman’s voice that said she was quite relieved her Gestapo acquaintance had left the party. “He always wears a white suit, in every season. He likes to be called the ‘Ice Man.’”

“The ‘Ice Man’? Why is that?”

“You don’t want to know,” she said, and when Michael looked into her eyes he saw a boundary there that should not be crossed. “We’ve just met, but...I have to say... you take a great chance speaking that way to someone like him.”

“I’d probably take a greater chance putting this in my stomach before bedtime.” He set the cake and ice cream on the tray of a passing waiter.

“I *mean* it.” Franziska’s hand found his. “Axel has two faces. You can never know which one is looking at you.”

“Meat,” said Michael.

“What?”

“Oh, I’m thinking aloud. I would like some meat. I believe the restaurant’s still open across the lobby. Have you eaten dinner?”

“I should stay here.”

He looked at her steadily. He put himself in her eyes.

“No,” he said gently, “you should not.”

Even though supplies were running low, the chef was doing the best he could and the grilled lambchops in the *Koniglicher Garten* were excellent. Franziska grazed on a salad. In the brighter lamps of the restaurant, she was no less stunning a creature than Michael had first seen. Here again he had to be very careful, because she would ask a question—about his life in Dortmund, his education and so forth—and she would watch him intently and also, it appeared, listen intently until his reply was done. Never once did she ask if he was married. He wore no ring either, but still...he might have left it in his room. She touched only very briefly on his military service, which suited him fine because even though he’d fully memorized the exploits and travails of the 25th Panzer Grenadiers gleaned from prisoners of war captured in the Ardennes a month ago, he didn’t wish to wander too deeply into the details.

“Your accent is strange,” she suddenly said, as he was reaching for a glass of water.

He continued his motion, picked up the glass and took a good swallow.

“I’ve known...met...people from Westphalia before. Your accent...it’s different, somehow.”

“Accents are as different as people, I suppose,” he answered. Was his throat too tight when he said it?

“I suppose,” she agreed, and she shrugged her lithe shoulders.

“I have a question.” And thank God for it, he thought. She focused entirely on him, which was a trait both complimentary to a man and confounding to a secret agent. “As a *Signal* photographer and journalist, what project are you working on with the Gestapo?”

She didn’t even blink. The gray eyes—and there were hints of violet in them, he saw, or perhaps that was a trick of the small candleflame between them—were steady and absolutely cool. She turned her head as if to speak to someone else across the room, perhaps one of the partygoers who

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had stumbled in and to whom she'd already introduced her friend Major Horst Jaeger.

I may have gone my own bridge too far, Michael decided. But he waited.

"We are both soldiers," Franziska said, her gaze swinging back upon him. "You have your battlefields and I have mine, because we both love Germany and the Reich. What more is there for us?"

"Life," he said, and it stunned him because he didn't know where it came from.

"The battle," she said, "is life."

He had eaten his way to the bones, and now he pushed his plate aside. Without looking at her, he could feel her like his own heartbeat. Her eyes were on him; they were taking him to pieces, even as he sat wondering what he should say next, what witticism, what paltry poetry meant to lure her upstairs to the bed in room 214, what gentlemanly endeavor in a world where the gentleman was nearly dead? And he himself...a hollow uniform, worn over a masquerade? He thought...he feared...she could see all the way into him, and what he thought of himself, everything he'd been through, all the fire and the blood, all the torment and tribulation, the very soul of what he pretended to be, all of it, everything, came down to the sudden crack of confidence, the feeling that for this woman, this creature, this *job*, he was not good enough.

Franziska spoke.

"I am not a whore," she said.

"And I am not sorry for you," she went on. "If you're ordered to go east tomorrow morning, or the day after...that is your *purpose*. What I told you at the first is true. I'd like to photograph you for my article. Why? You are a very handsome man. You would look good on a magazine cover. And as I said...I know you have a strong and noble heart. How do I know that? Because even though you and I both are aware we desire to go to your room and make love tonight, you're not rushing me there like an animal. I *would* go with you, regardless if you were all claws and spittle, because I do want the photograph. But because you are *not* an animal, I will go with you gladly and in great anticipation of learning what you think of all of me."

It took him a moment to recover.

"I might turn into an animal the instant the door is locked," he told her.

"I'm counting on *that*," she said, and for the first time he realized she had the most adorable dimples in her cheeks.

She also, behind the locked door, revealed her adorable dimples of Venus, as her red dress and silken slip glided to the floor with soft whispers. Michael thought he could set teacups in those indentations at the small of her back, or pour pools of cold water into them and as he crouched above her on all fours lap them dry with a flicking tongue. The black air-raid shades were lowered over the windows, cutting any glimpse of seething fires that still glowed from the raid the night before; in this room was seething fire enough.

She said she wished to keep the small lamp atop the writing table on, with its royal-blue shade that cast the light of secret grottoes and stolen moments. They began by standing close together, at the center of the room, and admiring with fingertips and slow caresses the bodies offered one to another. Her fingers played over the muscles of his shoulders, down through the hair on his chest, along his hard stomach and downward still. She wore the expression of someone in a dream world that could not be shared, her lips slightly parted and teeth gleaming, her gaze upon him hungry yet not to be hurried through this banquet. He moved his hands over her like a sculptor, warming the smooth sleek stone before its transformation; she was harder than other women he'd known, her breasts small but the nipples yearning for his touch and taste. He slid his fingers along her sides, feeling the ribs there and all the constructions of sinew, bone and flesh that held the soul at its center. He let the knuckles of his right hand glide slowly down her stomach, down over her deep-dish navel, and she gave a quiet soft utterance as his fingers reached and lingered upon the black triangle of hair between long thighs that had begun almost imperceptibly to tremble.

Michael cupped the back of Franziska's neck with his left hand, and as he drew her face to him to brand her lips with his own, she put a finger against his chin and the message was clear: *You do not have my permission for that.*

So he pulled his face away, and he picked her up in his arms and took her to the bed.

FIVE

Herr Rittenkrett Calls

HE LONGED TO enter her, to join himself with her in the only way he could, and she longed for it also because she pressed herself, moist with excitement, against him, yet he had no intention of rushing the moment. He began a soft consumption of her, an exploration of her beautiful body with his tongue and small nips of the teeth, and he began this study of erotic geography with her throat, which she offered to him like any passion-charged bitch in heat. He spared no effort and missed no port of call, and when his journey was almost done she shifted her hips and grasped his hair with both hands and called him back to revisit her aching harbor.

Then it was her turn to travel.

Michael Gallatin had known many excellent visitors, with many outstanding and often amazing talents, but Franziska Luxe very easily could be awarded the key to his city, if not his world. Her mouth was larger than he could have imagined, and her tongue more heated. Her forthright intention was to consume him to the root and hold him there until pleasure and pain began to merge together into a third sensation unknown to

him until now. She was a relentless lover, a force that went nearly too far, backed off again, and again pushed the limit of his endurance. He felt as he had always wished every woman in his bed felt: that the world had stopped for a span of time, that nothing existed beyond the walls, or indeed beyond the moment, and that there was no one else on earth but these two figures, damp with sweat and breathing hard in the celebration of what seemed the act of gods and too exalted for mere human beings.

When at last he pushed himself inside her, she took him in deeply and wrapped her legs like bands of fire around his hips. They rocked together upon the wrecked sheets. She bit at his neck and made noises against his ear like the keening of wind through pines in the Russian woods. He saw colors behind his eyes that had no description, and were blinding even in his darkness. He shivered, as if struck by the passing blast of a train on a wilderness track. He almost forgot himself, and what began in his mind as a howl emerged from his throat in a moan of pure white ecstasy. Then he opened his eyes to drink in her beauty and found her glistening face looking up at him with wonder, as a solitary traveller through many black nights might look upon a guiding star.

She mounted him, while he lay on his back in what felt like the embrace of a swamp. It had always been his belief that one could tell how passionate in bed a woman was by the way she danced, by her innate sense of rhythm and her daring to experiment with the music she heard in her soul. It occurred to him that she could knock the hell out of the Four Smooth Suits.

As Franziska gave a sudden cry and shuddered, so too did Michael. His orgasm racked him, again the sensation of pain mixed with pleasure. It went on, wave after wave, until he was emptied. Franziska clung to him through her own series of small deaths and in her rebirth melded her cheek against his. With her damp ebony hair in his face Michael released a long sigh of utter and complete satisfaction.

They lay side-by-side with their heads on the same pillow, staring at each other, her fingers caught with his and her thighs held between his own.

“What can I say?” she asked softly.

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“What would you *like* to say?”

“Something unladylike.”

“There’s no one listening but me, and I know you’re a lady.”

She moistened her lips. “You make me very, very, very, *very*...horny.”

Which was music to his ears.

The second time they made love was slower and softer. They were both tired, but both eager and willing to drive themselves and each other into the realm of dazed insensibility. Around three in the morning they showered together and were slick and soapy when the warm water abruptly turned icy cold, bringing a shriek and gale of laughter from Franziska and a good Germanic curse from the major.

“Oh, the time!” she said, as he towelled her off. Her face without makeup was no less beautiful, and to Michael even more so; she was scrubbed and naturally radiant, and her hair smelled of the hotel’s sandalwood shampoo. She went up on her tiptoes and gave a giggle that could only be described as girlish when he put the towel between her legs from behind and gave her a little buzz of friction. “You’d better be careful!” she warned.

“Or what?”

She turned around, pressed her breasts against his chest and with her arms around him looked him straight in the eyes. “You keep this up and I’ll have to stay with you all day. Just so you won’t get into trouble.”

“If you want me to keep it up, just ask.” He glanced southward. “Um...a growing boy does require breakfast.”

“I think,” she said, as she placed her fingertip on the end of his nose, “you should get some sleep. And I should go home too, sad to say.”

“Sad to say,” he repeated, and quickly he caught her finger in his mouth and almost sucked the meat from it. “So...don’t say it.”

She smiled at him, the perfect smile of freedom and happiness. But he saw the smile slowly fade away, until it was all gone. “I can’t stay. Really. I have some work to do this morning, I have to be clear-headed.”

“Am I now a noxious fog?”

“I’m serious, Horst. I would love to stay and have breakfast with you, and...do whatever you’d like, but...”

“Herr Rittenkrett calls.”

“Yes, he does. And I wish you would forget you ever met him or heard him speak to me. This is something you don’t need to be concerned about.”

“Which makes me more concerned than before. Is it dangerous?”

She pulled away from him and stepped back. Though completely naked, she was climbing into her armor. She began to get dressed and studiously avoided his stare.

He sat on the bed and watched her. God, she was some piece of fabulous woman! he thought. The memory of her vagina clamped to his penis as if he had pressed into a jar of warm honey sent a shiver up his spine. *I could take you to lunch*, he almost said. But in the next instant he thought, *Don’t beg. Never beg. Not to any woman.*

Suddenly she looked up at him and, half-dressed, she let out a laugh. “You’ve got the face of a wounded puppy! Get some sleep, you’ll feel better in a few hours.”

“I doubt it, but thank you anyway.”

“Of course you’ll feel better. Or I hope you will. Because I’m going to cut my meeting short, tell Herr Rittenkrett what he wants to hear, and then I can take the rest of the day to show you something I think you’ll really like. Will you do my buttons?”

It dawned on Michael what she was saying. He buttoned her up and placed his hands on both globes of her bottom, tight in the saucy red dress. “I’ve already seen something I really like.”

“Men,” she said, and she tensed her buttocks under his fingers. “Oh, look at you now! A wolf where a puppy just was!”

“Yes,” he agreed. “That’s me.” He let her go and frowned up at her. “Won’t our Gestapo friend take offense at your...shall I say...unprofessional attitude today?”

“It’s a meeting to make plans, that’s all. Now I’ve said enough about that, and you’ve asked enough questions.” A hint of frost was creeping into her voice. “*Honestly*,” she said, as if scolding a schoolboy. She finished dressing in silence, putting on her mink coat, her long red leather gloves and getting her handbag, and Michael let her alone.

When Franziska was ready to go, Michael unlocked the door for her. Before he could turn the cut-glass knob, she placed her hand on his.

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“I am never unprofessional,” she said. “Not when I’m working. Or... when I’m involved in a project. We won’t talk about this anymore.” It was a statement not to be challenged. Her face softened, and with it her voice. “If you’ll be downstairs in front of the hotel at ten-thirty, I’ll come for you.”

“In *public*?” he asked.

A naughty little laugh wanted so much to spring from her mouth. A muscle in her jaw moved to clench it shut, but her eyes were sparkling. “*You*,” she said, “are part gentleman and all beast.” The way she said it, that put him far ahead of other men she knew. She pushed him playfully on the chest, and then she opened the door for herself, went out into the hallway and closed the door behind her.

One of the hardest things he’d ever done was not open the door and watch her walk away, heading for the staircase since the elevator wasn’t working due to the lack of lubricating fluids for the motor. He lay on the bed for awhile, but it smelled too much like her. He got up and in the bathroom splashed cold water in his face. The bathroom, too, was heady with her fragrance. She was even still in his own freshly-washed skin and hair. He would have to cut his nose off if he wanted to be rid of her.

A rather nasty female Nazi, he remembered saying to Mallory.

Well, she was.

He’d done his damndest, but he hadn’t stopped her from going to see Rittenkrett. Maybe he was responsible for the meeting being cut short, as she put it, but that didn’t mean some member of the Inner Ring might not be picked up tonight. Her *invaluable communication skills*, Rittenkrett had said. *New clients on the list*. Did that mean she was inserting herself into having affairs with suspected members of the Ring to get information? So she might not be a whore for a single German officer, but she was indeed a whore for the entire Third Reich?

Oh my God, he suddenly thought with a startle.

Michael, old chap. Jealous just a little bit, are we?

He decided to take another shower, and the colder the better.

SIX

Why Scout Cars Aren't Silver

IT WAS MICHAEL'S intention to be a few minutes late striding out onto the Kleiststrasse, in front of the hotel, yet he found himself leaving the Grand Frederik a few minutes early.

He wore his perfect counterfeit uniform, his cap and boots, a *feld-grau* overcoat and black leather gloves. It was a chilly morning, though the sky was blue and the sun bright. A breeze moved past him, ruffling his coat and bringing to him the smell of the state of affairs in Berlin, and most likely the pungent aroma of its future. Smoke stained the eastern horizon, reddish in hue. He could smell scorched bricks, burned lumber and the odors of the dust of centuries spun up from the ancient cellars when the bomb-blasted buildings crashed down. True, Berlin was a massive city and there were scores of large buildings remaining, but it was now a town of targets. From his position he could see at the Berlin Zoo one of the three huge gray concrete flak towers that stood like the stalks of poisonous mushrooms in defense of Berlin. They were medieval in design, like Barbarossian castles, suitable to shelter ten thousand civilians and topped with a Hell's garden of

flak cannons. Still, the larger the flak towers and cannons, the bigger the bombers and more deadly the rain. It was just a matter of time.

And his thoughts on that subject came to an end when a sleek silver Bayerische Motoren Werke 328 sports roadster slid out of the trickle of elderly black cars and cloak-wrapped citizens on bicycles and stopped with a polite growl in front of him.

It was a convertible, the top was down, and Franziska Luxe sat behind the wheel with a gray woolen cap pulled jauntily over her hair and green-tinted pilot's goggles on her face, though the glass windshield was up both for driver and passenger.

"Ah!" Michael said, in appreciation of her machine and of her promptness. He smiled at her smile. "In the style of the Silver Arrows?"

"Exactly. Get in, I'll take you for a ride."

How could he not accept such an offer?

It was a tight squeeze. A car with a Grand Prix pedigree was not necessarily built for a man his size. Even for that, he felt it was the type of car one might need to be strapped into, because he saw on the speedometer the top marking of one-hundred-and-fifty kilometers per hour. Then Franziska put the white-knobbed gearshift into First, tapped the accelerator and they were off along the Kleiststrasse like a silver swan amid the waddling, somber geese.

He was glad she had the good sense to be wearing a fawn-colored overcoat and brown driving gloves. She kept increasing the speed, shifting through the gears with an expert hand. Michael remembered *driver of racing cars* from his briefing about her.

Franziska whipped to the right on Motzstrasse, crossing over the tram tracks and ignoring the shout of a traffic warden to slow down. A whistle was blown, which caused Franziska to shrug her shoulders and grin into the wind. Her foot descended on the accelerator again, Michael held his breath as they passed through a flurry of bicyclists, and they sped along toward the southwest.

"Your car?" he asked. "Or a friend's?"

"Mine, all mine," she answered, as she cut around a fat-assed sedan that flew a Nazi flag from an aerial on its roof and looked terrifyingly

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important. But it was left behind when she made a quick right onto the broad boulevard of the Hohenzollerndamm. “I was part of the Grand Prix Mercedes-Benz team in ’39,” she explained. “This was as close as I could get to a Silver Arrow for the road.”

Michael nodded. The story was that in 1934, prior to a Grand Prix race at the Nurburgring, a competing Mercedes tested one kilogram over the limit on the weight scales, so the racing manager and driver at that time removed all the white paint from the car to lose the offending kilo. The next day, the shining silver car won the race, and a legend was born. Between 1934 and 1939, all the great German racing cars of Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union were bare silver, and all were referred to as ‘Silver Arrows’.

Franziska and Michael arrowed along through the city, at one intersection causing a horse drawing a coal wagon to rear up in angry defiance of the 20th century.

“My studio’s over there,” she said, pointing to a concentration of gable-roofed buildings to the right. Not a minute afterward, she turned off the avenue and began a twisty-curvy tour that took them across cobblestoned streets not suited for speed, and as Michael had already seen the haze of smoke and dust in the air he knew she was trying to avoid the bombed-out sections.

It was an impossible task, because there had been so many bombs. Thousands of them, most likely. Rubble and twisted metal were so common in some places here that the unmarked buildings looked strange. Some of the destruction resembled what might have been Axel Rittenkrett’s birthday cake baked to gargantuan size, set on fire and allowed to melt into the street like black tar stubbled with fist-sized nuggets of cemented sugar. Buildings leaned against each other like drunken buddies, their faces full of cracks. Seas of broken glass glittered before the roadster’s tires, but in this area of Berlin Franziska was always twisting and turning the wheel, getting out of danger an instant before it got to her, avoiding the shattered bricks of buildings cleaved down the center so all the burned-up entrails showed, avoiding the dusty rag people with wheelbarrows who searched through the cratered wreckage, and avoiding the roaming packs of dogs that used to be household pets and now had no masters but Fate.

She didn't speak while they were driving through or around these sections, and neither did Michael. He wanted to ask her how she was getting the fuel and oil to operate this buggy, since for every car he saw there were a half-dozen wagons and a dozen more bicycles, but he decided it was not a prudent question.

The clusters of buildings thinned to outskirts. Suddenly they came upon a checkpoint with a lowered gate and four soldiers with machine guns. Michael's gut clenched, even as he returned the salute the soldiers gave him. Franziska showed one of the men a small booklet with a yellow cover stamped by the Nazi swastika. He opened it briefly to look at something—a special permission to come and go, Michael assumed—and then the booklet was returned to her, the gate opened and the 328 shot through onto what Michael realized was the Fuhrer's pride, the *Reichsautobahn*.

It was four lanes of white concrete separated by a grassy median about five meters wide. It stretched on across the rolling winter-brown landscape like a ski trail, which Michael thought touched two of Franziska's interests, both involving speed. As far as he could see, and he could see very far, today the *Reichsautobahn* belonged to her and her alone.

She had the BMW in fourth gear, her mouth was grinning below the goggles and the elegant Roman nose, the engine roared and the speedometer's red needle was climbing rapidly toward that one-hundred-and-fifty mark.

"Do you like to go fast?" she shouted to him against the wind.

"I do," he answered. "When do we start?"

She gave him a quick elbow in the ribs. He grasped his cap to keep it from flying away.

They went into curves that Michael was certain they could never take at this speed, yet they were kept on the concrete by Franziska's undeniable skill with the clutch, gearshift and quick taps of the brake. They hurtled onward. The smells of engine oil, grease and hot metal washed back through the cockpit. The engine noise was nothing short of apocalyptic. Michael had been in speeding aircraft before, yes, but never in a road rocket. The winter trees on either side blurred together. Now the BMW came out of a curve onto a straightaway, and as the engine screamed

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impossibly louder Michael looked at the speedometer and figured that at this rate they'd be in Amsterdam by early afternoon.

There was an idea, he thought. Just drive all the way to the American or British lines, turn her over to the first officer he saw, and there would be no more rivers to cross. She would be spared from the oncoming and unstoppable horde, in spite of herself.

He wondered if she kept a pistol in the glovebox, and if it would be loaded. But he felt that even at gunpoint she might fly this machine off into the woods, and it was a ridiculous thought anyway because there would be many checkpoints ahead just for the reason that Hitler wanted no capitulation with the Allies on the western front.

"You're very quiet!" she shouted after a few more minutes of racing along the perfectly-smooth roadway.

"I'm enjoying the ride!" he shouted back, which was absolutely true. He expected she'd be turning back before long. He intended to ask her where he might take her to lunch, and after that he would say he wanted to see her studio and maybe this afternoon, if she was willing, to get the photographs done. After that, if she was willing...

His reverie on matters of the bedroom was interrupted by a quick glint of metal.

Up in the sky, at about the two o'clock position.

He looked for it again. They were going down into a small decline. The hills and trees obscured his vision on the right. Then they curved to the left and started upward once more, and at the top of the rise the pair of aircraft, one following off to the side of the other, shrieked about fifty feet above their heads with a noise that enfeebled the 328's husky voice.

The car briefly slewed from side to side until Franziska got full control again. She glanced back over her shoulder, and Michael's head also swivelled.

They both knew their aircraft. The two planes were P51 Mustangs, bright silver as the BMW, and marked with American stars. Michael saw that the aircraft in the rear position, the wingman he thought that would be, carried four air-to-ground rockets. As Franziska returned her attention to the roadway and her fingers tightened on the wheel, Michael saw the two planes began to turn to the right.

His heart had given a lurch. He leaned toward her and said as calmly as his voice would allow, "I think we'd better get off this—" *Road*, he was about to say, for obvious reasons, but already the first Mustang was straightening out and coming in for the kill.

Sparkles of fire erupted from the leading edges of both wings.

He imagined the fighter jocks had been train-hunting today, and maybe one had already used its rockets to knock a locomotive off the rails. In any case, the little silver roadster with two Nazis in it was just too good a target for a trigger-happy Yank to pass up.

In the next instant the Browning machine gun bullets began to march in rows across the other side of the *Reichsautobahn*, on a collision course with the BMW. Michael nearly reached out to grab the wheel, but Franziska hit the brake. The car skidded in the smoke of burning rubber. The section of roadway it would have passed over if she'd kept up the speed was torn into pieces of flying concrete that thunked into the hood, smashed the windshield in front of Michael's face and passed over their heads almost as deadly as the slugs.

The carefree girl was gone. She whipped the wheel around and downshifted as she punched the accelerator again and the BMW fishtailed and spun in a circle that left a perfect O of black rubber. The second Mustang flashed over their heads.

"Hang on!" Franziska shouted.

He surely wasn't going to get out and walk. The 328 seemed to pause for a few precious seconds even though the accelerator was pressed to the floorboards, and then it gave what was nearly a forward leap that rocked Michael's head back and cracked his teeth together. When he got his neck working again and looked over his shoulder he saw the two angels of death turning for another pass.

Franziska didn't look. She just drove, now jinking the BMW to left and right, refusing to give the planes an easy target. Berlin, and its flak towers, was more than ten kilometers distant. Michael thought he should be pleased at this development of Allied fighters seeking kills on the edge of Berlin in broad daylight, but somehow he was not so pleased.

Another burst of bullets tore across the concrete and median in front of them, and then Michael heard a *whoosh* and felt something scorching

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hot pass seemingly right behind his neck. Over on the right, trees blew out of the ground, a geyser of dirt exploded and small things on fire began to run wildly across the hillside. Michael could imagine the radio chatter: *Direct hit today on a rabbit burrow, flight leader.*

Franziska was nearly standing on the accelerator.

The two planes roared over them, marking them with their shadows, and again made a circle.

It had already gone through Michael's mind that she should get off the roadway and make for the woods, but he understood why she didn't. In this case, speed was life. The car's silver gleam would not be hidden by leafless limbs. The only chance they had, if indeed it was a chance at all, was to outrun both bullets and rockets. One advantage owned by Franziska: the fighter pilots were used to attacking trains, tanks and trucks, which moved considerably slower and more predictably than the small quick 328.

To emphasize that point, Franziska suddenly swerved the wheel to the right and they crossed the median onto the other pair of lanes. Two rows of Browning bullets rushed after them but were late to catch their target, and so pocked the concrete and threw up plumes of dirt in the median. The first Mustang zoomed over their heads, but the second had eased back on the throttle and Michael knew the pilot was lining up a shot. Franziska knew it too; she hit the brake, violently downshifted and fought the wheel to veer again over the median to the other side. Heat waves shimmered past the car, there were two bright flashes and a black-edged crater suddenly marred Hitler's highway. Chunks of concrete crashed down, but the BMW was already racing out of the next curve.

Michael lost sight of the planes. An onrush of panic seized him. He twisted around, and there directly behind them the Mustangs were coming down side-by-side, like vultures, almost floating toward them. Taking their time, he thought. Waiting for Franziska to commit to a move. Where was the Luftwaffe, for Christ's sake? Closer still came the Mustangs, and lower.

It was just a matter of seconds now before the machine guns started firing and the last rocket ignited. The Mustangs were nearly wingtip-to-wingtip. Michael had the feeling they were going to let go at the same time

with everything they had, and it was probably going to happen when the BMW started up the slight incline that was just ahead.

He sensed her trying to decide what to do. Over the noise of the wind they heard the low roar of the Mustangs right at their backs. She decided, and he saw her grasp the gear knob to shift down. She was going to stomp the brake and make the Mustangs overshoot.

Michael had had enough of playing with death. He made his own decision. He reached out and pulled the cap off Franziska's head, letting the ebony hair boil out and stretch behind her like a banner. She looked at him from the green-tinted goggles as if she thought he'd gone stark raving mad.

The flesh on the back of Michael's neck crawled. Time seemed to hang, even at one-hundred-fifty kilometers per hour.

The two Mustangs passed overhead, still side-by-side. Picking up speed, they wagged their wings. Then they turned to the right, and Michael watched them as they flashed away, silver-bright and shining, toward the west.

"It's all right!" he shouted, the wind in his face through the broken glass. "They've gone!"

"They've gone? How do you *know*?" Her voice was admirably controlled, but he could see that her eyes were wet. "And what was that with my cap?"

"I decided that no fighter pilot worth his wings," he said, "would kill a woman in a sports roadster. But they had to see you were a woman." He thought the wagging of the wings was the same unspoken message that the Luftwaffe captain had given him at the party last night: *good luck*.

So there *were* gentlemen left in the world, after all.

Their good luck, today.

At the top of the incline, Franziska downshifted, braked and cut their speed. In the distance ahead of them was the smoke-haze of the destruction in Berlin. Franziska eased the BMW to a stop in the road, and they sat there while the engine burred and the hot metal tick...tick...ticked.

She drew a long breath, both her hands still tight on the wheel. Michael reached into his coat for the white handkerchief he always carried. "Let's do this," he said, and he pushed the goggles up on her forehead. The tears in her eyes were of course from terror, but she was certainly a

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strong-hearted woman. He dabbed the tears away, as gently as he could. If he wasn't supposed to be such a man, he might have shed a few himself. Even so, his hand wasn't exactly the steadiest it had ever been.

"Now you know," he told her, "why scout cars aren't silver."

She stared at him blankly for a few seconds. Then all the fire and excitement rushed back into her eyes and she began to laugh as if this had been the grandest adventure of a lifetime. Her laugh was so open and natural that Michael was struck by the strange humor it carried, and he too began to laugh. What could be more funny, he mused in his hilarity, than to be sitting in a fast roadster on the edge of Berlin with a beautiful Nazi Gestapo 'talent' and the smell of rocket explosive in one's clothes? He suspected that at this minute he'd become a little unhinged.

Franziska's laugh ceased.

She leaned toward him, took his cap off and put her hand around the back of his neck.

Her lips just barely grazed his own, but her mouth was ready to be crushed.

She stayed at that intimate distance. Michael didn't try to breach the gap; he didn't yet have her permission, and he respected that.

When she kissed him, it was soft. It was the blue sky of May, the warmth of a sun-lit morning. It was distant music playing in a park. It was boats on a lake, young men in their best courting suits and young women with their parasols. It was a kiss that belonged to another world.

He kissed her back, just as softly. Their lips met and held, and some trick of friction or cold air made them tingle together, and when Franziska pulled her head back and looked at him she said, "Oh," very quietly, as if he'd made a statement that required an answer yet she didn't know how to give one.

"We'd better get off this road," Michael told her, which was what he'd intended to say before the air attack. When she still hesitated he had a bad instant in which he couldn't decide whether he'd spoken in German, Russian or English. Then she nodded, answered "*Ja, haben Sie Recht,*" and she started them off once more toward the city.

SEVEN

I Loved A Man Who Died

THE DAMAGE TO the BMW wasn't so bad. Besides the broken windshield, various dents to the bodywork, a single bullet hole in the spare tire mounted on the trunk and the groove across the passenger side where a ricocheting slug had passed, it was perfectly able to race another day.

The damage to the bed in Franziska's studio apartment on Wittelsbacherstrasse was more substantial. Sometime during the afternoon's storm that swept through, the bed capsized on one side like a freighter struck by a U-Boat torpedo and its occupants, still wrapped up in each other, tumbled off to the floor where they finished what they'd started.

They lay on a pile of pillows beneath the window, as the afternoon light began to fade. Franziska had her head on his shoulder, and she suddenly woke up from her sweet slumber and stretched so hard Michael heard her joints pop.

"If you give me one more orgasm," she said into his ear, "you're going to have to take up permanent residence in my pussy."

“What more could a man ask for but a warm, snug place to call home?” he asked.

She began to lick in slow circles around his nipples, her tongue flicking this way and that.

“You’re tempting fate,” he warned. Though one very important part of his body had come to the end of its usefulness for awhile, he still could flip her over and dive in headfirst, and before his own tongue and lips were through he would make her scream all the framed photographs off the walls.

She put her chin on his chest and stared up at him. “Are you married?”

An instant after she’d posed the question, she pressed her hand to her mouth. The gray eyes widened. “Oh my God! Oh Christ, I didn’t mean to ask that! Forget it, all right?”

“All right,” Michael answered. Better, perhaps, to make her think he *was* married?

“That’s a stupid question,” she went on after a short pause. She snuggled up in the crook of his right arm. “It’s unsophisticated.”

“It’s not unsophisticated to be curious.”

“Yes it is.” She didn’t speak again for a while, and he didn’t either. He could feel her heart beating under his hand. They’d gone to lunch at a small cafe after the incident on the *Reichsautobahn*, and then Franziska had brought him here to take the photographs. After about half-an-hour of posing before a Nazi flag tacked to the wall, Michael had had enough of being told what to move and what not to move, especially when Franziska took off her clothes and informed him from behind the chrome-bodied Leica Standard that she just needed a few more shots.

“When the war’s over,” Franziska said quietly, “it will all have been worth it.”

Michael said nothing.

“You know what I’m saying. When the trash and the undesirables are removed from society. When Germany takes its rightful place. You know.”

“Yes,” Michael had to say, because she was waiting for his reply.

“I’ve seen some of the sketches for the buildings. Berlin is going to be the most beautiful city in the world. The parks will be majestic. The *Reichsautobahn* will connect every city in Europe, the trains will be back as

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they were, but even faster, and the ocean liners will even be bringing the American tourists over. And everyone will be flying in their own personal autogyros. You wait and see.”

“I’m just concerned with the next few months.”

“Oh, I understand that!” She rolled over so she could see his face in the shadowy light. “You don’t have to grasp the big picture right now, but you’re going to be part of it. All good Germans will be part of it. Those who fought and died, they’ll be part of it too. The war memorials are going to be the envy of the world. Showing them all how we stood against the Bolsheviks. How we were the wall they couldn’t break through. How we won the battle the British and Americans didn’t have the courage to fight.” She nodded, to emphasize her own certainty. “If the Fuhrer says it’s so, it will be so.”

“Yes,” Michael agreed. He had to stare at the ceiling. He’d already noticed many cracks up there. This building on the outside was untouched by the bombing, yet here was the damage from distant explosions, creeping along walls and ceilings from cellar to attic, weakening the structure by millimeters of brick dust and plaster, a slow destruction, a death counted in sheared-off nailheads and popped rivets, until the sick center could not hold.

“Horst, you’re going to live to see all this.” Franziska put a hand on his chest, over his British and Russian heart. “God will not let a man like you be lost to the future. I know this like I know my own soul.”

Michael made some kind of noise of assent, he wasn’t sure what.

She stretched out upon him, her arms going around his body and her ear pressed down as if to count the heartbeats of such a noble beast. “You’ve seen so much death, I know,” she said. “I can feel that in you. I think you’ve known very much pain. But you hide it from the world. You see, we’re alike in this way. My parents were too busy for me, too busy adventuring. I was raised by a succession of nannies and thrown out of a succession of schools. I loved a man who died. In a racing accident, right in front of me. We were going to be married, but...you know, such things happen. I was a girl.” An element in her voice was quickly effervescent, and then gone. “I think... maybe all of me never came back from that. I’m sorry,” she said suddenly, “I wasn’t meaning to talk so much about myself.”

Michael's right hand had moved to poise over the black waves of her hair. He let his hand drift upon her head. He stroked his fingers gently through her hair and down along the back of her neck. "I like to listen," he invited.

She didn't speak for a length of time. The light faded more and more, to less and less.

When Franziska did speak, it was in a quiet voice that was tight with emotion. "Sometimes I feel...as if no one knows me, or can ever know me. I feel as if...no one hears music as I do, or sees color, or appreciates... just *living*, every day. I feel...I'm in a world of shadows, and where are the real people? Am I the sleepwalker, or are they? Because if I learned anything from watching Kurt die, it was that one must be *prepared* to die, at any moment. But that doesn't mean being afraid, or locking yourself into a room and sealing off the world. Oh, no...it's the opposite. It means going out with courage into what you fear the most, and looking it right in the face. And if you live, you laugh, because you have won the fight for another day. *That* is how you prepare for death. By embracing life, not hiding from it. Oh, *listen* to me!" She glanced quickly up at him and then returned her head to the position it had been in. Michael knew she was enjoying having her head and neck rubbed. "Lecturing about life and death to a soldier!"

"I understand what you mean," Michael said.

"I knew you would. And I knew, the moment you approached me at Herr Rittenkrett's party, that you were different. I looked at you and took you in, and I thought... Franziska, you must be with this man. You must not only go to bed with him, but you must *be* with him. Why? Because I'm a selfish slut dressed up in silks and furs, and I want my pleasure. But also... because to you I want to *give* pleasure, and I haven't felt that way...since I was a girl," she finished.

Michael said, "I'm honored," and he meant it.

Her hand slid down between his thighs.

"Now," she said, "I'm going to get up and go fetch from a drawer a paper pistol target and a floorstand to mount it on. I'm going to set the target up within an interesting distance. Then I'm going to give you the

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cocksucking of your life, and even though you think you *might* be tired, I'm going to use your gun to hit a bull's-eye. Do you understand that?"

An expert marksman, Mallory had said.

Michael would have to judge for himself.

"Yes," he told her, and heard in his own voice the nearly giddy excitement of...a boy? "I very much understand."

There would be no shooting of blanks in this contest.

Sometime when the evening had closed in and they had showered together, she remarked on how fast his beard seemed to grow, and what kind of razor did he use? He said he owned a French Thiers-Izzard, and she gave him an expression of horror and said the beauty of his face should only be trusted to German steel.

He wound up shaving with her razor, and afterward he watched as she sat on the edge of the tub and shaved her magnificent legs.

"Do you like my bush?" she asked, with a dimpled half-smile he found devastating. "It's getting a little full, I think."

He just had to look down at the floor tiles and shake his head at her earthiness, and when Franziska laughed at this unbelievable and until now unknown moment of shyness in the life of Michael Gallatin he thought he would pick this woman up in his arms and press her so close that Eve would return the rib.

"Dinner?" he asked her, when he'd recovered himself. "Someplace with music?"

A frown surfaced. "Oh...I have an appointment tonight. Something I can't put off. As a matter of fact, I was supposed to call Herr Rittenkrett by now. He'll be waiting to hear from me." Without the need for a towel, she walked in her glorious lithesome nakedness to the telephone in the other room.

Michael hated to play his next card, but it was time to show the East Front Jack Of Hearts. He sighed as she picked up the receiver. "I'm sorry we can't spend all our time together. The time left, I mean."

She put the receiver to her ear and started dialing.

"If I get my orders tomorrow," he continued, "I might not have a chance to see you again." *Careful*, he thought. She mustn't smell the lie.

“Franziska Luxe for Herr Rittenkrett,” she said to whomever answered on the other side.

“Well,” he said, “do you have a suggestion for where I should eat?”

She gave him a look over her shoulder that of itself was worthy of more target practice.

“Hello, Axel,” she said into the mouthpiece. “I wanted you to know...” She paused, still staring fixedly at Michael. “I’m not feeling very well tonight,” she went on. “We’ll need to postpone our plans. What? My condition? My throat is a little sore. Yes, I think I’ll feel better tomorrow. Definitely tomorrow. I’ll swallow something for it. Yes, I do know.” She paused, listening to the Gestapo’s ‘Ice Man’. “That’s right, Major Jaeger *is* here. I’ve been taking his pictures this afternoon. Yes, I’m aware it’s evening, thank you.” She gave a quick nod as if standing in Rittenkrett’s presence. “I’m also aware of *that*,” she replied. Then, after a silence, “I’ll give him your regards, and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Franziska returned the receiver to its cradle.

Her eyes had gone a little chilly. “He knows I’m lying, of course. It wouldn’t do to lie a second time, about your not being here.” She examined her fingernails for a moment, and then when she lifted her gaze to his again her eyes had warmed. “I *am* free for dinner, after all. And I do know a place with music.”

“And dancing?” he prodded.

“I’ll dance you into the ground,” she promised.

“We’ll see about that.” He hoped he wouldn’t be dancing on a grave; either his own, or hers. The Ice Man might look coldly upon this interference in the Gestapo’s plans, even if from a major who ought to be a colonel. Michael decided from here on out he should take care to pay attention to anyone coming up behind him.

But, for the moment, there was life to be lived.

EIGHT

This Particular Wolftrap

OVER THE NEXT few days—as the air raid sirens shrieked at night, bombs fell on Berlin, troop trains passed through carrying more meat to feed the Russians and yet the parties went on at a pace meant to satisfy all human appetites and destroy all remaining inhibitions—the major with wary green eyes and the female photojournalist with an interesting reputation were seen in several restaurants, the cinema, and a few nightclubs that still had glass in the windows and not boards.

Michael thought that for a person who felt she was known by no one, Franziska had an army of acquaintances. At lunch or dinner their table was bound to be approached by at least two or three people. Of course Franziska would introduce him and—most of these visitors being civilians—Michael would listen politely to their comments about the war being won soon, and Berlin getting back to normal and the world paying its heavy debt to Germany. Even Franziska, who could herself go on at length about the future of the Thousand-Year-Reich, was bored within one minute of the proclamations of some of these overstuffed blowhards. Michael didn't fail to notice

that several of the married men, their mummified wives in tow, gazed upon Franziska with the eyes of those who have for a short space of time seen what lay beneath the gown and the manners, and their nervous movements from side-to-side showed they hoped someday to repeat that viewing. She dashed their hopes and broke their hearts with a quick sidelong smile and a turning away of the face that said *Your day is done*.

Of more concern to Michael were the officers who occasionally ambled up, their pathetic attempts at charm not quite up to the hard reality of a missing limb, and above the fixed smiles the glazed expressions of actors no longer sure they remember their lines. They steered clear of actual war talk, movements of troops and tanks and so forth, which suited Michael fine, but what made him dodge a bit were the questions of did he know Colonel der von Glockenspiel or Major Hamminibus or some such name thrown at him like a fat piece of oily pork. He always said the name was familiar but, no, he had never met the man. He knew the name of his own supposed divisional commander, Burmeister, so he couldn't be tripped up for that mistake.

The officers always said it was a pleasure, good luck in his forthcoming struggle, may God protect Germany, and *Heil Hitler*.

Then, when the major and the photojournalist sitting at their table had seen that sharp hunger in the eyes of the other, the rising of the heated flame that no liquid outburst could extinguish for very long, either he or she reached for a knee and in his case winnowed his hand beneath her skirt and moved along a silken thigh, or in her case placed a firm hand of ownership upon what she wished to command, and one of them— or both at the same time, as had happened—would ask the question: “Are you ready?”

They were always ready.

He didn't know exactly what she was doing. If she was gathering information for the Gestapo by seduction, or by following and photographing the comings and goings of suspected Inner Ring members, or some of both. He didn't think she was doing only mundane investigation, she was far too talented for that alone. He understood how within a few minutes of being with her, a man would cast aside all caution and self-preservation and start to jabber about things to make himself sound important, until a slip of the

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jabber made her hone in on some remark and work it like she worked in the sheets on a man's most valued companion. If, as Michael understood, the majority of the Inner Ring's members were office clerks, military aides, pencil pushers and scientists who might be brilliant but sometimes forgot what shoe went on which foot, Franziska's work was nearly accomplished just by walking into the room.

One evening at midweek, before going to a late-night *Signal* party that she'd invited him to, they went to dinner in one of the very few fine restaurants still open, and they sat before a picture window overlooking a lamplit park. They'd just gotten their food when the air raid sirens went off, and instantly the few other patrons started for the cellar.

"No," Franziska said when he started to stand up. She was radiant tonight, absolutely gorgeous in a dark blue dress with a strand of pearls around her neck. She took his hand. "We'll be all right." Then she'd continued eating her dinner and drinking her wine, and though the manager came and implored them to leave their table and come down with everyone else she shook her head with a wry smile, and at last they were alone in the restaurant.

The flak guns began firing, the sounds like pillows being whacked with cricket bats. Michael heard the distant thunder of the bombs. Through the window he could see the blue-white flashes, like whips of lightning, and then the faraway red flames curling up. She was staring at him across the table. He had lost his appetite, but he lifted his glass and said, "*Prost!*"

"*Prost!*" she answered with pleasure, and they drank.

A bomb fell closer. Michael felt its power in the floor. Multicolored lanterns at the ceiling shivered.

Her fingers entwined with his. She said softly, "I am safe with you. And you are safe with me. As long as we're together...nothing can hurt us."

"I'm glad you believe that."

She shook her head. "More than believe. I *know*."

But he wondered: do the bombs know?

One fell very close, an explosion perhaps a street or two beyond the park. The wineglasses and gold-edged plates jumped on the table. Tree limbs came flying at the window and made a noise like clattering claws.

She just smiled.

Michael looked at her. Really looked, as if he'd never seen her before.

At the birthday party, he'd said something to the Ice Man that wasn't exactly true: *I don't fear*. The truth was, he wasn't *afraid*. He was cautious, and he was prepared, and so he was not afraid.

But he feared this woman sitting, smiling, before him. The woman whose fingers were entwined with his.

He'd had choices presented to him, after the mission that involved the D-Day invasion of Normandy and the matter of Iron Fist. Chesna van Dorne had asked him to go to Hollywood with her. In his mind he'd weighed that invitation against disappearing into the wilds of Canada, of finding a hunter's stone cabin three hundred miles from people, and living as a solitary man there until, possibly, the end of his days.

His decision had been neither of those. He'd decided to stay where he was, at the house in Wales. To press on pressing on, as the British would say.

But now he knew, he had made a mistake.

He should have left Wales. He should have gone where they couldn't find him. Where an inquiry for Michael Gallatin drew only a blank stare. He had made a mistake, and now he was in Berlin, with bloodthirsty Russians on the outskirts and bombs falling down, and he was holding the hand of Franziska Luxe.

Whatever he was, he was not fully. Not one nor the other. He could not live in the crowded city of Hollywood, nor could he live three hundred miles from the nearest human being. But whatever he was, and whatever he at last became, he realized that he needed the human embrace just as every heart did. And more than that...his downfall...was that he needed to be the human embrace to some other heart.

She was a Nazi, with a Nazi's view of the world. What they had between them was the sex. The deep and hungry kisses, the bites, the cries of passion, the friction of flesh, the movement of hips and the pounding one into the other until the electric release and then the wet mouths searching for each other again. They had the sex, and with that they were very good.

But when the next bomb fell, again too close, and Franziska's hand tightened just a little on his own but her composed expression never

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changed, Michael feared this woman because she was the river that, once crossed, would never let him go home again.

Moving in slow inches, he began to turn his chair and his body. She would say she needed no protection, and so he didn't ask. He positioned himself so he was directly across from her, his back offered to the picture window and to the God of War from whom all jagged shards flew.

Franziska continued the conversation they'd been having before the sirens, about the prospects for German Grand Prix racing to be reinstated after the war, and her intention to be part of a team. She knew her cars inside and out and could explain the varying characteristics of engines, braking systems, tires and so on year-by-year. Michael was more comfortable listening rather than talking very much, to avoid a blunder, though she did try to encourage him to talk about his childhood and his family. If she only knew the truth, he thought as he fed her the fiction that had been prepared for him before he'd left England. There were never any questions about his being married, or about his experiences in the war. She never failed, however, to at least once a day ask if he'd gotten his orders yet.

Not ninety seconds later, the bomb that Michael was dreading ended its long fall among buildings on the far side of the park. At the same instant as they heard the hollow *whump* of the blastwave, there was a loud noise like a pistol shot. Michael flinched. The floor trembled and creaked. Brick dust drifted in the air. Throughout the restaurant the lanterns swung back and forth. Michael turned in his chair and saw first the crack that had cut diagonally across the window. Secondly, he saw that the park's lamps had been blown out, and thirdly he saw that a building was burning bright orange with a white center where the bomb had struck.

Another bomb exploded further to the east, and one or two or several more after that, moving eastward still, the noises merging together to make a continuous whirling roar.

Then, there were only the creaks and pops of an injured building settling deeper on its foundations. The air raid sirens were still shrieking and the flak guns continued to fire upon the departing bombers. Shortly after that, they heard the sirens of the ambulances and fire trucks. The flak guns ceased, and the air raid warning abruptly stopped in mid-cry.

“Someday I’d like to take up sailing,” she said to him, as the manager and the shaken-looking patrons began to emerge from the cellar. “On the open sea. At least try it. How does that sound?”

“Wet,” he answered, which was also the description of the back of his neck. “But with you, an adventure I wouldn’t dare miss.”

“To our wet adventure,” she said as she lifted her glass for another toast. “Someday. *Prost!*”

The party—held in honor of *Signal* journalists by some very important backers and supporters of the magazine—was held in a private mansion on the Grabertstrasse. The place looked to Michael as if its architect had been a little too fond of gingerbread houses in his childhood, with its walls that resembled thick white frosting and upon the roofs, chimneys, and turrets that might have been sprinkled with cinnamon. On their way there, in the open-topped BMW through the wintry night, Franziska had given Michael a brief accounting of who would be in attendance: Baron von Caught the Clapp and his fourth wife the spindly sixteen-year-old Spidergirl, Ziggy the Playboy who zigged and zagged both ways, the Countess of No Worth, and so on, plus bodyguards and handholders for all these people and whoever else had decided to come in search of free champagne and little sausages in sesame-seed buns.

It was dreadful, but the champagne was good and flowed freely. The chamber music ensemble wasn’t so bad. The pile of logs in the huge fireplace was very warm, and the chandeliers sparkled in a merry way. Michael found himself and Franziska separated soon after they arrived, she whisked away by a spry white-haired man—the Clapp?—through a larger throng than he would have expected out on a bomb-run night. Suddenly Michael was surrounded by four girls, three of them very attractive indeed and the fourth unfortunately buck-toothed but who energetically kept wanting to feel his Iron Cross. They laughed and jostled together like brightly-painted freight cars while he tried to be charming and found that he didn’t have to try too very hard.

But the thing was...he realized that he was aware of wherever Franziska was among all these grinning and champagne-soused and somewhat sad people in the large ornately-appointed room. He just *felt* her out there. He

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would get a glimpse of her hair or her shoulder or her hip, before the crowd closed in, and then he would sense when she was moving, and in which direction. He laughed and talked to the ladies, but he was always aware that he was connected to Franziska by what seemed like an elastic band that could stretch to any distance and then draw them together again.

The ladies chattered on. Then through the crowd he saw her standing amid a group of several uniformed men of varying ages, her champagne flute in hand, the men motioning and posturing with the animation of excitement, she calmly sipping her bubbly at the center of what looked like a lot of playboys talking with their groins.

A thought came to him, unbidden.

That is my woman.

And as if she'd heard this as clearly as his voice, she looked at him directly across the room, through the puffery of playboys, and over the champagne flute that caught golden firelight from the blaze her right eye quickly winked.

My woman, Michael thought.

Then in the next instant he had to turn away, to stride past the girls with the giggles on their lips, to stride past the massive fireplace and the hanging tapestry that depicted a German knight on a white horse, and going past people he didn't know and would never know he had to find a place to stand by himself, to think, because he knew exactly what the spikes at the bottom of this particular wolfttrap were made of. This was wrong, terribly wrong, and here he paused to pluck a fresh flute of champagne from a waiter's tray, and as he took a drink he thought it smelled of cigars and a leather saddle, and then the white-clad arm caught him hard by the shoulder and Michael turned into the mountainous bulk of the white-haired, red-faced man who also had hold of Franziska's left arm as one would clutch a troublesome piece of luggage that sprang open at the most inopportune times.

Behind Axel Rittenkrett stood the thug and the accountant, both in their dark suits.

"Major Jaeger," said Rittenkrett, with a slight bow of the mountaintop. "Franziska wishes to say goodnight, and may we call a cab for you before we leave?"

■ Robert McCammon

Michael read Franziska's expression; it was more annoyance than pain, but the Gestapo man's fingers were pressing into her flesh.

"Take your hand off her," Michael said.

Rittenkrett's pale blue eyes were dead. Icy, as it were.

"It's all right, Horst," said Franziska, her brow furrowed. "I just have to—"

"Take your hand," Michael repeated into the dead eyes, "*off her.*" And across his body—back, chest, arms and legs—he felt the scurrying of dangerous ants.

"Or *what, sir?*" Rittenkrett's face thrust at him like a scarlet bludgeon. "What will you *dare* to do, if I don't take my hand off her?"

Michael wasted no time in answering.

He flung the remainder of his champagne across the flaming face and the snow-white suit jacket, and from the liquid that streamed down the cheeks and dripped off the chin he almost expected to hear a sizzle.

NINE

The Perfect Package

THE GROUP OF people who witnessed this drama froze as if statues in a tableau, though across the room the violins and cello of the chamber music ensemble kept on playing. The accountant, Sigmund, looked worriedly around as if searching for a notepad to write down the details of this atrocity. The thug, Ross, strode toward Michael with a grim purpose, his hands in black leather gloves clenched into fists.

“Ross, be still!” snapped the Ice Man, whose face glistened. He had taken his hand from Franziska’s arm, and he reached with it for the red handkerchief in his jacket. Ross stopped. “Everyone be calm,” Rittenkrett said, to no one in particular. He wiped his face and gave a grunt of dismay at the champagne scrawled down the front of his suit.

Michael felt Franziska wanting him to look at her, to convey some message, but he would not. He stood loose-limbed and relaxed, ready for whatever happened next.

“This is a mess,” the Ice Man muttered. He aimed his eyes at Michael and scowled yet there was no true rage in the florid face, as Michael had

expected to find. "Major, this tells me you're either insane or you believe yourself to be in love. Which is it?"

"I don't like to see a woman bullied by a man."

"*Bullied?* Because I was guiding her to the door? Are you sure you know as much about women as you seem to think you do? By the way, are you married?"

"No," came the reply. As far as he could tell, that brought no reaction whatsoever from Franziska.

"*Ever* been married? No children?"

Michael thought of a white palace, in what seemed another life. He was silent.

"We need to have a little talk, Major. About the importance of responsibilities. I suggest we go find a quiet room. Everyone!" Rittenkrett said to the onlookers, many of whom obviously knew his station in life and wore sickly expressions that said they regretted having been witnesses to the incident. "This has been an unfortunate misunderstanding, but everything's fine. Believe me," he added, for the unbelievers.

Michael, Franziska, Rittenkrett and the two underlings went through a door and along a hallway. Rittenkrett guided them into a room with a checkerboard-patterned floor and some overstuffed chairs arranged around another huge fireplace, this one cold. A chandelier hung from the high ceiling and the walls were adorned with a few light fixtures done up to resemble torches that might be carried by a village mob, but with electric bulbs. Rittenkrett closed the door behind them. In here there was no noise of the party, just the quiet ticking of a grandfather clock in a corner.

Ross stood at the door. Sigmund wandered around, perhaps making mental numbers of how much everything in the room was worth. Rittenkrett folded his handkerchief into smaller and smaller squares.

"I presume," he said after a few more ticks of the clock, "that you're fucking her brains out? You must be, because she's gotten stupid here just lately. She was supposed to meet me at headquarters this evening, at exactly six-thirty, yet where was she? With you, I'm guessing. This afternoon, she missed another important meeting. You know why? Because she called my secretary and said she had to go *shopping*."

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"I regret not being available this evening," Franziska spoke up, her voice firm and clear. There wasn't a hint of regret in it. "I had my notes delivered to you."

"Oh yes, your notes. Your journalistic impressions. Of course. Those." Rittenkrett reached into a pocket and brought out a pack of Kreter Indianer cigarettos, with the stylized drawing of an American Indian chief on the front. He lit a gold-colored bullet-style lighter, got the cigarette going and blew a couple of hearty smoke rings. "Major, do you have any inkling of what Fraulein Luxe is doing for the Gestapo? Or should I say, for the war effort against traitors unfortunately too close to home?"

"No."

"Good, because it's not your concern. You have your own war to fight. I presume you do. When are your orders coming through?"

"Any day now, I'm sure." This was a hazardous area; he didn't want the Ice Man checking up on his supposed division. "I'm ready to go tonight, if need be."

"Are you?" Rittenkrett squinted at him through another smoke ring that floated toward Michael like a ghostly noose and broke apart only at the last second. He let the question linger, as he paced back and forth across the polished floor. His shoes were also white, and they made clacking noises. "Look, Major Jaeger!" Rittenkrett abruptly stopped, and with the cigarette clenched between his teeth he threw up his hands. "The problem seems to be that Franziska is neglecting some of her duties to be with you. Now, I don't care if you're fucking her. I myself have fucked her. She has a whole closet full of letters and medals and little pitiful gifts sent to her by men who have fucked her, from all branches of the services, and I think there are even some Boy Scout badges in there somewhere. I mean, this is what she *does*. She's *famous* for it, sir. Surely you know why by now. Either that, or you're dead down there."

Michael was by no means dead down there, but he did feel a little ill.

"She is the perfect package," Rittenkrett went on, behind his smoke rings. "And her photographic talents aren't so bad either. Working with *Signal*, she has an open doorway to anywhere she wishes to go. Which makes her also valuable to *me*." His gaze turned upon Franziska. "But I

really *don't* like it when you send me notes as if I'm not worthy of your time or presence. You have winnowed yourself into a position of responsibility, and I expect you not to falter in your duties. You realize, the perks you enjoy aren't free."

"I never assumed they were," she said, with her own touch of ice.

Rittenkrett silently smoked at the center of the room. His expression told Michael he wasn't sure he liked her tone. But then he shrugged the massive shoulders. "Let's put this behind us and focus on our *work*. All right? The reason I've come here tonight is to tell you that something strange is happening with our list of clients. They are...shall we say...vacating the premises. Therefore we need to work faster. And, by the way, were you going to forget your appointment?" He checked his wristwatch. "In a little less than an hour, I believe."

"There's not much there," Franziska said, and Michael just pretended to wear a puzzled look that he kept short of too much curiosity.

"But there's *something* there," the Ice Man reminded her, with a jab of his Indianer in the air. "You yourself said so, and I hold you to delivering it." He gave the major a damp smile. "Business, you see, goes on both day and night. Oh, don't look so glum, sir! I'll tell you what." He approached Michael, the white shoes clacking, but stopped short of crowding him. "We'll give you a ride. Not far from your hotel is an excellent whorehouse with many beautiful young girls. Some of them are gypsies, if you like the dark look. Very talented, in their way. So if you were hoping for a warm hole tonight, you won't be disappointed."

Michael stared at the floor, somewhere between himself and the white shoes. "I'll just accept a ride to the hotel, if that's what you're offering."

"Yes, indeed it is. And Franziska, you should be on your way."

She left without another word.

They rode back in a long black Mercedes that displayed small Nazi pennants on aerials mounted above the headlamps. Sigmund drove, Michael had the shotgun seat, and Ross and Rittenkrett occupied the spacious rear seat. Michael's head felt foggy. He rolled his window down and put his face into the cold. A few snowflakes whirled before the lamps. Either that, or ashes.

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Rittenkrett wished him good night in front of the hotel. "You do understand," he added before Michael left the car, "the value of the work that Franziska is doing?"

"I'm sure it must be valuable."

"Oh, yes. And one more thing, Major Jaeger: please don't try to see her again. It really *would* interfere. All right?" He continued without waiting for a response, and this time his voice carried a sharp edge. "You've crashed my birthday party, made a spectacle of me before some very important people, and taken Franziska's mind off her responsibilities. Now I'll tell you that if I find out you're seeing her again I'm going to forget what an excellent soldier for the Reich you've been and escort you through a door you certainly will not want to enter. In there is no cake and ice cream, I can promise you. But I'm sure we won't see each other again, so once more I say good luck to you in your future battles, and Heil Hitler."

Michael returned the salute with small enthusiasm. He got out of the car.

The Mercedes pulled away.

He went to his room, took a cold shower and stretched out on the bed. The sheets were fresh, but still her aroma seemed to be everywhere. It permeated and perfumed the air in here. No wonder, he thought; it was in his clothes. And it lingered on his own flesh too, no matter how hard he scrubbed.

But, in truth, he didn't want to scrub too very hard.

He might have gotten to sleep around midnight. But on the first ring of the telephone he was immediately awake. "Hello?"

There was a silence. Michael waited through it.

In a voice that tried to be cheerful but had a sad center, she said, "I'm missing you."

He didn't hesitate. "Franziska, come to me."

She hung up, and he lay waiting for her in the fragrant dark.

She arrived within fifteen minutes. His heart beat harder when he set his eyes on her. When he kissed her, he found her face was still cold from the wind. He wondered if she'd gotten the BMW up to racing speed through the empty streets. Under her coat she was wearing the dark blue

dress and the strand of pearls around her throat. Within another minute she was as naked as he was, the expensive coat and dress falling to the floor the same as if they'd been old rags, her shoes kicked away, her sheer stockings tossed one way and another, her underwear crumpled in elegant folds. She started to remove the pearls, but he caught her fingers and said, "Leave those on for now."

Her raven-black hair was touselled and roughened by the night. Her gray eyes were sparkling and eager, but Michael could see they burned with a lower flame. He could smell the too-sweet cologne of the man she'd slept with, could smell his hair pomade and his bitter sweat. He could smell the cigarette the man had smoked in the aftermath. A much inferior brand to the cream of the British crop, he thought.

"I've been with someone," she told him, which was perhaps the biggest waste of breath in the history of the world.

"I know, but you're with me now."

"Please," she said, her mouth up close to his, "will you hold me?"

He guided her the few steps to the bed, and lying down together he enfolded her, and she pressed her head against his strong shoulder and gave a soft quiet sound worlds away from the brassy trumpets of the Third Reich.

She went to sleep in that position. He closed his eyes against the blue-shaded lamplight and dozed, opened them, closed them again, felt the full length of her body shift against his, deliciously warm in the sheets, her thighs moving, her lips grazing his cheek, and still she slept.

She trusts me, he thought. She trusts a fiction, to keep her safe through the night.

My God, what am I going to do?

If he ever really went back to sleep he wasn't sure, because the steam pipes began to knock and the radiator hissed. He heard the rumble and rush of wind beyond the glass. Maybe it was bringing heavy snow. The Ice Man's element, he thought. To Hell with that bastard.

Suddenly he felt her above him, and when he opened his eyes she was staring at him with her chin supported on her forearm, as if trying to memorize every line, every pore, every newborn beard hair.

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"I've realized what I can hear in your accent," Franziska said. Her hair had tumbled forward, covering half her face. "You speak English."

"Speak English?" He needed a few seconds to think about that. If he did decide to start speaking the King's, she would instantly hear that he spoke it far too effortlessly. "No, I don't."

She frowned. It was a mystery she was trying to solve. Then her frown went away. Up close to his ear she whispered in lightly-accented English, "I've been waiting for you, for a very long time. I didn't think you were ever going to find me. But I'll wait for you still, however long it takes."

With the greatest force of will he'd ever commanded, Michael just gave her a bemused expression and shook his head.

Franziska returned to her German: "I just said I bought you a present today. It's in my handbag, over there." It had been placed on a chair. She licked across his chest with her talented tongue. "Why don't you go see what it is?"

When Michael removed the white-wrapped present with its green bow from the purse, he remembered Rittenkrett saying that this afternoon *she called my secretary and said she had to go shopping*. Here, then, was what she'd gone shopping for. A gift for him. He felt he should be pleased, but why did something the size of a pine knot seem to be caught in his throat?

"Open it, open it!" she urged, sitting up with her legs crossed under her.

He did. It was a flawless silver case, and upon opening that he found a shiny new Solingen travel razor, the kind that screws two parts together to make a whole.

"It's very handsome," Michael said. "That was kind of you."

"I was going to have your initials put on it, but I wasn't sure what type of lettering you'd like. There are too many choices these days. Can we go tomorrow and get it done? I'm free until two."

"Yes, absolutely."

"I'll take you to lunch. All right?"

He nodded. He realized that she was asking for more time with him because the howling wind and cold outside spoke volumes of merciless death on the Eastern Front. Which, of course, now Berlin bordered.

"I'd like you to use your razor now," said Franziska.

He touched his chin. It *was* a bit prickly.

“Not on you,” she told him, as she stretched her legs out before her. She wiggled her toes back and forth. “You missed the jar of shaving soap and the scissors in my handbag. Get them.” She smiled impishly, her dimples going deep. “I’ll wait.”

He got them. “And just what would you like me to shave?” he asked, though his cock already knew.

“I want a heart, right here.” She put a finger into her untamed black bush. “Are you up for that?”

Which might have been the second biggest waste of breath in the history of the world.

Michael prepared a warm towel and warmer water in a white bowl. He got the razor rinsed and ready. He got the soap foamy. His cock strained upward, which might be a problem. When Michael sat down on the bed between her open thighs to begin this heroic endeavor by shaping the heart with the scissors, Franziska gave a throaty little laugh that almost finished him off.

“We’re just using the *soap* cream right now,” she reminded him. “Go ahead, my life is in your hands.”

He did a good job. An excellent job. A slow, careful job. If a razor could speak, it would babble happily for the rest of its days.

Then it was done, and she gazed down upon the result and then looked at him with what he thought might be stars in her eyes.

“Now,” she said, “I can say that both my hearts belong to Horst Jaeger.”

He put the razor and the scissors and the soap and the bowl aside, and he grasped a handful of her hair to rock her head back and even as his mouth pressed forward hers opened to accept him and her tongue was formed of flame.

For the next hour, as the wind shrilled and the pipes thrummed, he devastated her. He took her to the edge and brought her back so many times she became a trembling, moaning, half-sobbing pulse of nerves vibrating with need and shining with sweat. He plunged into her full-length, at full power, and then he pulled out and balanced above her, the very tip of him making slow circles in the foldings of her new heart. Again and again he

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moved upon her, into her and within her. She cried out, and she mashed her lips against his shoulder to muffle her cries because any louder and the police would arrive to investigate the killing. Then, when she was crazed and her eyes were wild and her hair was a beautiful tangled jungle, Michael said he wanted to show her what pleasure he could give her with a strand of pearls.

At last, at length, as she lay upon him with her back against his chest and he clutched her breasts and stroked her fire like a machine, a cry came out from between her gritted teeth that became a scream from an open mouth. She tensed so hard Michael thought he could feel every muscle in her body move beneath the flesh like bundles of piano wire. It went on and on, and then the flash seared through his own body and as he slid out of her he felt the flood of her liquid explosion. In the next instant he knew what it was like to be a long-distance shooter, lying in a rain of his own making. She gave a groan that was nearly a different language altogether, and she turned over atop him and pushed him back in with one hand and clamped herself around him like a hot, soaking-wet vise.

They stayed that way, breathing hard together.

She shivered a few times, on her long strengthless falling back to earth.

She tried to lift her head. Tried to speak. He needed a towel and a new pair, because these were done for the night.

“Oh my God,” she finally was able to gasp. And again: “Oh my God.”

When he slid out of her again—and this time he wasn’t going back in for a while, no matter how much he might desire it—Franziska tried in vain to hold him, but she too was as weak as yesterday’s pudding.

With an effort her head came up and she looked at him through glazed eyes.

“I think you’ve broken me,” she breathed. “I’m in pieces.”

He brushed her hair aside and kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry, I’ll put you back together again.”

That was enough for her to hear. She lay silently atop him, holding on. And he stared at the ceiling for awhile and listened to the storm.

It was the sound, he knew, of the future lashing at the walls around them, trying to get in where the British secret agent and the Nazi huntress

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lay on the edge of slumber. But the future did not and would not slumber, and Michael knew that very soon it would rush in upon them no matter what he felt, or hoped, or wished for.

And what then?

Oh my God, he thought.

What then?

TEN

The Messenger

THE FUTURE ARRIVED at around three o'clock the following afternoon.

Berlin wore a crust of snow. Flurries drifted over the roofs and spires and made spitting noises in the places where bomb-burned buildings yet smoldered.

The future arrived as Michael, after returning from lunch with Franziska, was having a quick touch-up shave with the happiest razor in the world. On the silver case were the freshly-tooled letters H and J, as simple as possible. They'd had a long untroubled sleep, tangled together in the bed that she'd nicknamed *der Regen-Hersteller*, the Rain Maker, for reasons obvious to them both. He'd said he hoped she was careful today, whatever she was doing, and she'd confidently replied that she was always careful.

Not careful enough, he thought as he'd watched her walk away. And this time before she reached the end of the block she had glanced back at him and given him a wave and a smile that came closer to breaking his heart than any pain he'd ever known.

The future did not arrive with Russians smashing into the city. It did not arrive with Gestapo agents in black leather coats swarming out of cars

and bounding up the stairs to room 214 with their Lugers drawn. It did not arrive with the falling of more bombs, or with train-killing Mustangs pumping rockets into buildings that were old when Beethoven's Fate first knocked at the door.

It arrived with a telephone call to his room, and a softly-delivered message from a clerk that a priest by the name of Father Hubart Kollmann wished to speak to Major Jaeger in the lobby as soon as possible.

The major said he'd be down in a few minutes.

Now this was puzzling. There was no need for alarm...but still...if this was someone from his side, what was the reason for contact?

But, of course! He was being contacted to end the mission! It was all over. They must have gotten enough of the Inner Ring out that a week's stay in this Devil's playground was no longer required. He could get to the safe house and—

Cross the river and go home?

Walk out of this hotel in the company of a priest and never see Franziska again?

And leave her to what he knew was coming, in a month or two or three at the most? The Russians were set on vengeance for what the Germans had done to their countrymen beginning in '41. The murders, atrocities and rapes were going to be returned a hundredfold. Michael knew that, as the Russians steadily advanced into German territory, the sufferings of civilians and the sheer horror endured by those who couldn't or wouldn't escape were already beyond any demonic imagination.

He finished his shave, washed his face, buttoned up his uniform, put on his cap just so and left the room. It seemed a longer descent down the stairs than before.

The priest was sitting in a black leather chair in the far corner of a lobby that maintained, in spite of all realities, its opulent *faux* medieval charm. Flames crackled in the gray stone hearth, which was decorated with carvings of the faces of various knights and noblemen. Flags of many family crests were on display, all surrounding a huge Nazi banner. It was fitting, Michael thought as he crossed the gold-colored carpet, that the priest be waiting for him under a tapestry that depicted a medieval

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wolfhunt, with men on horseback plunging their spears into the doomed and bloody beast.

“Major Jaeger,” said the priest, as he stood up from his chair.

“Father Kollmann, is it?” He shook the man’s hand. A hard grip, very dry.

“It is.” Kollmann motioned to another chair, identical to his own, that faced him. “Please, sit.”

Michael did, like a good dog.

Kollmann sat down and, smiling faintly, seemed to be carefully examining the major. Michael had already taken the priest in: tall and slender, about forty-five, with light brown hair showing hints of gray here and there, a sharp nose, a long chin, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses with blue-tinted lenses that made view of the eyes difficult. Slim-fingered hands with manicured nails, a bit vain for a priest. Black shoes polished to a military or holier-than-thou gloss. The smell of soap or aftershave that had a little too much topnote of Paris perfume, and the odor of a drink or two in the early afternoon. Also, the priest had a taste for licorice; there was probably some in his coat.

“We’re all hoping for an early spring,” said Kollmann.

“I can’t recall a colder winter,” Michael returned.

“But my dog certainly enjoyed it,” was the response to that.

“What kind of dog?” The response to the response.

“Just a mutt,” was the final piece.

Michael nodded. He removed his cap and stared up at the tapestry. There was some message in it, he thought. Maybe something he didn’t want to see.

“The situation is evolving well,” Kollmann said after a time. The movement of his head tracked a few people crossing the lobby. An older man and woman were seated on a sofa at a comfortable distance away, the woman’s face bowed. The man was talking quietly to her. Michael had already seen them; they looked like people who’d made a long trip under the burden of great sadness, possibly to visit in the Army hospital an armless or legless or completely appendage-free torso that used to be a good German boy. Michael wondered how many times that scene had been

repeated, in how many countries, and when it would ever stop. "Evolving well," Kollmann repeated.

"Glad to hear," was Michael's brusque comment.

The priest steepled his long fingers. He stared into space. Communing with God? Michael wondered. Hearing some voice from the divine infinite?

"There's been an alteration," said Kollmann.

Michael waited. He was tense. *Alteration*. A tailor's term, the taking in or letting out of clothes by nimble needles.

"We want the woman removed," came the next decree, as hard and dry as the handshake.

"Removed," Michael echoed. "You mean...taken somewhere?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I do not." Michael's heart felt squeezed by a hand made of a thousand thorns. He couldn't breathe. The blood pulsed in his face. "No, I do not," he said again.

"The decision has been made to remove her. We want to make a statement."

And here was where he almost lost everything he'd built into himself over the hardship and experience of his years: his self-control, his knowledge that one must sometimes accept an occasional whip from a stupid man in order to move toward freedom, the pushing down and down and down of his own desires of the heart, the grimness of the morning before dawn when the wolves call and no human is there in bed to make you want to stay. To make you *need* to stay.

He almost lost it all, because the bones seemed to start to reshape in his face before he caught himself, and the blood roared within him and the scent of the wildness that was his deepest essence bloomed from his flesh.

"A *statement*?" He sprayed spittle. His face was contorted, and he leaned toward the priest with death in his eyes. "A statement of *what*? That we can kill women just as easily as *they* can?"

Kollmann said, "Calm down, Major," as if speaking to a slightly-troublesome moron.

That was very nearly his last utterance upon the face of this earth.

Michael struggled to regulate his breathing. His joints were sore. All his bones had threatened, in the briefest of seconds, to rearrange themselves.

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Across the back of his neck, against the collar, he felt the scurrings of small coarse black and gray hairs rising and falling like strange tides. Only he knew what they were, and only he knew how much he wanted to kill the priest for even daring to speak this dirty idea into action.

Kollmann, his eyes hidden behind the blue lenses, reached into the pocket of his immaculate coat, and the fingers with their manicured nails returned with a small packet of black licorice sticks. He took one, slid it into a corner of his mouth, and offered the pack to Michael.

“No thank you,” Michael said. “I’m not a drunkard, so I don’t need that to hide the smell of my breath.”

Kollmann sat very still for a few seconds. His face was a blank. He returned the pack of licorice to his pocket.

“We are still where we are,” he told Michael. “The alteration does not come from me. I’m the messenger. But I am told to tell you that you should not blame our mutual friend for the disaster at Arnhem, and you should not blame him for this.”

“I’ll blame whoever I fucking choose to blame,” came the answer, spoken in almost a snarl.

“We need to make a statement,” the priest went on, his voice and demeanor maddeningly calm. “Not to the Germans, but to the Russians.” He lowered his voice, though there was no one close enough to hear. “They have spies here, watching. They want to see how we handle ourselves in matters like this, for future reference. We have to be as ruthless as they are, Major. Otherwise, they’ll walk all over us when they take the world stage. And believe me...when they seize Berlin, which they will...they will claim a large piece of Europe. So the woman needs to be removed, as a statement of what we will not tolerate.”

“One woman,” Michael said bitterly.

“No, she’s not the only one. Of course not. But she’s the one you’re being ordered to remove.”

“Why? Because I’ve gotten close to her?”

“Exactly,” said the priest.

Michael was sweating. It was oozing out of him. He could smell the sourness of himself. He put a trembling hand to his forehead.

“Are you going to be ill?” Kollmann inquired.

Michael lowered his hand. He smiled into the blue lenses, his face slick. “Do you believe in Hell?”

“Certainly I do.”

“You’re a damned liar,” said Michael, “because if you believed in Hell, you would be getting out of that chair and running for your life.”

The fingers steepled again.

“Oh, I see.” Did the mouth, with its licorice stick in one corner, twist into the briefest worm of a smile? “We have a complication.”

Michael stared at the floor, as that ridiculous hollow word clanged in his mind.

“I’ll remind you, Major,” said the priest, “that this woman has been instrumental in the brutal murders of many German patriots. Of many fine men, woman, *and* children. Because, you must realize, entire families have been destroyed in this. Just disappeared without a trace, but certainly we know they were taken first to Gestapo headquarters. And some of those people—those patriots who risked *everything* to save this country from its self-mutilation, its sheer drum-beating *insanity*—were my friends. Now, I suspect, bones and ashes in a garbage pit somewhere. Before we go any further with this, shall I supply for you a list of their names and a display of their photographs? I can show you some grand pictures of the children, all dressed in their nice clothes and smiling. You know, there’s nothing quite like a child’s smile.”

Michael kept his head lowered.

Kollmann nodded, still working on his candy. “They *are* the future, children are. Such potential, to make things brighter in this unhappy world. But, things do get complicated. Sometimes—very often it seems, in this day and age—the dark and the light get all mixed up together. And there are intelligent men who count on that happening. They are educated to make that happen. It is their most profound desire to do so. Now, I can sit here and say that possibly this woman fell under the spell and influence of such a man. That finding herself surrounded by fellow Germans who bore a grudge against the world and heeded the stirring call of a madman gave her a swell of what she took to be true and most

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worthy patriotism. Well, *he* said it: if you don't follow me, you don't love Germany. And he's a fantastic speaker who can make some very convincing arguments. But..." And here he removed the stick and gazed at what had been whittled away. "One can call murder a process of cleansing, an eradication of the unfit, and the preparation for a Thousand-Year-Reich. It's still murder, even in the language of the lawyer and the politician." He let that hang for a few seconds. "She's one of the people who must pay for that murder. Not just of other human beings, but of the country I knew. Because, Major Jaeger, my land has been burned away. I'm just trying my best to save a few seeds to throw on the scorched earth, in hopes anything can ever grow here again."

"So," said the priest, "you see, I do believe in Hell." He brought out the packet and returned the remainder of the stick to its brothers. "I live there."

Michael put his hands to his face.

"Is there any other way?" he asked, with a note of pleading.

"*You* don't have to do it. Our mutual friend suggested it be offered first to you. If you refuse, you can go with me right now to the safe house. We'll get you out as soon as possible."

"But she'll still be killed."

"Yes. We have people with experience."

"*How*—" His voice cracked. He tried once more: "How would it be done?"

The priest watched a Naval officer cross the lobby with a stylishly-dressed woman in a derby hat clinging to his arm. "A knock at the door of her studio, late at night. A silenced bullet to the head. Or someone following her to strangle her with a wire garotte wrapped around her neck. It would be quick."

"Oh, Jesus," Michael whispered, in agony. "I suppose one can also call murder a just retaliation for past sins?"

Kollmann's face was impassive. "I didn't always need the licorice for my breath, Major."

The future had come. Michael knew it. And this future was more terrible than he ever might have conceived. The fighter pilots couldn't kill a woman, because they left that hideous job to the slime on the ground. The shadow men. And him, the most shadowy of all.

"Can't I get her out?" he tried. "Knock her over the head, use chloroform or something? Can't I just get her out, and call it done?"

"Too risky. And in the scheme of things she's more valuable to us dead than alive."

It took Michael Gallatin awhile to get the words from brain to mouth and out.

"If...I were to do it...how would I?"

"You're the killer," said Kollmann.

Michael closed his eyes. But when he opened them again, he was still sitting in a black leather chair in the lobby of the Grand Frederik in the presence of this priest, and there was still a task to be done.

"Yes," he agreed, "I *am* the killer. Yes, I am. So." He lifted his gaze to the blue lenses. "I presume you have a chemist."

"Yes."

"I want a pill. Something that dissolves quickly. Something that is tasteless and odorless." He had to stop for a little bit, because he was hurting so much. "Something that will put her to sleep, within...fifteen or twenty minutes. That's what I want. That she just go to sleep."

Kollmann thought about it, his fingers tapping the arm of his chair. "It's a tall order."

Michael leaned toward him with such ferocity that the tapping instantly stopped and the man shrank back.

"Yes, it is," Michael said, his eyes enraged though his voice was eerily controlled, "but I'm the killer. And I'm telling you, as a killer, that if she feels pain, that if she throws up her guts or defecates herself, or anything *other* than going to sleep, then I'm coming after the messenger. And the messenger may think he's so righteous and pure for his glorious love of what Germany once was, but it's all murder to me because I'm the killer. If the messenger tries to hide in his house, I'll tear it to pieces, and if he tries to hide in his church I'll take that apart too. And maybe I'll never leave this city alive, but after she's dead and I've ripped you to shreds I will have no more need to live another day, because the killer's work will be finished."

It took a moment for Kollmann to relax. He must have really been close to God, because his next question was, "Shall I bring you two pills, then?"

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Michael had already thought about that. As much as he might wish it, suicide was repugnant to him. The wolf in him wouldn't allow it. No. Never.

"Only the one," he said.

The priest stood up, and so did Michael.

Kollmann said, "We'll come up with something. Still...there won't be an opportunity to test its qualities. It'll have to be guesswork."

"Prayer might help," Michael advised.

Kollmann offered his hand. Michael just looked at it, and thought how he could tear it off at the wrist. On his way across the lobby, Kollmann was stopped by the older man and woman. The woman began to softly weep, and then so did the man.

The priest spoke to them and touched their shoulders, but never did he remove his blue-tinted glasses.

Michael climbed up the stairs to his room, where pallid-faced and gasping he leaned over the toilet just in time to be violently, wrenchingly sick.

ELEVEN

The Tenth Woman

HE WENT FOR a long walk through the streets, as evening turned the dim light of afternoon blue and snowflakes whirled around him. He walked on and on, as if seeking to be lost, but his sense of direction was unerring and he always knew exactly where his hotel was. He walked through bombed areas, where people still tried to salvage something of their lives from the ruins. He saw an overturned wagon with two dead horses still in their traces, the bloated carcasses whitened with snow. He saw a pack of desperate dogs gnawing in to get at the entrails, and he walked on.

In the silence of the evening streets, just a few people out and a few wagons, some riders on bicycles and a scattering of cars, Michael thought he could hear the sound of artillery firing in the east. The Russians might be slowed for a short while, but nothing would stop them from taking this city. He knew the strong, unyielding and often brutal nature of the Russian; after all, he was one of them.

At his hotel, the clerk gave him a message from Franziska. She had a dinner engagement she couldn't get out of, and then she had to

do some photographic work in her darkroom. But she would call at eleven o'clock.

The clerk read the last lines of the message: "Think of me when you have dinner. A thousand kisses. Weather forecast: more rain coming". The clerk looked strangely at the major, as if he suspected this must be some kind of secret code.

Michael took the paper and had dinner in the restaurant followed by a good strong glass of brandy. He wound up paying for an entire bottle, which he took with a glass up to his room.

He was waiting, half-drunk, when the telephone rang at ten-fifty-six.

"I have to work a little later," she told him. "Some more pictures to develop, and they must be done tonight."

"By order of Herr Rittenkrett?" he asked.

She was silent for a few seconds. Then: "You don't sound like yourself. Are you all right?"

"I've had dinner and I've been drinking. Just a little." Had he slurred that word? Have to be careful here, not to let his accent slip. What the hell was wrong with him, letting his guard down like this?

"You've been drinking," she repeated back.

"Yes. Brandy. I'm looking at what is almost an empty bottle. I expect to empty it in the next...oh...ten minutes."

Franziska gave a sudden gasp, as if she'd been slapped.

"Your orders came," she said.

He closed his eyes, the better to see her standing before him. "Yes."

"Oh...Horst. I'll be right there."

"No! Franziska...finish what you're doing."

"I'm leaving *now*. This can wait."

"Listen to me!" he said, more sharply than he'd intended. "Just...stay there and do what you need to do. Keep your mind on your work."

"Oh, of *course*!" Were there tears in that word?

"I mean it." He wondered what Mallory and Kollmann would say to his telling her she should do the exact work he'd been sent to interfere with. Did it matter now? "Franziska," he said in a quieter tone, "I don't have to leave tonight. Nor tomorrow."

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“When do you have to go, then?” Yes, definitely a tear or two. Her voice had thickened with what could only be sorrow.

I have to go after you're dead, he thought.

But he said, “We still have time enough. I promise.”

“There can't be enough time.”

“Go back to your work,” he said firmly.

“I'll be there as soon as I finish.” She hung up.

Michael returned the receiver to its cradle and then he picked up the bottle of brandy and swallowed some more courage. He would go down and buy another bottle, but he couldn't get too drunk or he might lose himself. Whoever he was tonight.

When Michael heard the knock on his door at twelve-forty and opened it, Franziska rushed in and put her arms around him. She was wearing her fawn-colored overcoat and a sea-green beret. She kissed him on the cheek, on the forehead, on the lips and on the throat. She pressed herself into him. Then she put her head on his shoulder and said in his ear, “I know men who can help. They can have you reassigned to duty here. All I have to do is—”

He knew what she would have to do.

He took her chin in his hand and glared into her luminous eyes.

“No! You're not doing that for *me*. Do you hear? Not for me.” He saw the pain in her face, and it nearly dropped him to his knees. He tried to pull a smile up from somewhere. “There's no need for sadness. Didn't you say to me that this is my *purpose*? And you know fully well you said that God would not allow a man like me to—”

“That was *before*,” she interrupted, and he saw the tears bloom. One overflowed and streaked down her right cheek.

“Before what? We went to bed together?”

“No.” A second tear followed the first. “Before I wanted you to stay with me. I know forever is a long time, so I won't say forever. But we could start out by saying it *might* be forever. Couldn't we? Please, please, please.” It was she who got down on her knees. She grasped his hand and kissed it, and she held it against a tear-wet cheek. “Please, I can take care of this. I can go see those men, it would be nothing, it would be so easy, I could—”

“Stand up! Come on! *Up!*” He pulled her to her feet. “Don’t beg,” he said. “Never beg. Not to any man.”

“I don’t want you to *die!*” she rasped. And there it was. The reality, in amid all the fictions, the parties and the merrymaking. She trembled, and her tears were trickling slowly down and so also trickled down a small thread of saliva from her lower lip.

Get out of here, he almost said. He thought for a few seconds of shouting at her, of running her out because this was too much, it was impossible to bear this. But the fact was, he knew how short their hours were, and if she had to die—if she *had* to die—then he would be with her when it happened, and it would not be a cold stranger with a silenced pistol or a strangler in the alley at the end of the street. He would take the responsibility to put her over as gently as possible. And then, quite suddenly, he felt the burn in his own eyes and he lowered his head but she’d already seen.

She put a finger under his chin to angle his face toward her again.

Strongly and clearly she said, “I’m not going to let you be lost.”

“I have lied to you,” he heard himself answer. “My Westphalian accent is false. Studied. I was not born in Dortmund. I am...different, from anyone else. I was born in Russia, and I was a child there. What you’re hearing in my accent is—”

Her fingers went to his lips.

“Shhhhh,” she said. “I don’t care. Just answer me this: you’re not a traitor, are you?”

“No, I’m not a traitor.”

“Then what does it *matter?* Very well, so you were born in Russia. What were you, the family secret?” She didn’t wait for a response. “If you looked into the histories of most of the people at that *Signal* party, you’d find few of them without a chambermaid or a stable boy hidden in their family trees.”

The power of illusion, he thought. Or *delusion*. Right now she was creating the story in her mind of how he was the child of an ill-starred love between a German officer and a Russian maiden on the eve of the Great War, and how he’d probably been raised by the simple and gentle maiden, but then she’d sent him to be cared for by his father in Dortmund because she knew what better education and enlightenment he would receive.

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In fact, that sounded close to the movie they'd seen at the cinema a few nights ago.

What was the point of going down the road of truth? It was too fantastic to be believed. And if he showed her...what then?

He might kill her of fright, and then he could go home like a real hero.

He put his arms around her and held her tightly. They clung together like the only still-solid objects in a universe disintegrating to dust.

"I'm so sorry," he said. Sorry, he realized, that she had not been born in England, that they had not met years before this one, that even together they stood on different sides of a chasm. Sorry that life was as cruel as it was, and that time could never be stopped or wound backward.

"It wasn't a bad lie," she answered, misunderstanding. "I forgive you."

She kissed him on the lips. She traced her tongue along the outline of his mouth. She took her clothes off and pressed her breasts against his chest. She ground her second heart against his groin in slow circles while she stared pleadingly into his eyes but he could not be roused.

"Are you tired of me?" she asked.

Could a man ever be tired of the sun in winter? He said, "No, it's not that."

As Michael sat on the edge of the bed, Franziska knelt behind him and worked the tense muscles of his shoulders with her strong fingers.

"I'll do anything you like," she told him. "I'm the tenth woman."

He frowned. "The tenth woman?"

"Oh, yes. Don't you know? Five women out of ten will slap a man's face for an indecent suggestion. Two will turn on their heel. One will kick him in the balls, and one will think it over. I'm the tenth woman."

He smiled slightly, in spite of himself.

"I'm the woman who refused to leave the Garden of Eden," she said as she worked on him. "I bake pies from the forbidden fruit, and I serve them to whomever I choose."

"Sounds delicious," he said.

"Do you think I'm a bad person?" she asked. "I mean...do you think I'm..." She trailed off, and Michael could feel her shrug. Her hands stopped.

He knew what she was really asking: *How do you feel about me?*

■ Robert McCammon

He turned toward her, and it hit him anew how beautiful she was. She was to him like a masterpiece of a painting, a work of art that comes together in its perfection only once in the proverbial blue moon, and always in her face there was some shade or nuance of expression that changed it ever so slightly so that looking at her was like seeing not one woman but a multitude. And all of them, every one, were now staring at him with this question in the perfume-scented air between them.

He was going to show her how he felt. No matter what tomorrow held. She wanted to know, and words were not enough. So he would lay her down upon the bed and show her, with all his strength and tenderness and desire, because she deserved to know and he owed her that much. Then he would make her promise on both her hearts that she would do nothing to interfere with his orders, and he would tell her that tomorrow night he intended to take her to dinner and to a place where music played until very late, and afterward he wanted her right where she belonged, here in bed with him tasting the forbidden fruit.

And champagne, he would say. Of course they needed champagne to drink, on the last night of their world.

She wrapped herself around him as he entered her, and in his ear she blissfully sighed the name of a stranger.

TWELVE

The Light And The Dark

A BAD PART of the morning was when Michael, returning from a walk, asked at the desk if anything had arrived for Major Horst Jaeger.

“Yes, Major. This came while you were out.” The clerk brought from beneath the smooth oak counter a small box wrapped in brown paper. Michael noted at once that it was about the size of a jeweler’s box. The kind that might hold a—

“If you don’t mind my asking,” said the clerk, “I’ve seen you several times in the company of the beautiful young woman. Um...would this be a ring for her, sir?”

Michael knew what the man surmised. Lovers being parted, the noble soldier of the Reich going off to war. Was this an engagement gift, perhaps? A promise of many bright tomorrows?

“I’ll need a magnum of chilled champagne in my room around midnight,” he said, with no emotion. “Two glasses. I’d like the best bottle in the house.”

“Yes sir. I believe we have some Moet still in stock.”

“That’ll do. Bill my account, of course.” He started to walk away, the box in his right hand.

“My compliments and congratulations, sir,” said the clerk.

In his room, Michael opened the box and unwrapped a small ball of waxed paper sealed with tape. The pill was white with a faint blue tinge, the same color and a little smaller than one of Franziska’s pearls. He returned it to the waxed paper and then to the box, which went up on the closet shelf behind the folded extra blanket.

For most of the day he slept, or tried to. He curled himself against the gray light that fell through the windows. Snowflakes spun against the glass. The steam pipes beat a rhythm. Just after three she called to say she would be there in front at six-thirty. Their dinner reservation, more romantic than necessary, was for seven o’clock. She said she was happy, and she called him darling.

When he hung up, he was planning the evening.

Yes, I am the killer.

He showered and shaved and dressed well in advance of her arrival. He used a German military-issue brush on his hair, and a German military-issue toothbrush on his teeth. He took the taped-up ball of waxed paper from its box and put it into his trouser pocket on the left side. He wasn’t sure yet how or when he was going to drop the pill in her glass, but he had the confidence of the professional.

The killer, yes I am.

Dark was falling, very quickly.

He went downstairs to meet her, and pulling the collar of his *feld-grau* topcoat up he walked into the flurries and waited.

The BMW came, its top raised and secured with grommets against the weather. When Michael climbed into the car, Franziska gave him a quick kiss at the corner of his mouth and she said she was famished, she’d been so busy during the day she hadn’t had time for lunch. More photographs to be developed and some documents delivered. She looked as if she might have cried at some point today also, because her makeup didn’t quite cover the dark hollows beneath her eyes.

The roadster roared off, snow be damned.

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I am the killer. Yes.

They ate at a restaurant that overlooked the river Spree. It was all candles and dark red drapes. A strolling violinist made the circle between their table and the only two other occupied tables, until Michael tipped him and said they wished to be excluded from the route. Michael had to move his chair a little, because from where he was sitting the view out the terrace windows to the east showed him the occasional dim flare of an artillery shell against low-lying clouds.

Franziska played hands with him atop the table and rubbed his ankle with her foot beneath it. She ate her first courses of rose hip soup and potato salad like there was no tomorrow. When his meal, the grilled venison, came he moved it around the plate for show but found he had no stomach for the eating.

Still, he had to pick himself up for her. He had to chat and listen and nod, and to give her a smile when she needed or expected one. And she had chosen this night to reveal to him the full power of her gifts, for not only was she streamlined and sleek as a racing machine in her black dress trimmed with silver spangles, and not only were the waves of black hair pinned back with a silver clasp in the shape of a half-moon, and not only did her wine-red lips shine and her gray eyes gleam in the low light, but her force of life was focused on him as if he were the only other human being in the world. Whenever he spoke about the most inane thing—the weather, the service at the hotel, what he'd seen on his walk today—seemed to her rapt attention to be the most heart-felt confession of a god.

This was how she worked, Michael thought. This was how the family man or the office worker or the lowly aide tripped over his tongue in his eagerness to be heard and appreciated, to be thought so important by a beautiful creature. This was how the secrets became known: not by being pried out, but by being urged out word after word with silent approval. Then the Gestapo came and took the crowing, pitiful roosters to Hell, to be boiled down into oil for the potato salad.

Yes.

I am the killer.

"You look so worried," she said, as she rested her hand atop his. "You don't need to be."

"It's not worry. I'm just preparing myself, in my mind."

"I know," she said, "that you want to do your duty. I know you're a warrior. What would you be, if you weren't? An office boy? And not some general's staff monkey, either. You are what you are, and I thank God for that. But you're also only a man, Horst. The same flesh and blood and... worries... of any man. It is the woman who shoulders the burden her man can't carry. This woman *wants* to, very badly. So if you need to talk about the war, or anything else that troubles you... please... I'm right here."

Michael took a drink from his cup of erstaz coffee. *Her man*, she'd said. He picked up his fork and drew furrows in the white tablecloth.

This was her power.

Because everything in him wanted to say, *yes I am the killer, but I want to be your man. And I want to start clean and tell you my story. I want to tell you how I was born, both times, and how I have lived. I want to tell you about my first bitch and my missing son. About the world as I know it, and the world as I wish it to be. I want to tell you how the old tales of the lycanthrope are wrong, and how they are right. And I want to be able to tell all this to you, and afterward look into your eyes and see not fear but love.*

But he didn't say any of this, because there was no time and the pill was in his pocket, and if he was indeed her man he would not ask her to shoulder any burdens he couldn't carry alone.

"It's going to be all right," she said. "You'll see."

Michael nodded. Sometime in the next few minutes one of the other couples in the room, an elderly pair, stood up and danced gracefully beside their table to the violinist's tune, and Michael watched Franziska's face as she smiled at the charming old man who at the end of the dance kissed his wife's hand and held her chair out for her as any gentleman should.

They went to a music hall where the attendance was again skimpy, but the dark brew was good and a trio of guitar player, pianist and drummer held the stage. The lights kept flickering, not for effect but because of hits somewhere on the power grid. Michael asked Franziska to dance to a slow, jazzy number during which he held her as tightly against himself as

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he could without hurting her. Suddenly they found themselves alone on the floor because the music had stopped and the place was closing down.

“Just a moment,” he told her, and under the uncertain lights they danced a bit longer to their own secret music.

Then it was time to go back to the hotel, back to room 214, because there was nowhere else to go.

The magnum of Moët champagne sat in its ice bucket by the bed. Two champagne flutes had been placed nearby. A light blue envelope bearing the golden seal of the Grand Frederik called for Michael's attention, and when he opened it the note read in tidy German penmanship: *Dear Major Jaeger, in recognition of your service to the Reich and to your happy occasion, which our day clerk Oskar has informed me of, please accept this bottle with the best compliments of the house, and please think of the Grand Frederik should you require accommodations for any future celebration. A good life to you. In Debt To Your Honor, Adrian Bayerbergen, Manager.*

“What's that?” Franziska put her arms around him from behind.

He folded the note. “The bill,” he said, as he put it into a coat pocket. “Unfortunately, in this world nothing is free.”

“Oh, don't be so sure about that.” She kissed and nuzzled the back of his neck. “I'm pretty free.”

“You *are* free,” he agreed, “and you *are* pretty.” He turned around to face her, and he took hold of her chin and stared deeply into her eyes. His heart was its own BMW 328. “What can I do for such a free and pretty woman as you?”

“Well,” she breathed, with her lips just barely grazing his, “first I would like to put into my mouth a big, succulent, wet and delicious—”

She held up before him the champagne flute she was holding. “Drink?” she finished.

“I should spank you first.”

“Would you please?” she asked, her eyes going wide.

He opened the champagne, which foamed extravagantly, and then he poured a flute for her and himself. She tapped his glass with her own. “To freedom?” she asked. “No, no! Wait! To...good decisions? No, wait!” She frowned. “Ah!” she said. “To the sun that sets in the west.”

“What kind of toast is that?” he asked as she drank.

“One I hope you remember when you need to.” she answered. “Drink up.”

He did, trying to figure out what she was saying. Maybe it was the beer talking? “Excuse me while I go to the bathroom.”

“May I give assistance?”

“You may stay right here and have another drink.” He went into the bathroom and leaned over the sink, because his heart was hammering and sweat was rising on his face. He might be a killer, but he wasn’t a monster. He couldn’t do this. No, tomorrow he would go to the safe house and tell them he was done, he was out, and to send a killer with the fingers of an angel and the mind of a blank slate to remove Franziska Luxe from this world.

He took the ball of waxed paper from his pocket and held it over the toilet.

But he asked himself: if it fell in the water and was swirled away into the depths of Berlin, would this be the act of a hero or the shame of a coward?

The light and the dark, all mixed up together. The words of a priest.

“Darling?” Franziska called. “Shall I phone for a plumber?”

“Hush!” he told her, trying to keep his voice light.

When he’d pulled the chain, the toilet had flushed and the waxed paper was gone, he walked out of the bathroom and found her naked on the bed but for a strip of sheet clutched between her legs. She was drinking her champagne and reading the afternoon’s edition of the *Deutsche Allemagne Zeitung* as casually as if she were waiting for the next tram to come along.

“Oh!” she said at his appearance. “Are you the new serving-man here?”

“Does the uniform give me away, madam?”

“It does. Please be kind enough to take it off and serve me.”

She watched as he undressed, making rather interesting noises and a few earthy comments here and there. Then, nude, Michael took her flute and poured some more champagne and as she leaned forward and gave his right buttock a fairly stinging slap he dropped into the sparkling liquid the small pill that had been held in his palm. He faced her with the glass down at his side, giving time for the dissolution.

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“You have a very strange look on your face,” she observed.

“Possibly there are strange thoughts in my mind.”

“I’m a journalist!” she said brightly, and sat up on her knees. “Tell me *everything!*”

He drank down the rest of his champagne, set her full glass on the table and his empty one next to it. His voice was husky when he spoke; not with passion, as she might think, but with the first pangs of true grief. “I’ve always been better at showing than telling.”

If anything, he had to command his own performance. Franziska was talented, true, and she was eager and hot-blooded and adventurous, but Michael Gallatin was fighting his own battle even as he stormed her walls.

He gave her as good as he could, as long as he could. He stretched her out and pressed her inward. His tongue shattered her dam, and her mouth brought forth droplets of rain in February. He lay back on the pillow, seeing colors and catching his breath.

Before he could move or speak or do anything, she stood up from the bed, picked up her flute and drank the champagne. She took three long swallows.

It was too late to move. To speak. To do anything.

He noticed then the bruises on her smooth bottom and the backs of her thighs.

“What are those?” he asked.

“Those what?”

“Bruises. Right there.”

“*Bruises? Where?*”

“There. Right *there*, on your—”

She slid into bed, tight up against him, and kissed him. Her mouth might have given him a taste of her champagne too, he thought. But it no longer mattered.

He pushed her back. “The bruises. From *what?*”

“I fell down today. I slipped on some snow. Fell smack on my bottom.”

“That’s not true.”

“It *is* true!” she said, right in his face. “I promise!”

“I don’t believe you. Not even a promise.”

She tapped his lower lip with her forefinger. “Is this our first quarrel?”

"No, it's not a quarrel."

"That's too bad." She sat astride him, her legs curled around his hips. "Because, you know, they say the best thing about a quarrel is the making-up."

The bruises were not going to be explained. Michael let it go; the ticking of the clock had begun.

They lay together, cuddling. Warmth upon warmth. They kissed lightly and deeply. One mouth was never without the other for very long.

She lay without moving for awhile.

Michael said, "Are you all right?"

"Sleepy," she answered. "It just came on me."

"It's late," he told her.

"I did have a long day." She turned toward him and, looking into his eyes, she softly stroked his cheek. "You need a shave." Her voice was a little listless.

He caught her hand and kissed the fingers. Every one.

"Will you hold me while I sleep?" she asked, nestling against him.

"I will hold you forever," he said, and he put his arm around her.

"I'm so...*tired*. I don't think I've ever felt so tired. Or so *happy*," she amended. "I think you've worn me out."

"Just lie still. Rest."

She gave him a crooked smile, her eyes hazed. "I used to be *young*," she said.

He waited.

When he looked at her again, her eyes had closed.

"Oh!" she said suddenly, with a jerk of her body. Her eyes opened. They were bloodshot, and Michael thought with a shrill of alarm that he was going to have to kill a messenger after all.

But she smiled in his direction, and she felt for his hand until he found hers, and she asked in a voice that was going away, "Am I still...only *nearly*...the most beautiful woman you've ever seen?"

He might, in some other situation, have had a response to this. A quick-witted comeback, a double-entendre, a poetic witticism worthy of Cyrano. Now, though, at this crucial and terrible instant he was struck dumb as a stone.

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“It’s all right,” she whispered. Her eyes closed again, and with her last dwindling strength she squeezed his hand. “Tell me when I wake up.”

She breathed in and out, and in and out. He heard her breathing become shallow. As if in slow-motion, her head came back and her neck stretched, a cord standing out against the flesh, and for an instant Michael thought she was having one of her small deaths, and that when she regarded him again it would be with sated eyes, a dimpled smile and the sparkle of sweat on her cheeks.

But she was gone.

He felt her leave. Because suddenly the room felt so dark, and suddenly he felt so alone.

He got up after a few minutes, because she wasn’t coming back. He went into the bathroom, where he sat down on the cold tiles in a cold corner and wept.

She was right, he decided when he was all cried-out. Maybe he did need a fresh shave. *She never knew my real name*, he thought. That was what caused the first cut. Then, dripping blood from seven slips of the Solingen, which was not such a safety razor after all, he stood over her body and finished the last glass of champagne. He sat beside her for a time, just looking at her. She did appear to be only sleeping. But when he touched her hand he felt her already becoming common clay. That thought caused the tears to burn again. His nose ran like a spigot. Still, he held her hand until he was sure her ghost was no longer there, and he could no longer hear the music of her laughter.

One last thing. To get her properly in bed, with the sheet tucked around her and the fan of her black hair spread out on the pillow. Her face in repose did seem to have the hint of a secret smile. Something, perhaps, she knew that he did not?

Good dreams, he wished her.

He was tired, too. Worn out and weary. Sick with himself. He wished he could go to sleep and dream with her. It was going to be mind over matter tonight to get dressed and make his way to the safe—

He heard the footsteps at his door. The creak of a board.

They didn’t bother with knocking.

A heavy boot crashed the door in. Men in black leather coats came boiling like ebony wasps into the room and from their midst strode the big man with the red face and the white suit.

He brushed past the major even as two men caught Michael's shoulders and slammed him against the wall. A painting of a golden-haired *fraulein* in a sunlit garden jumped off its hook and fell to the floor.

Rittenkrett walked to the edge of the bed and peered down at Franziska. He squinted, spoke her name, and then reached out to rouse her before he realized she could not be roused. "Hey! Sigmund!" he snapped. The accountant came over, lifted the sheet and tried to find a pulse. He leaned forward to feel for breath. He jammed a hand against her breast, seeking the missing heartbeat.

Sigmund shook his head. Rittenkrett turned toward the major with his face as red as a crimson lamp.

"You," said Rittenkrett behind a thick forefinger, "have done a dirty. Haven't you? Eh? Ask him, Ross."

As the two men held Michael, Ross stepped forward and hit him in the stomach with a black-gloved fist. The second blow was harder, and the third made Michael's legs buckle. Before he could find his balance, a hand gripped his hair and a knee burst his nose open.

"Careful with the blood!" Rittenkrett warned, retreating a step. "Christ, get him a towel! Stand up, Major Jaeger! But that's not your real name, is it? How did you murder Franziska?"

A throat cleared. Rittenkrett turned around to see Sigmund holding up the two champagne flutes. "We'll find out," Rittenkrett promised Michael. "Next question: *why* did you murder Franziska?"

Michael didn't answer. There was no point. Eight men in the room. At least four with drawn pistols. His nose was streaming blood, his eyes were swelling shut and his head pounded. Maybe down his sides or upon his back there were small stirrings of animal hair, but not much.

He could never commit suicide, but he was so weary and so sick at heart that he wished for death tonight. He welcomed it. He was no one's hero. He was the shadowy slime that could kill a masterpiece of a woman who loved him, a perfect package, and no matter what her

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sins were he had failed to move heaven and earth to find a way to save her life.

He deserved to die. To die brutally, and in great pain.

Which had already begun.

“We’re going to march you out of here,” Rittenkrett said. “No clothes are necessary where you’re going, but we’ll take your uniform anyway to go over everything with our fine-toothed buzzsaws.” He came up close to the bleeding face, though not too close to risk the suit. “I hope you enjoyed her. Got your dick’s worth. Because now, sir, whoever you are, you’re coming to the Gestapo’s playhouse. And there we will give you a fucking of another kind. Sigmund!”

The accountant hit Michael across the side of the head with a leather-wrapped blackjack. He was fast and efficient, no energy wasted.

They dragged the naked, bleeding major out. Behind them the pair of men charged with tearing the place apart for evidence peeked under the sheet. One grinned at the other and with his fist made a pumping gesture at his crotch.

THIRTEEN

The Room

THROUGH THE WIND and gusts of snow the two black sedans drove. Through the dark and empty streets of Berlin. They drove also through the nightmares of those Inner Ring members who yet remained in this city, manning the code books and doing whatever small sabotage they could conceive for the glory of old dead Germany.

When these black sedans came for you, the intelligent thing to do was to pick up the pistol in the upstairs desk, shoot your children in the head and then your wife and then yourself. That was called *escape*.

And it was the only way.

But for Michael Gallatin—sitting naked, groggy and bleeding on the back seat of the lead sedan between Sigmund and Ross—it was no way at all.

His strength was gone. He was all used up. He just no longer wished to live.

Was it suicide if he allowed someone else to kill him? If he simply lay unresisting as they pulled him apart? On that matter, the wolf in him was silent.

Through the streets they went, through the wind and snow. At length the two cars turned onto Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse. Their yellow cat's-eye headlamps approached a block-long gothic slab of bricks, with five floors showing. Beneath the street, who knew how many? Lights showed through some of the windowblinds. This place never slept.

The cars went through a black gate, past the electric lamps that stood on either side of a porte cochere, and slid to a halt before a secondary entrance toward the rear of the building. Michael was dragged out, with Ross's Luger in his ribs. He knew that if he struggled, he would not be shot in the ribs but instead either clubbed again over the head, hit in the face or in the worst case shot in an area that would cause pain but no immediate death, like the back of the hand or the knee. He didn't care to struggle; it was too much of an effort.

Sigmund pressed a recessed button on the wall beside a door. In a few seconds the door was unbolted from within. The entourage, six men strong, went through with Michael a pale hobbler at their center. Inside there was a desk and a soldier and a file cabinet and a telephone and another door. Michael was half-pushed, half-carried through this door and into a green-painted corridor with frosted glass light globes spaced along the ceiling. Various doors lined this hallway, and at the far end was a tall, wide window through which another light gleamed.

At about the hallway's centerpoint they came to an oak-railed staircase and started down. When Michael's feet wanted to balk, he was picked up by two of the men and rushed downward. The staircase descended past several landings and more doors. It angled to the left, straightened out again and then angled to the right. Bare bulbs lit the stained risers. Michael smelled the old odors of human sweat and fear, and some of them not so old.

"Move!" a voice said from behind him. Sigmund's blackjack gave him a knock across the base of the skull, which filled Michael's head with flaming pinwheels. They came to the bottom of the stairs. Michael heard the jingle of keys, a merry sound like little bells. A lock was turned.

When the door opened, he was pushed and hauled through. In his haze he made out a stone-walled chamber with light bulbs hanging on

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cords from the timbered ceiling. Shadows ate some of the room. There were chairs sitting about. There was a machine of some kind on rollers, with coiled-up cables that ended in what might have been large alligator clips. Another machine was attached to what appeared to be a portable water tank on one end and on the other a gray instrument that resembled a baker's pastry bag. He doubted it was used to frost any birthday cakes. He heard the door close behind him. A bolt was thrown with a metallic finality that would have made most men start to either babble or weep. In here there were no windows. The air smelled of vinegar and the sharp bitterness of chemical disinfectant.

And fear. Much, much fear.

He was dragged onward, the men moving quickly around him.

The machines gave way to the medieval. Red embers glowed in a brazier full of pokers. And beside it stood that most ancient of torture devices: the rectangular wooden frame, ropes and rollers of the instrument known as 'the rack'.

Upon seeing it, something in Michael Gallatin stirred and growled a word he took to be *resist*. But that was all, just a growl. He didn't care to resist. He was no longer fit to wear either flesh or fur. It was over. He was ready to die.

But his captors didn't know that.

"Ross," said the Ice Man.

While Michael was held, Ross beat him. The black-gloved fists crunched his ribs, slammed into his shoulders, crashed into his jaw and nose and cheekbones. Michael's legs gave way and he tumbled into darkness.

He was aware of lying on his back, his wrists and ankles being bound with ropes. He heard the cranking of the ratchet. The rollers rumbled and the ropes tightened, and the pressure began building at the sockets of arms and legs.

Warm liquid was flung into his face. He sputtered and spat. His swollen eyes opened into slits, and he smelled and tasted another man's wine. In fact, wine from several men.

Michael moved the throbbing bloodmask of his face and was able to find Sigmund amid the shadows. The accountant held a bucket in

one hand and was zipping up with the other. Ross also was zipping, and one man had his huge cock flapping up and down for the envy of the others.

Rittenkrett's crimson moon emerged from the dark. The teeth in its crater gripped a freshly-lit cigarello. "How do you like *our* champagne, Major?"

Michael closed his eyes again. He'd seen by the filmy glare from an overhead bulb that the Ice Man had removed his white suit jacket and was now wearing a leather butcher's apron.

"Your teeth are still there. Your lips haven't been ripped off. Yet. You can still talk. Let's hear the story."

Michael smelled the smoke ring drift into his face.

The ratchet went *clack...clack...clack*. The pressure on his joints increased. It was not pain yet, but it would be there on the handle's next turn.

"All right, let me try," said Rittenkrett. Michael heard the white shoes grind grit on the floorstones. "It's safe to say, I do believe, that you're not who you say you are. Eh? Not a German officer. And not even a German? So, because you speak so well and you act with such authority, I'd say someone has gone to great trouble to train you and put you here. You know, I told you...hey, look at me when I'm talking to you!" The tip of the cigarello crisped hair on Michael's chest.

Michael obeyed, not because he had to but because he wanted to move the torture session along. The sooner they got past the small stuff and Rittenkrett realized his guest would not talk, the faster they'd get to the hard treatment. And from that, it would eventually be the death that Michael desired. How many hours would it take?

No matter. He would never leave this room alive.

"Better," the Ice Man said. "All right, then. So...well, let me backtrack a bit!" He blew a few smoke rings and admired their advance. "The most amazing thing happened to me today! Just this afternoon, Franziska arrives at my office looking very fetching, and she says, 'Axel, do you know that thing you've always wished to do with me?' And you can bet I do! So she says, 'I have one request. That you call Denker in Administration and remind him to do what I've asked of him'. And what would that be? I inquire. But she says it's her private business, and so—knowing I'm going

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to find out from Denker anyway, who is scared to death of me—I say, as you wish.”

“Therefore, we go to my little hideaway that every decent married man should have,” said the Ice Man, with the cigarello in one corner of his mouth, “and for as long as I am able I partake of this offered gift. Oh, you should have seen her on the edge of the bed as she was! Such a beautiful ass! Ah well.” The massive shoulders shrugged. “I’m going to miss her sense of humor.”

“But that’s not all the story!” Rittenkrett paced back and forth, smiling. He was careful never to leave his prisoner’s field of view. “Denker calls me in the evening with this question: do I know what the relationship is between Franziska Luxe and a certain Major Horst Jaeger?” He made a face and slapped himself on the forehead. “That goddamned man again! After I’ve told him to leave Franziska alone! And now comes the real gem: Denker tells me that this morning Franziska went to see Colonel von Piffin, the old fucking goat who has some pull in the dispatching of orders and so forth, and for an hour or so they left the building. Denker, you understand, is von Piffin’s aide. When they came back, von Piffin was using his walking-stick. It’s common knowledge that he has a little hideaway as well, for his chorus girls. Now listen, Major what’s-your-name, you’ll appreciate this!”

A smoke ring ascended toward the dirty lights.

“Denker,” said the Ice Man, “tells me that Franziska says she has always found him attractive—yes, him with his cocked eyes—and she wishes a favor. If Colonel von Piffin fails to put his signature upon a certain request for transfer in the next day or so, would Denker do it for him? To tell you the truth, he does it all the time. And if Denker the cock-eyed dreamboat will do this for her, Franziska will go to his fucking little hideaway with *him*. Only Denker’s too stupid to have a hideaway, so they go to a broom closet on the fourth floor. Then...get this, now...after *that* is when Franziska came to *me*. Talk about doing a dedicated job, Major!”

Michael started to let his eyelids slide down, but the Ice Man was leaning over him.

“The kicker to this tale of lust and woe is that Denker tells me what Franziska wants done can’t be done,” said Rittenkrett. “She wants her Major

Horst Jaeger transferred from the 25th Panzer Grenadier Division before it moves to the East Front. She wants this great man of hers to be transferred to a division on the *Western* Front. Only Denker's looked up the orders, and found that the 25th Panzer Grenadier Division was relocated to the East Front at the beginning of *last week*."

"We may have a deserter, I say to Denker. Now we have to do some digging and make some calls, because people have left their offices for the day. It's night now, the phone lines in and out of Berlin are cut by Inner Ring swine all the time, and every colonel worth a shit is in his little hideaway. Records are incomplete, fucked up by incompetents, lost and damaged. But at last—about an hour ago—we get the information we need. And you know what we find, don't you? Speak up!"

Michael remained silent.

"You don't exist," hissed the Ice Man. "You never did."

He let that hang, and blew a misshapen circle that curled in upon itself.

Then he opened a red box in his right hand and withdrew from it an ice pick with a pearl-white handle.

Clack...clack...clack went the ratchet. Michael winced and bit his lower lip as pain rippled through his joints.

"She was trying to have you sent to the Western Front." The Ice Man inspected his instrument of choice. A small spark of light jumped from the tip. "Hoping to save you from the Russians, I suppose? Picture it. Poor Franziska, fighting for the life of her noble knight with the only weapon she had."

I'm so tired, she'd said. She must have scrubbed herself raw to get rid of the odors of those men. Either that, or he was really and truly in love, because all he'd been able to smell was her.

And now, tortured in his own private hell, Michael thought her champagne toast made sense.

To freedom?

To good decisions?

To the sun that sets in the west.

What kind of toast is that? he remembered asking.

And the reply: *One I hope you remember when you need to.*

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He realized what she was trying to tell him.

She seemed to speak to him again, her voice calm and quiet from the realm of the dead: *They can't be stopped from the East. Not by all our wishes and dreams. Not by all we pretend to be but are not. They can't be stopped, and when this city dies I will die here too, because I have chosen my field of battle. But you...in the West...can make the good decision to live. You can put aside your rifle when there's no need for any more death. You can find honor in being one of the Germans who survives a war that is senseless to continue, and give yourself to the British or the Americans. It may be a little while until you find freedom...but you will.*

You see? I said everything would be all right, didn't I?

"And then you killed her," Rittenkrett said. His hand reared back, and drove the ice pick into the exposed underside of Michael's left arm.

This little pain was nothing.

"Are you British?" The ice pick slid into his right arm. Rittenkrett gave it a twist.

"Are you American?" The ice pick went into his left thigh.

"Are you *Russian*?" There was a pause, and then Rittenkrett drove the ice pick into Michael Gallatin's right testicle.

"Oh," said Rittenkrett in the aftermath of the teeth-gritted scream, "I think *that* hit something!"

His audience, frocked in darkness, laughed.

Rittenkrett nodded to whoever was handling the ratchet.

Clack...clack. Two turns. Agony upon agony. A mist of sweat and a new flow of blood from Michael's nostrils. The next turn of the ratchet would tear his shoulders and legs from their sockets.

"I'll ask again," the Ice Man announced. "Are you British?"

The ice pick pierced Michael's side, and more blood spooled down.

"Are you American?"

The ice pick went into his right cheek. Rittenkrett let it sit there vibrating for a few seconds before he took it out.

"Are you *Russian*?" Rittenkrett's hand poised in the air. The stub of the cigarello in his mouth glowed as red as his face.

The ice pick entered the loose flesh between Michael's penis and scrotum.

“Oh, I missed!” said the Ice Man, and he pulled the pick out and jammed it into the left testicle.

His audience applauded at that one. It did go on at length.

Rittenkrett paused in his performance to take a drink of water and flame a fresh Indianer. “What’s the reason for not speaking, sir?” he asked as he returned to the sweating, blood-pocked figure on the rack. “I’m just asking you your nationality, that’s all. Who do you work for, that kind of thing.” He took his position and lifted the pick. “Let’s start again, shall we? Are you British?”

The pick swung down and entered Michael’s left leg just above the knee.

“Are you American?”

Into the upper chest, where it turned on the collarbone.

“Are you Russian?” Rittenkrett lifted the ice pick high. “You know, sir, whoever you are, it’s futile. You’ve lost. Not just you, but your entire effort. Because I hear it on great authority that the scientists are only a few days away from having the Black Sun, and when that is complete no force on earth can stand against the Reich.”

Light gleamed from the bloody tip.

A drop of blood fell, and hit Michael on the forehead.

It was in his mind.

The Black Sun.

Only a few days away.

Something that had wanted to go to sleep, that had yearned for the peace of sleep, now stretched its muscles and opened a fierce green eye.

The Black Sun.

What in the name of God could that be?

In spite of himself, in spite of all the little pains that had merged together to make one pain huge and terrible, he knew his duty just as Franziska had known hers. In the flash of an instant it brought him back from the edge. It cleared his head.

He knew who he was, what he was. And *why* he was.

Michael looked up at the Ice Man and spoke.

In a hoarse, nearly inhuman rasp. And in English.

“I wish...you hadn’t said that.”

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“He said something!” Amazed, Rittenkrett looked around at the others. “I think it was English! Uthmann, come over here! Don’t you speak English?”

“I’m about to kill you,” said Michael Gallatin, prisoner of the Gestapo and wrenched out upon the rack.

“*What?*” Rittenkrett leaned down toward him, the cigarello gripped between his teeth on the left side.

What the Ice Man could not possibly know is that there was more than one perfect package in this world.

FOURTEEN

The Soul Cage

"*KILL YOU,*" THE major repeated. Except now it was mostly a snarl, because the change was upon him.

One benefit of practice is, indeed, perfection. It comes only after many hundreds of attempts. And through Michael Gallatin's lifetime, it came from his practice of controlling and guiding the transformation sometimes three or four times a day, in all weather, in all positions both solemnly immobile in the cathedral of the forest and running at full speed as if to beat Satan's own locomotive on the underworld tracks.

He was by now very good and very fast at opening his soul cage and letting Hell loose.

Several things happened at once, in rapid succession. There were the crackings of bones and joints and the wet slidings and rearrangings of sinews that might have been taken for the work of the rack, but it was not. Bands of black and gray hairs rippled across the pick-pocked flesh. The face seemed to dissolve, to be replaced by a second, darker face that had been hidden beneath the mask of the first. It, too, was battered and bloody

as the first one had been; the man's wounds were also the beast's. Fingers warped and toes warped into claws. Fangs exploded from bleeding gums. Ears burst forth fur as they lengthened like strange flowers. The ribcage shivered and changed shape. The torso altered, the spine shifted, the neck thickened, the shoulders grew muscles like pulsing gray ropes and then the black hair scurried over them and across the chest and groin where the pierced testicles tightened. The pain was exquisite. The pain was a religious experience, because through it Michael Gallatin was reborn.

All this happened in a matter of seconds. It happened so fast the black wolf streaked with gray was there on the rack before Axel Rittenkrett could cry out around his cigarello or step back from the blood-dripping muzzle that now snapped up at his face. The fangs caught cheek, nose and forehead. Then the wolf's head thrashed side-to-side in a blur, the muscles standing out in its neck, and very suddenly Axel Rittenkrett really did have, as Franziska had said, two faces.

Both of them were red. One was streaming blood around torn and twitching facial muscles. That side had no eye, because the eye was crushed between the wolf's jaws like a hard-boiled egg and swallowed. It had a gaping hole where the nose had been, because nose went very well with eyeball. In fact, much of the whole side of the face had gone down the gullet. A smoke ring red with gore burst from the mouth. The teeth clacked, like the sound of a rack's ratchet or white shoes on a checkerboard floor. And Rittenkrett's shoes were, alas, no longer the color of virgin snow.

Michael Gallatin tore the Ice Man's throat open with his next snap and thrash, and perhaps it was due to the wolf's rage or his strength or his purpose returning, but the Ice Man's mangled head was ripped off and went rolling across the stones like a large red rubber ball. It rolled past the shoes of Sigmund, who like the others in the room were for the moment truly ice men: frozen in absolute, apocalyptic horror.

As the merely human stood stunned, the monster of miracle's hind legs slipped out of the loosened bindings. One rope on the right foreleg had to be gnawed off, the matter of a few heartbeats, but the left foreleg came free easily enough. In his fever dream, Michael smelled that every man in the room had just peed in their pants. A couple of them needed their

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diapers. The wolf leaped to the floor, and the slitted green eyes searched for the next throat to savage.

Could five men scream as one? They could.

There was a rush toward the door. An entanglement of Gestapo men. A crashing together, stumbling and falling of the Master Race, reduced to Marx Brothers comedians.

He paused to kill one man who'd fallen. It was fast and clean, and it tasted good. Then he was moving again, his shoulders hunched. It was unfortunate, Michael thought as he loped across the stones, that a bolted door couldn't be opened when so many hands were slipping and sliding all over the place.

"Help us! God help us!" one of them shouted, banging at the wood. Was that Sigmund, whose account had suddenly become due?

The wolf lunged forward, seized Sigmund's ankle and dragged him away, and that debt was paid in bloody full in about three seconds.

Someone had either gone mad or found courage, because a Luger began firing into the dark. A bullet whined off the floor to Michael's left. "Get it open! *Open it!*" a man shrieked; now *that* was the sound of madness, for sure. A second Luger fired, the bullet hissing through the air over Michael's spine. Then suddenly there came the noise of the bolt being drawn, light from the staircase streamed in as the door was opened, and a trio of rabbits in pee-stained trousers were fighting to get past each other.

Michael slouched forward as beasts do. He could slow time down to his own desires, so the merely human were moving as if through sludge. He let them all get started up the stairs. His muzzle was throbbing with pain. Something was not totally right with his lower jaw. The agony of two stabbed balls still writhed in his belly.

Oh, he thought as he listened to them scrambling up those stairs and wheezing in fear, you are *mine*.

Then the purely animal took him. He growled deep in his throat and flung himself through the door and up after the three men, rivulets of saliva crawling from his mouth.

Ross was going up first. He had a Luger. When he turned and saw the monster coming, he got off a wild shot that was unfortunately not wild

enough to miss the head of the man just behind and below him, who also had a Luger. Ross's hair was standing on end, as if electrified, and his face was the color of wet paper. As the man in the middle fell, the one closest to Michael screamed like a woman and tried to kick like a little girl, but he died like a pile of dirty laundry when Michael bit into the leg and threw him almost disdainfully down the stairs where his chin hit the railing, his neck broke, and he slithered down in his stinky pants.

And now there was just the common thug.

Ross started shooting over his shoulder, without looking. The bullets whacked risers and walls but no wolf. Then Ross got to the top of the stairs and turned to the right, and with a keening shriek he fled along the corridor in the direction of the large window. He ran out of one of his shoes. Michael, a green-eyed and ravening juggernaut, went after him. A bullet suddenly hit the wall and another cracked through the window's glass; someone, likely the guard at the door, was firing a pistol. Michael could imagine the man's dumbfounded wonder: how in the name of Gabbling Goebbels had a big *dog* gotten in here?

The big dog now wanted out, and he saw the way.

He managed a burst of speed, and he leapt.

An instant before Michael hit Ross, the thug must've felt the death fangs at the back of his neck and somehow he mustered the courage to face them. He turned and fired, possibly his last shot. Michael felt the bullet go into his left hip and do serious damage, and then he was on top of Ross and Ross was being propelled backward along the hallway the last few feet to the window. They crashed through the glass and into a snowscape, with Ross taking the brunt of the injuries. The air whooshed out of the man's lungs, but in the next instant Ross didn't need that air anyway since claws and fangs removed the lungs in a small frenzy of maddened revenge.

Ross, hollowed-out, lay twitching in the snow. Michael heard soldiers shouting, and the hard authority of an officer's voice: "*This way! Move!*"

He took his bearings. He was in some kind of courtyard. A small park? Lights glowed on lampposts. There were snow-covered bushes and bare trees and a concrete pathway winding through. Life-sized statues of, presumably, famous Gestapo torturers stood about, and there were small

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concrete benches where one might enjoy a quick respite from working the electric gut-grinder. The snow had begun to fall harder, no longer the light flurries. He had to find his way out of here. His hip...now, that was bad. The pain in his hip was a thousand degrees of fire, yet he had the sensation that his left leg itself was becoming cold, losing all feeling. Going dead. His nostrils were so full of blood, both his own and others, that he could hardly draw a breath.

He had to get out.

He staggered along the pathway in what was nearly desperation.

A wolf without four good legs on which to run, to evade and escape?

Not good.

He came to a wall. A high wall. Too high.

He went in another direction, burst through the undergrowth and into another wall.

"Blood on the ground over here!" shouted a soldier, off to his right.

Oh, yes. He was bleeding pretty badly, too.

This would be called a cock-up, Michael thought. But he was not yet ready to go belly-up.

He turned away from the voice and ran low, the pain in his left hip nearly making him whine. He ran past two soldiers who never knew he was there. He heard a shot, but it came nowhere near him. "Over here!" came the yell, followed by another errant shot. They were seeing big dogs under every bush.

This courtyard...was there even a way out of it? How had the soldiers gotten in? From the building, of course. He couldn't go back into there, not with this leg.

He was going to have to get over the wall, while he still had enough strength.

He circled from wall to wall, aware that the soldiers were circling too. A rifle shot hit a tree trunk to his right and sent a tremor through him; it had been much too close. "It's here, sergeant!" shouted the sharp-eyed rifleman. "I've got it!"

Michael pushed through the undergrowth. He came out with snow on his back and a wall before him. On his left a few feet along the pathway

there stood a stone bench. On his right, closer to the wall, was the statue of a man with his arms extended and palms offered heavenward, as if asking the help of God in smiting down the evildoers, perhaps with a blowtorch to the genitals.

The wolf measured distances. It was a long jump, especially with the injury.

But he really had no choice.

They were coming. He heard the crunch of boots in the snow. Someone had a flashlight, the beam sweeping back and forth. How many men? Too many to kill all of them. A Gestapo security squad, ten at least.

He had to go *now*.

He ran back along the pathway.

“There it is!” The light grazed him, lost him, searched for him. “Shoot it!” came the command, but the big dog had abruptly turned and was no longer there.

Michael ran, one leg starting to drag. The pain was tremendous. It stole his breath. If he misjudged this, he was dead. *Faster! Faster!* he told himself. *And when you give it, give it everything.*

He leaped upon the stone bench, sprang off its snowy surface with a jolt that this time did make him whine and brought a red mist whirling before his eyes, and in midair he stretched the long muscular black-and-gray body out as far as bones and sinew would allow. A rifle fired and the bullet went past his right ear. Another grazed his tail. A third hit the statue of the supplicant and threw stone chips into Michael’s pelt.

Michael’s paws scabbled on the outstretched palms. He heard something crack: his bones or the statue’s arms, he wasn’t sure. He didn’t care. He leaped again with all his power, upward from the Gestapo’s hands, and then the snow-slick top of the wall was in front of him and he was hanging onto it with his forepaws and trying to push himself over with one good leg.

The rifles spoke. Bullets ricocheted off the wall. Someone fired a sub-machine gun in short, deadly chatters. The top of the wall blew up. Smoke and snow spun together in airy whirlpools.

“Cease firing!” cried the sergeant. The last few rifle shots rang out, and the sergeant glared back at whomever had been slow to obey. Then, satisfied

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he wouldn't get shot up by his own men, he walked forward and aimed his flashlight at the wall beyond the statue of Rudolf Diels, the first commander of the Gestapo from 1933 to 1934.

"Damn," the sergeant said. Because the big dog was not lying dead on the ground. Maybe it was on the other side of the wall, they'd have to go and look, but at least it was out of the courtyard. There was a mess to clean up inside. This might send him to the gallows. Maybe tonight he and his wife should take a little trip to the West. Like beginning in the next fifteen minutes. He'd seen many stray animals, but never one like this. Maybe it was a wolf that had escaped from the zoo?

The sergeant, an old veteran with one hand, knew all about wolves. When he was a child his grandmother Tippi used to scare the shit out of him with her stories of wolf men. He still had nightmares about waking up with hairy palms, because in his dreams he was always a boy and he always had both hands. *When the full moon shines bright, then the beast shall roam at night.*

All that kind of rubbish.

But there was no full moon tonight. In fact, it would soon be morning. "Blast," he said, mostly to himself. "All right," he told the men around him, "let's go out and see if we killed anything."

They had not.

The wolf was on the move.

It staggered, in great pain. Its left hind leg dragged. It rested for awhile, leaning against the corner of a building just as a weary man might. Then it went on a little further, and staggered again, and again had to find a place to support its unsteady weight.

Snow fell, white upon the streets and bricks and stones of Berlin. The wind picked up and began to keen. Night could be brutal. Night could be the no-man's land of the soul, and so it was this night for Michael Gallatin.

But he was alive.

A truck carrying soldiers was coming. He turned into a trash-strewn alley and stood against the bricks, the left hind paw up off the ground above a puddle of blood. The truck passed. They were in no hurry, all the soldiers smoking cigarettes with their rifles at ease. They weren't looking for him.

Michael lowered his head. *Franziska*, the wolf thought. Oh my God. *Picture it. Poor Franziska, fighting for the life of her noble knight.*

And earning only bruises and a poison pill for her sacrifice.

The green eyes dimmed. It seemed to Michael that in the battle called life a skirmish had been lost. It seemed to him that on this day the sleepwalkers had won just a little more ground.

I will hold you forever, he thought.

And then through the pain of broken heart and damaged leg he considered the fact that he was alone, hurt and naked in Berlin, and if the Ice Man was correct, some fearsome secret weapon called the Black Sun was being prepared to destroy the enemies of the Reich.

A few days, Rittenkrett had said.

Michael thought: That gives *me* a few days.

If I can survive the night.

He had more stamina and resistance to pain as a wolf. When he became a man again, he was going to need crutches and a long sleep. So... among the pigeons with rifles and the sheep with machine guns stalks the wolf. But he had the feeling that the closer he got to the Black Sun, the more he was going to need everything the wolf could give him.

A slight movement to his right suddenly riveted his attention. Down at the far end of the alley.

What was that down there? He sniffed the air, and smelled...

A white dog, dirty but still white enough, came a step closer and then stopped. Its ears were up, and it too was sniffing the air. Smelling his blood, Michael knew. He took a whiff of essence: female.

Another dog appeared at its side. Small and brown. A sausage dog. Male.

A third one nosed up beside the female. Another female, sand-colored with a long snout. She was mottled with sores, and Michael could smell her sickness.

They all stood still, watching him. The snow fell down and the wind blew, and Michael Gallatin shivered and felt the blood running out of him.

A fourth dog moved through the others.

They parted to give him way. No wonder. He was the man. A big black Doberman with powerful haunches and eyes the color of amber stones. He

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got between the wolf and his charges and stared fixedly at the new arrival, which meant *Do you want to fight?*

Michael Gallatin, for all his size and the fact that even as wounded as he was he could tear them to shreds in a matter of seconds, put his head down almost to the concrete and rounded his shoulders.

No, I don't, he replied.

The Doberman remained in guard position. Michael suspected that had been his job, before life in an alley. The white dog started to come forward, and the Doberman gave a whuff of *Stay* and pushed her with his snout. She stayed; she was his bitch.

The dogs of Berlin, Michael thought. The castoff pets, the companions of dead people, the unwanted and unloved. Now scavaging for whatever they could find in the garbage cans, and living...*where*, exactly?

The bitch with the sores on her body came up beside him. She sniffed at him, and to be polite he returned the compliment. She regarded him with eyes full of pain and, perhaps, true wonder. She was old. In her last days, her aroma said. Thin and diseased and homeless: a hopeless triad.

She came closer. He could tell she'd seen a lot, this old one had. Had seen a hearth and bedroom slippers. Had seen maybe a child's joy. And a mother's sadness, too. There was a lot in there. She had a regal air about her, a self-possessed dignity. Michael thought she was like an empress whose lovely domain had one day suddenly crumbled around her, through no fault or doing of her own. Possibly it was one of the bombs.

The little sausage crept up and, very carefully, sniffed. He couldn't reach what he was after. When Michael shifted one inch, the sausage yelped and skittered away.

Then the white dog came, the beauty. The one who in another life would be companion to a fashion model in Paris and lie about on velvet cushions politely asking for liver treats. She came cautiously, stopping and then coming again, step by graceful step.

The Empress spoke in a low throaty grunt: *He's okay*. Then the Beauty came on the last few paces, but she was trembling a little, like any high-spirited female might be in the presence of such a wounded monster, and she was ready to run.

Finally, then, the Doberman arrived.

He took stock of Michael at a distance, and with a sidelong appraisal. He sniffed the air, gave a quiet growl to let everyone know who was the Commander of this army, and then he pretended to look everywhere but at the wolf. The snow whitened his coat, and he gnawed at himself out of petulant irritation. Then, abruptly, he came right up to Michael and stood staring at an ear while the wolf, for the sake of getting along, gazed directly at the ground.

A tongue licked him. Just slightly. Darting in and away.

The Empress had found his gunshot wound.

The Little Sausage ran around in a circle, snapping at some memory of table scraps.

Then the Commander nudged Michael's ribs with his muzzle. A nudge neither hard nor soft, just testing the bones. The message was: *Maybe we can use you.*

Michael was thinking the same thing.

The dogs drew away from him and began to trot toward the far end of the alley. The Empress turned back and waited, and then one by one the others stopped to wait too, until finally the Commander paused, one foreleg raised in a military pose.

Are you coming? was the pack's question.

Michael Gallatin lifted his face to the sky and felt the softness of the snow. He felt also the oncoming dawn, far before the light arrived. He thought that the pack must have found or dug a shelter somewhere. He wondered if the Empress knew all the underground tunnels where the trains used to run when Berlin was a city with a heart, a soul and a mind.

The Black Sun.

He realized he might be the only one who knew. The only one who'd ever heard of it. Well, he'd let someone kill him some other day. When he was good and ready to die. When his job was finished.

But this wouldn't be the day.

The dogs were waiting for him.

Michael thought that sometime soon he would find a silent place. A place where he could stand without being seen. A place where he could look

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out across the city and the sky. And in that place he would howl to the stars, he would howl to God, he would howl for the injustice and insanity of this world and he would howl for her.

My Franziska.

But for the rest of this night, perhaps only just this one, he would sleep among the angels.

And, undefeated, Michael Gallatin struggled on.

Death Of A Hunter

WHEN HE FOUND the gray wolf dead with its throat cut and its eyes gouged out, Michael Gallatin knew they had come for him.

He sat in a brown leather chair in the front room of his house, which had once been a church and was to him still a holy place of solitude and reflection. The structure was made of dark red stones chinked together with white mortar. It had a narrow tower topped with a white spire and a walkway around it. Up in the tower were panes of stained glass colored crimson and dark blue.

Darkness was gathering outside, across the dense Welsh forest that shielded Michael Gallatin's home from the rest of the world. It was the eleventh day of July in the year 1958. He was listening to Ralph Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* on his record player. He knew that when the music was over and full darkness had fallen, he would get up from this chair in which he'd sat so many times, listening to music or reading before a polite fire, and he would go out to meet them.

Because they had come for him. And he doubted if he would ever return to this house the same as he'd left it, if he returned at all.

They were professionals. They were killers of the highest order. How many there would be, awaiting him out in the night-black forest, he didn't know. But they had executed one of his wolves—one of his companions—and he knew that if he did not go out to meet them tonight another

wolf would die in his place. They wouldn't stop until all his companions were dead, murdered by the fast blade and then mutilated by some brutal Oriental instrument, and he could not—*would* not—allow that to happen.

So he sat in the company of the music, waiting for the dark.

He wore black shoes with soft soles, gray trousers and a dark blue cotton shirt. The air was warm outside, unseasonably warm even for the middle of summer in Wales.

The hunter's moon would be shaped like a scythe tonight, perfect for cutting down old things that no longer had much use in this world.

He was a hard-used forty-eight years old. His thick hair had turned fully gray on the sides, with a small thatch of gray at the front. His face was still ruggedly handsome and his eyes were still luminously green, yet he knew how slow he'd become. He knew the onset of age. He knew what had been and what was to be, if he lived through this night. He was not the man he used to be, nor for that matter the wolf.

He thought of getting up and pouring himself a glass of Talisker, his favorite brand of Scotch whisky from the isle of Skye, but he decided against that. It had the salt taste of the sea in it, which he so enjoyed. One drink would be a pleasure, but one drink might give the killers a further advantage. No, if he lived through this night he would drink a toast to his miraculous survival at the dawn. But he doubted very seriously if he would ever taste Talisker again.

His left shoulder had been bothering him today. The shoulder he'd broken in the crash of a Westland Lysander aircraft in the North African desert in 1941. It was stiff and altogether unyielding to his will. His right leg today was also a traitor; it had been snapped in two places as he was caught in an avalanche on Monte Leone in 1952, when he'd been on the trail of the infamous professor of murder Dr. Shatterhand and his doxy of death Sabrina Neve. He had a headache that came and went, the nagging reminder of many fists, blackjacks and other items intended to knock his brains out. It was a wonder he still had any brains left at all.

He checked his Rolex. On the table next to him was a glass case that held a Breitling wristwatch with a plain brown leather band. He kept the watch working, though he never wore it. The watch was not his to wear.

The music ended, on its soft high lingering note.

He stood up. The darkness outside was almost complete. He took off the Rolex, took off his shoes, took off his socks, took off his trousers and underwear and shirt. He went out the door into the summer night, and drawing a long breath of fragrant pines and green moss he thought he might never come home again.

But he was certain he was going to kill at least one of them tonight. He would not go easy. He would not go without demanding a price be paid.

Opening the soul cage was more difficult than it used to be. The hinges creaked a little. The wolf balked, wanting to stay comfortable. It came when it was beckoned and it answered its call, but it was an older wolf, a slower wolf, and it had become a little bit hesitant of the pain of change.

Because the pain was the one thing that had not diminished. If anything, the pain had increased by many times. It was a hard birth for the wolf now, and a hard rebirth back to Michael Gallatin the man. Older bones for both wolf and man made the change slower, in each direction. The pain was exquisite. The pain that brought the scents, sounds, colors and forms in an explosion upon the senses unknown to ordinary men was almost too much to bear.

Almost...but then there always came the power, and though that had also diminished it was still the alpha and omega of the wolf, and it was still worth the journey from man to beast and back again.

He walked past his dark green Range Rover. He changed, as he stood in front of his church. He changed, in the dark with the yellow scythe of the moon hanging amid the clouds. He changed under a million million stars. Maybe he shuddered in pain and shed a few tears, but he changed.

He had never asked for this. Had never dreamed of it, when as an eight-year-old boy in Russia he'd followed a drifting white kite into a forest just like the one here in Wales he was about to penetrate. He'd never asked for this; it had been thrust upon him, whether he'd wanted it or not.

And now, as he contorted into a green-eyed wolf with more gray hair than black on its flanks and a certain injured stiffness in its stride, he thought how all these many years he had not been a hunter from the woods so much as he'd been a wanderer in the wilderness. It was the fate

of all humans to wander in a wilderness, some made for them by others, some made by themselves. And the wilderness could be all of life, from beginning to end. A trackless wilderness that held no reference points nor easy places of rest. It was a place of hard demands and no acceptance of mistakes. It was a place that whittled a man of action down to a sleeper in a brown leather chair on a Sunday afternoon. And it was a place that could be so terribly lonely that the heart broke into a thousand pieces at the merest memory of a woman's name and her touch in the night.

Michael could not go there. Not to that place. So he put his wolfen head down, and his wolfen body propelled itself forward, and though the old aches and agonies whispered through him and wanted to slow him down he loped onward into the woods, nearly soundlessly, his eyes seeking movement in the tangles of trees and folds of vegetation. They were here. They were close. Tonight there would be death.

Death had always been at his shoulder. It had always been leering at him, in the faces of many enemies. As he ran, searching, he thought of his trial by fire on the Caribbean island of Augustin Mireaux, the industrialist who had sold his soul and his nuclear missile plans to the Red Chinese. He thought of his battle against the drug-created assassin known as Chameleon that had begun in Paris, moved to Rio de Janeiro and ended in the Amazon jungle. He thought of his narrow escape with Aurore Bardot from Edward Wintergarden's sinking submarine under the polar ice. He recalled Simon Tollemache's barracuda pool, and the bloody massacre on the golf course at St. Andrews. He remembered Tragg, the killer with hypnotic eyes and two-tone shoes. He could trace in his memory every step through the deadly funhouse of Phaninath Po. All those and more remained in his head, though some he fervently wished he might forget. He wished he might forget about the Ginshi Kazoku—the Family of the Silver Thread—and the murder of the man he'd known as Mallory, but he could not.

This was why he was a hunter tonight. This was why he was ready to die, if he could kill at least one of them.

He loped onward at an easy pace, tasting the air for humans. These killers were careful. They were using an odor mask, which could be as simple

as pine soap or as complex as a homeopathic drug. The Family of the Silver Thread was famous for its creation of exotic pharmaceuticals useful to the criminal underworld, as well as for its international trade in weapons and military secrets. It was said that the Silver Thread was woven through thousands of tapestries in dozens of countries, and trying to remove such a global intertwining of interests based on money and power was impossible and for the most part fatal. Last year Michael had succeeded in small part, by crippling a faction of the Silver Thread in Hong Kong. One of their weapons warehouses had gone up with an ear-splitting bang, a courier with a large suitcase full of money had found himself staring at a set of fangs just before they seized his throat, and the floating mansion of the jet-setting newspaper mogul and Silver Thread leader Anthony Tong had been sunk to the bottom of the bay with Tong's body along as fishfood.

Something jumped in the brush as he approached. A rabbit, running for its life. It didn't get very far before one of the other wolves emerged from the night to pounce on it, tear it to pieces and eat.

Michael went on, slinking close to the earth. There were many other wolves here. Real wolves, not questionable miracles such as himself. They came, stayed as long as they pleased, and then drifted away again. A few ran with him on a regular basis and seemed to see themselves as his 'pack' and he the alpha. Two days ago a new wolf had appeared in an area Michael thought of as the Four Brothers, which was a sloping meadow that held four huge granite boulders. The new wolf, coal black and smelling of maleness, had been lying up on one of the stones basking in the bright sunshine. When it saw him it sat upright, perhaps also recognizing the large black wolf with gray sides as the ruler of this domain. Michael noted that this new male had the rarity of ice-blue eyes, and the commanding way it held itself made him wonder if he wasn't going to have to put up a fight to keep his kingdom.

Getting old was a bitch.

Michael suddenly stopped on his prowl through the woods. He had sensed something: a slow movement, a gliding from one patch of pure dark to another, a tensing of muscle before an action. He wasn't sure what it was, but it was there. An owl hooted distantly and another answered. The noise of the night's insects was a low susurrus.

He waited, all his senses on high alert.

When Valentine Vivian had retired six years ago to his estate in Wessex and begun writing paperback spy novels that no reader on earth could take seriously, a new hale and hearty boy had taken the reins of Special Operations. This one was straight out of Oxford, he wore natty tweeds and a regimental tie of the Royal Green Jackets, and he smoked a meerschaum pipe like a whorehouse chimney burning buggy bedsheets.

This new boy, by the name of Cordwainer, greeted Michael Gallatin one day in his office with the brusque statement *I understand you're quite the hero*. Only at that early point Cordwainer had understood nothing. After a summoning to Valentine Vivian's estate where the master of suspense interrupted his latest epic to inform Cordwainer of things that Cordwainer needed to know, from that point on Cordwainer had declined to have Michael anywhere near his office and peered around corners to make sure the hero wasn't lurking in the shadow of the potted ficus tree.

Michael began moving again through the Welsh woods. Slowly... slowly...inch by inch. His left shoulder protested this movement, and his right hind leg felt on the verge of a cramp. His eyes ticked back and forth, measuring space and darkness and distance. His nose sniffed, searching the air. His ears were up, twitching.

After the scene in Hong Kong, Mallory had come to visit Michael in Wales. It seemed to Michael that Mallory had always looked like an elderly man, but maybe part of it had been stagecraft because Mallory in his dark blue suit and with his white hair combed and parted looked not much older to him than the day they'd sat drinking Guinness at a North African airstrip sixteen years before. Mallory had to be in his late seventies by now, yet perhaps he had against all odds retained the soul and spirit of a hale and hearty boy.

Valentine Vivian had been the head of Special Operations. Cordwainer What'sHisName was currently the head of Special Operations.

But Michael knew that this man sitting in his den, smoking a black briar pipe, *was* Special Operations, and it was a lifelong position.

The word, Mallory confided, was that the Silver Thread had taken photographs with a long-lensed Leica. That Michael had been trailed by their professionals and the pictures snapped at an unfortunate moment.

Michael had known what he meant. The Family of the Silver Thread had photographic proof of him changing from man to wolf, or back again.

Be very, very careful, Mallory had told him. *They may want your skin, or your heart, or your head. Or they may want all of you. So be very, very careful.* But not more than a month later, it was Mallory who had not been careful enough. Missing for more than a week, he was found in the trunk of an abandoned taxi in an East London junkyard with his throat cut and his eyes gouged out. Valentine Vivian hired a small army of bodyguards and went on an author's tour of America, his author's name being Evelyn Tedford, and Cordwainer the new boy bought an attack dog to patrol his recently-acquired electric fence.

Had something moved, or not?

Michael got still. He heard the owl hooting again, and another answering. It came to him that just possibly they were not owls after all.

The night hung on the edge of violence.

There was this *hero* thing, Michael had often thought in less troubled times. This concept of the man of action. After all this time, he realized Rolfe Gantt had been right.

Everyone loved the hero, but the hero walked alone. It was the nature of the hero, to be solitary. To live life on his own terms, and in his own time. To be neither rushed nor to rush toward oblivion, yet oblivion would claim the hero just as it claimed every ordinary man. And love? Ah, *that*. Love. What woman was it who could truly love the hero? Oh, they might wish to brush against the heroic flesh, or to have some fling in the heroic bed and make for themselves some memory of a heroic night, but *love*? No. When the chips were down and the night was cold, it was the ordinary man who won the heart. The man of meat-and-potatoes, the man who stayed fixed in place, the man who saw his destiny and future in a family, the man to whom wife and daughter or son transformed life into a hero's dream.

But such was not to be, for a hunter from the woods.

The death of a hunter loomed large in Michael's mind on this night, as it did on many nights. He was old and he was tired. He was hurting and he was slow. What was ahead for this hunter, who had already given everything? There was only one thing left to give: his life, in exchange for

transfiguration from what was to what will be, as the lark ascends into the heavens and the last soft note fades slowly out.

But it was not a soft note he suddenly heard, that made his wolf-bones jump and his green eyes widen.

It was an explosion that cracked across the forest and echoed from every rock in the meadow of Four Brothers.

It was, he realized, the sound of his house being destroyed.

Several explosions followed the first. He saw the leap of fire through the trees and smelled the bitter tang of gunpowder in the concussive wind. They had blown his church to pieces so he might not find sanctuary there. They wanted him out in the open. They wanted him to know fear, because they moved as silently and swiftly as any wolves in the dark.

And then a shadow shifted before him, very near, and the black arrow from the black bow fired by the ninja in black came at him with a serpent's hiss.

Even as he twisted his body to escape, Michael Gallatin knew the arrow would find its mark.

It did. It hit him on the right side. Its soft plastic tip, about the size of a ripe fig, burst open on contact. It splashed and streaked his gray hair with the bright green glow of chemical phosphorescence. He was well and truly marked.

The ninja moved again, in a blur. A gloved hand opened and closed.

A net of some fine and pliable metal caught moonlight as it bloomed in the air. It sailed toward the lycanthrope, expanding as it came.

Michael saw the fallen tree to his left and the narrow space between it and the earth. He flung himself into the opening, his claws digging into the ground for traction.

The net hit the tree above him, snagged on its stubs of dead branches, and the wolf pulled in his breath to flatten his ribcage and scabbled under the trunk. Then he quickly turned to face his attacker. With a running start he took a powerful leap, pushed off with his hind legs against the tree trunk and fell upon the ninja.

It was not to be so simple. The ninja retreated. With incredible speed that turned the wolf's leap into a slow-motion exercise, the assassin threw

up a roundhouse kick that got Michael in the belly. As the wolf's body twisted again, this time in pain, the ninja got his balance and drove a rock-knuckled fist into the center of the chest. He was gone as Michael crashed into the underbrush.

Michael drew a wounded breath and righted himself. He saw the ninja moving through the foliage on his left. With an instant's pause to calculate distance and speed he took off in pursuit.

The ninja was fast and he was nimble, but this was the wolf's world.

Michael caught the killer's right ankle between his teeth and crushed it. The ninja suffered in silence, but would not go down; he gave a one-legged leap toward the nearest tree and began to climb it, using what Michael thought must be small metal pitons embedded in his bootsoles. Michael leaped up, caught the man's left ankle and dragged him down. The ninja whirled around and like a cornered animal fought with everything he had: fists to the skull, a knee to the muzzle, stiffened fingers thrusting toward the eyes and the edge of the hand chopping for the throat. They did their deadly dance in silence, as flames crackled from the werewolf's church and red sparks whirled to heaven.

Michael took a blow to the side of the head that made him *whuff* with pain. He dodged a strike meant to blind him. Then in a split-second calculation his animal instinct determined where the fist would be next and his jaws were there waiting for it. He crunched the fingers and torn human flesh to shreds. Blood sprayed into the air. The ninja gave a quiet noise not unlike a sigh of resignation. His remaining hand came at Michael with a slim-bladed knife in it and plunged the blade into the wolf's left shoulder.

But Michael had his bloodlust at full charge now and the sharp bite of Japanese steel would not turn him aside. When the ninja withdrew the knife to strike again, the wolf gripped his arm at the elbow and with a ferocious thrash broke the bones and nearly tore the limb from its socket. The knife flew away from dead fingers. Michael seized the throat and ripped it open from ear-to-ear. A glistening black flood washed over his muzzle. Then something gave a small *pop* on the ground next to him and smoke welled up into his face. His eyes stung. He smelled an odor of bitter almonds. His lungs hitched and his heart was racing. He held his breath,

even as the second gas grenade exploded behind him. A second ninja had joined the battle.

Michael let the first one slither to the earth and then he turned and ran. At full speed, or whatever speed he could manage. A third grenade popped to his right, spewing a noxious cloud. He squeezed his eyes shut and ran blindly. Even a half-breath of the stuff was strong enough to nearly knock him senseless. He thought this was how they must have subdued his companion, then slashed the throat and taken the eyes. Maybe the gas had worked its will on Mallory, too. He began to feel his usually innate sense of direction betraying him; where was he, and where was he going? He crashed through a thicket and fell through thorns and down an embankment into a hollow where a pool of water smelled green. He plunged his head into the pool and opened his eyes to wash them out. Then he shook his head to clear it as best he could and lapped up water with a tongue that felt burned.

He stood breathing hard through swollen lungs, his heart pounding. He saw the woods through a drugged mist. When he tried to move, he staggered. *Wait*, he told himself. He kept breathing, deeply and slowly. Maybe he could get his heartbeat regulated. He listened to the night and for the things that stalked in the night. How many ninjas there were, he had no way of knowing. He was going to have to get out of this hollow before they found him here, dazed and confused. And go where? he asked himself.

There was only one answer.

Go back to what had taken him to Octavius Zloy's trailer in the dead of night. Go back to what had brought him out of the ruined church in the Russian village, when he'd seen Valentine Vivian being carried away by men with guns. Go back to what had made him ask Paul Wesshauser if he could make a torpedo. Go back to facing Rolfe Gantt's pistol and saying he would let no man tell him what to do on the last day of his life. Go back to telling the Gestapo's Ice Man to take his hand off Franziska Luxe's arm.

Go back to being a man, even if he wore a wolf's clothing. Go back to the fight.

Always, always...go back to the fight.

Michael Gallatin climbed up the embankment, pushed through the thorns and the thicket, and he was very much aware that his phosphorescent glow would bring them coming now, at any minute.

He was ready to kill, and he was ready to die. But he would go out as he had lived, and no fear would cripple his cause.

A wind moved through the trees. It stirred the new leaves on the old branches.

It was the zenith of summer, and looking up at the scythe of the moon Michael opened his mouth and howled for what life had meant to him. For the joy of it, and yes for the sorrows too. All were important, in the grand scheme of things. He had not chosen this path. It had chosen him. But he thought—he hoped—he had walked it well and with honor, as both wolf and man.

They fell upon him from the dark.

There were two. One whirled a chain around Michael's throat and tightened it so hard the blood thundered in his head. The second had a baton in one hand and a net in the other, and Michael realized they meant not to kill him but to trap him. To take him on a drugged journey and place him before the Family of the Silver Thread, whose scientists would like to know what little boys who became wolves were made of.

Michael turned toward his attackers. With a snarl and show of fangs that would have dropped any ordinary man to his knees, Michael first lunged toward the ninja who chained him. He got a kick to the muzzle from a man who was as quick as a cobra, but Michael was not stopped nor was he slowed. He hit the ninja with all the power he had and slammed the man's back against a tree. Then lifting up on his hind legs and pinning the ninja with his forepaws he tore into the masked face as one would scoop the flesh from an exotic fruit. He saw the wet terror in the man's eyes as fangs tore meat and muscle away from bone, and in a frenzy of killing Michael shivered to his animal core.

He enjoyed it.

The chain loosened. Michael pulled it free from the ninja's hand. The thing in front of him had no lower jaw but it was trying to scream. Something stabbed him on the left side. In the next instant he was lifted

off his hind legs and thrown to the ground and he smelled the ozone of the electric shock after the searing pain had ripped through him. He struggled up to his knees, his muzzle dripping blood and his eyes full of red fire. He realized he was connected on the right side by a pair of wires to the baton in the remaining ninja's grip.

A finger moved, a spark jumped, and the current delivered agony to Michael Gallatin.

As the shock tortured him, he changed back and forth. From wolf to man and back again, an involuntary reaction to the electricity. He fell again to his side, in wolf form, and tried to get up again but once more the finger moved and the current obeyed and the electrical shock coursed through his body in waves that took him from wolf to man and man to wolf in a matter of seconds. His mind felt blasted; he had no sense of abrupt change, but rather that he had always been both wolf and man at the same time all his life and he had never known it.

He told himself to get up. To keep fighting. He reached for the wires to yank their hooks out of his flesh.

But the next long and terrible shock told him to stay down, and to give up.

He lay as a man, weak and naked and bleeding. His strength was gone. He watched as the ninja came forward to throw the net, and then maybe there would be another gas grenade or a blow to the head and Michael Gallatin knew his freedom would be over.

The death of a hunter, he thought in his suffering and near-delirium. He tried to change back to his more powerful form. He couldn't open the soul cage. Not this time.

The wolf was paralyzed by shock, and the door of the soul cage was sealed shut.

The ninja came forward, a graceful evil.

He never reached his destination.

For in the next instant a coal black wolf sprang at him from the side, and bearing him down to the earth it planted its paws upon his chest and took his throat between its jaws and with an explosion of power nearly ripped the head from the neck. Then it cracked the ninja's breastbone like

an eggshell and winnowed its muzzle in and plucked out the still-beating heart. It turned its head to show Michael Gallatin the prize, and Michael saw that the black wolf's eyes were ice-blue. The wolf ate the ninja's heart.

It licked the last of the blood from around its mouth.

Then it stood up on its hind legs, and with a shiver of anticipation it began to change.

As the black hair disappeared into white flesh, as the bones remade themselves and the spine drew its tail inward, as the ears became human and the face began to compose itself, the man walked toward Michael. He stood about two inches over six feet and he had a narrow-waisted body with wide strong shoulders. He moved with confidence, and Michael thought there was some arrogance in there as well. Fully revealed, the man was maybe in his mid-thirties, with thick black hair that tumbled over his forehead. He had a handsome, intelligent face with high cheekbones and the elegant nose of a lost aristocrat. A Russian face, Michael thought. The man's intense blue eyes remained fixed on Michael, even as he knelt down and pulled the hooks out from Michael's phosphorescent-streaked side.

Michael just stared in amazement at this walking miracle. But he realized he recognized the eyes. With a start, he remembered whose they were.

The younger man spoke with a distinctive Russian accent. A warmth came up in his eyes that melted all the ice away.

"My name is Peter," he said.

And he added, "I think you are my father."

