

Castle of the Wolf

Chapter 1

*The Bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling,
For you but not for me.
And the little devils have a sing-a-ling-a-ling,
For you but not for me.
Oh death where is they sting-a-ling-a-ling,
Oh grave thy victory?
The Bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling,
For you but not for me.*

No doubt about it, thought Wolf Baginski, the Sugar version of the KV-17 transport was still loud. And cold. But he was dressed for the cold. Just not dressed as well as he ought to be, but there was no choice. Not the 'plane, but his uniform. It was, he reckoned, the only 'plane out there which could do the job. Range and payload, that was to be expected. Rain Island designed for the Pacific. You could build 'planes faster than you could build ships. And they'd worked out how to use them.

The Sugar was sweet, all right, built for the sort of mission they were flying. Here it was, pitch black winter night, in a snowstorm, weaving unerringly through the Alps. He didn't doubt his pilot: Crimson Otter had been dropping him onto targets for close to ten years now, and she was the best. Even Helen Todd said so, and that was a high recommendation. Once it would have depended on feline night vision, and Rain Island had been training feline pilots, male and female, for over twenty years.

Didn't need them so much, now. As well as the mapping radar in the nose, which came out of the maritime reconnaissance version, and which meant they'd find the drop-zone, another aerial, nodding up and down, drew the glowing profile of the land ahead on a screen in the cockpit, a screen closely watched by Crimson Otter and her co-pilot. In this sort of country, no pilot dared fly in a blizzard, except one.

The RAF pilots in the Mess at Tempsford had been polite, but sceptical of what sounded a little too much like a line-shoot. On the other hand, she was getting to be an old pilot, and there is no such thing as an old, bold, pilot. And they'd seen R.I.N.S. Uniforms in the newsreels. Crimson Otter reflected that they might even have seen her.

And, last year, they'd lost a Halifax in these parts.

She wasn't even waiting for the full moon. Well, she was a mainlander, and she knew mountains and snow. And her two years at the Jump School, teaching the pilots, had given her a lot of flying time in the mountains. Well, these mountains were Swiss, and she really shouldn't be here, but better internment in Switzerland than a PoW camp until the end of the war. And maybe better Germany than Japan. Some very ugly stories had come out of the Liberation of the Spontoons.

Wolf Baginski had been sleeping, which surprised most of his companions. They didn't know him. Not Alberto Gonzales, in the seat on the opposite side of the cabin but for now they were pretending to be strangers. The rest of them had been griping about the mission, but not now. Well, the

way the mission had been set up, it wasn't the Alfie way. Sure, they'd gone in fast, without any planning, but a team was a team. Not mind-reading, but they knew each other. They didn't need a detailed plan, because detailed plans tended to collapse on contact with the enemy and a team didn't

But this wasn't an Alfie team, just anyone who was available. Sergeant McKendrick had been "borrowed" from the First Canadian Parachute Battalion, and of course he knew the name Wolf Baginski. No combat record, but he was a paratrooper, been through the Rain Island Jump School, and that counted for a lot.

The other four, they didn't have the recent experience, but Wolf was short of recent experience. He knew Alberto had been up to something, in the Mediterranean, but he'd been working at another level. Jump School Syndic wasn't entirely a desk job, but then he'd been posted to the Military Collective Mission in London. At least he was passing on lessons learned, and nobody at Ringway had thought he was a know-nothing. Though he'd surprised the RAF—soldiers aren't supposed to know the details of air operations, aren't supposed to care, and aren't supposed to be like Wolf Baginski. His neck had depended often enough on the flight plan that he could figure it out. A Wing-Commander, a surprisingly young fox-hound, had expressed surprise at the turn-around times for a second lift.

Wolf had shrugged. "We've proved we can do it. We train hard. And since the mission profiles include long over-ocean flights, we know we have to get it right." He smiled slightly. "I've passed spanners to an aircraft mechanic. And then boarded the 'plane with my parachute and jumped into action. I'm Army Union rather than Naval Syndicate, but we're in it together."

"But you're an officer," somebody had blurted.

"Not that you'd notice," said Wolf. Again he'd shrugged. "I'm a Sergeant. With a file stuffed with specialised qualifications. We do things differently."

Henman, Forsyte, Algekirk, and Rolland, they all had experience. They'd all spent time in occupied Europe. But, as far as he knew, none of them had worked together before. It was hard to trust a stranger, hard to predict what they might do. Yes, they were experienced, but men wore out.

They might be old now, but he'd rather have Doc Bredon and Charlie Bellman at his back. And he could just imagine Esterhazy in this uniform. He could have done the job. He'd stayed in the Spontoons, and he'd kept fighting. Not a man to crack up or run away, but he'd died there.

England wasn't a bad place, but Wolf didn't want to die for England. Didn't want to die for the Spontoons, but it was his home.

He glanced at Alberto again. They'd all be shot as spies, if they were caught. Didn't make much difference, there was the *Kommandobefehl* which meant no quarter. Not much different from his first combat operations: pirates didn't take prisoners.

Those guys were nervous, with good reason, but Wolf had his afterlife clear in his mind. Heck, maybe he was already dead, and this was *fimbulwinter* he was flying through, but Sylvie had said she'd wait for him, and that he trusted more than anything the Gods might promise.

"He's bloody sleeping," said Algekirk.

"Si," said Alberto.

"We could crash at any time!"

"Not this 'plane, not this pilot." He glanced towards the dispatcher. "Anyway, I don't much like the idea of being able to experience the process of dying." He paused. "I've seen too much of death."

Henman, he noticed, just nodded.

Crimson Otter doubted her passengers would notice the turn onto the new course. That was what being a good pilot meant. She was expected to drop them onto what amounted to a ledge half-way up a mountain, though it was a pretty big drop-zone by Alfie standards. Alfies would leave a 'plane fast, but most of these guys weren't Alfies. McKendrick would know the drill and was sort of cute, but the other four had the look of desk-jockeys. They'd be slow. And at this altitude the stalling speed would be higher, and she'd need a margin for manoeuvring. They'd string out.

She stilled her speculations about McKendrick. There was a kitten back in Rain Island, with her parents, and she couldn't be sure who was the father. Well, he'd grow up OK, whatever happened to her. Wolf and Alberto had kids too, and wives. And they were still going on this crazy mission, dropping into the heart of the German Alps. It looked like suicide, but those two never planned on dying. They had a way of getting out, and a back-up plan. And McKendrick stood a pretty decent chance too. If he could make it with those two, he might be worth more than speculation.

“Checkpoint on radar, five miles, on time and on course.”

“Roger that.” Of course they were on time and on course, but it was good to know, just the same. Everyone was working together, everything was right. Two more checkpoints, and the the Initial Point for the drop, climbing away from the valley floor, a hard, steep, full-power climb.

McKendrick was scared, not that he would admit it. This would be his first combat drop, and it wasn't the sort of operation he had trained for. He'd expected to drop as part of a battalion, at least. But fear... His mind drifted back to the day when he had first encountered Wolf Baginski.

It had been a parade. In a hangar, and not even Canada. McKendrick had seen four furs walkout in front of the battalion, and heard the half-scream of the RSM, and snapped to attention like an automaton. The four were wearing Rain Island uniforms, with sergeant's stripes on their sleeves, and they exuded assurance. They didn't march. They didn't need to. But they walked smartly, as McKendrick had seen officers walk. They came up to the Battalion commander, and the first, a rather skinny bear, saluted Lieutenant Colonel Johnson, anarchist style.

They had exchanged a few quiet words, and then the bear had turned to face the battalion. “Parade, stand easy!” It was a sergeant's voice. “I am Sergeant Wolf Baginski, Syndic in Command of the Army Union Jump School, and all of you, whatever your rank, are Paratroopers Under Instruction. Your officers still have their rank. Your sergeants can still do what sergeants do. But any Jump School instructor can give them orders and they will be obeyed.” His voice moderated. “Making mistakes can get you killed. You will learn to depend on each other, to check on each other. And you have my permission to be scared. But you will not qualify as a paratrooper if you give in to fear. And I want you to finish the course knowing you can depend on a fellow paratrooper.”

He had looked around then, and smiled slightly. “You're volunteers, and so am I. And I have heard good things about the Canadian Army. But, in the darkest moments, what matters is what each one of you is. I've jumped into combat, and sometimes all I have had is what I can carry on my back. I'm a soldier of the Army Union Landing Force, an Alfie, and we never give up. You want to be paratroopers? Don't make me think you'd give up.”

McKendrick smiled slightly. The battalion had picked up a few Rain Island habits, like the unobtrusive rank badges, and the tendency for every soldier, from Lieutenant Colonel down, to be burdened down with kit when they jumped.

And now he was jumping with Wolf Baginski. There'd be one soldier the bear could rely on. Canada! And Rain Island!

Alberto Gonzales had been born in Mexico, not New Mexico, and his parents had fled to Rain Island one step ahead of the faction which had won that Revolution. There'd been another Revolution, there always was. And somehow the son of a Doctor and a Teacher had ended up as a soldier. And if he had to pretend to be a *yanqui*, amongst all the other pretences of his savage and secretive war, he would be one.

There had been a briefing in London. There were things he knew, from other sources, which he didn't mention. And there were things he knew from the Admiral himself. And he was jumping with Wolf Baginski. Just like the old days. It felt almost comfortable. But in the old days, nobody lied about the men who they were sending into battle. He wouldn't have had to pretend to be a US Army Ranger.

He'd envied Wolf. The Army Union certainly expected soldiers to be smart, but they didn't make uniforms with stiff collars and neckties. Oh, if you had been a Sergeant, pre-war, you could show off with the Mess Dress. There were medals, and skill badges, you didn't wear on other uniforms. And, for an Alfie, a custom of not wearing every badge, because it would be boasting.

Besides, it was a rare Alfie who had arms long enough for all his skill badges.

The rosary beads clicking through his fingers were more real than his uniform, but he wasn't praying. The nearest thing to prayer in his mind was a comfortable awareness that he was in God's hands, but he was the soldier. And it would be his choices he would be judged on. Following orders wasn't enough.

The Admiral was also Charlie Bellman's boss, though Bellman was on indefinite sick leave. His generation called it shell shock. But this time his war had been amongst the Spontoonies. They knew, and they cared. And Doc Bredon, old and frail, would not give up on those casualties.

It meant that the Admiral had seen reports that Charlie Bellman had written. If Charlie Bellman was flying a desk for the Spontoonie Aerial Militia, he hadn't written his reports on Alberto and Wolf from the safety of a desk.

Alberto doubted Charlie could manage it, but, age apart, he should have been here.

"You are here," said the Admiral, "because you are the only people available with the talents and experience needed to successfully execute this mission." He'd paused. "Even Sergeant McKendrick. He speaks German, and is an excellent wireless operator."

"I know," Wolf had said. "Jump School," he added, as if that was all that mattered.

"Ah, yes." The Admiral paused. "Major Baginski was running the Rain Island Army Union Jump School when they parachute-trained the Canadian Parachute Battalion. Captain Gonzales wears the uniform of the US Army Rangers, you will note. You know their reputation. The rest of you have all spent time undercover in Germany."

"The mission," he went on, "is rather important."

"For a rush job such as this, I think we can all work that out," said Forsyte.

The Admiral nodded, and turned to the map. "Two nights ago, an RAF Mosquito crash-landed here." He indicated on the wall-map the area of the old German-Austrian border. "It was not an ordinary flight. There are a small number of Mosquito aircraft modified to carry very urgent passengers and cargo, flying over occupied Europe between Britain and various destinations in the Mediterranean. The passenger was Major-General Percival Carnehan, US Army, travelling to a meeting in Cairo, with certain officers of the Russian Army, to coordinate the timing of certain major operations this summer."

"So he knows too much," said Algekirk. "The Second Front."

“Yes. Time and place.”

Wolf had nodded. “And the timing is linked to sunrise and tides, I expect. Some delay is possible, but changing the place on an operation like that? Which idiot sent him that way, rather than via Gibraltar?”

“Quite.” The Admiral looked a little sour. “The Germans are very good at getting information from prisoners, and they already know that Carnehan is important. He has been taken to the local SS headquarters. I don't think Carnehan will talk willingly, though he might let something slip. He will talk.”

There were slow nods around the room. Wolf said nothing, though Alberto knew his view of the quality of information that the Germans would get through torture. These people believed that if they were captured, they would be tortured, and they would talk. All they could do was buy time.

It wasn't a bad rule for running a spy network in occupied Europe.

“So our mission is to get him out before he talks?” That was Rolland. Alberto had noticed that he tended to state the obvious.

“And if we cannot get him out, we kill him.” Alberto didn't sound Spanish, normally, but he let the accent slip out, in a slightly sinister way. “The Army will not like it.”

“Too bloody right,” snapped the Admiral. “And if you don't get him out, we'll be risking a couple of thousand RAF aircrew to flatten that castle with bombs. Which will really annoy the Americans.”

“One bullet, one *yanqui*,” said Alberto. His shrug suggested that he didn't really care who was in his sights. “Save your gallant airman for bombing civilians.” What the Admiral didn't know was that last sneer was no act. Alberto was a Rain Islander, and an Anarchist, and had fought in Spain. He was alive because he had standards. And the carpet-bombing of cities was not how he waged war.

“Captain...” Wolf sounded bored. “If it comes to that, well, I doubt I shall be alive to choose.”

There was an uneasy silence, before McKendrick said, “I suppose it will be up to me to tell you that the bombers aren't needed. And I guess if one of you guys were a good wireless operator, I wouldn't be here.”

“Astute of you.” Hawkins was the Admiral's chief of staff. New since the war started, and he hadn't seen Bellman's reports. The Spontoons had been a backwater, and Bellman had a poor reputation over his last days in Berlin. “And Captain Gonzales is here because he is an accomplished marksman, as well as his other talents.”

Alberto nodded an acknowledgement. And, whether or not there was a need to shoot Carnehan—he hoped otherwise—there were likely to be plenty of Nazi corpses decorating that SS headquarters when they left it. Think positively.

He'd vanished for a while at Tempsford, and reappeared with alcohol scenting his breath. The Rain Islanders knew what he'd been really doing. They knew who he really was. And they knew who he had married. If she wasn't supervising them as they checked this plane, they'd still not make any mistakes. They were professionals. And they knew how she felt, as they exchanged bawdy Spontoonie badinage.

The worst thing about it, thought Alberto, was that it was a farewell. Maybe this time there'd be a child. And of course he'd be back. Spontones and Rain islanders, if he didn't come back, they'd look after her. And his kid. But he'd be back.

“Getting Carnehan back matters, because of his experience. The skills of the mind will win us this war. It's the knowledge he has which could lose the war.” Hawkins was smart, but there was

something a little disturbing about his attitude. He wouldn't approve of the people Alberto knew.

Out in the mountains Obergefreiter Hans Von Focke knew very well why his unit was there. There was only one way to spot a plane on a night such as this. The radar had to work, every night, whether Hitler was here or not. If it was only on when Hitler was present, it might summon an air raid, And they did see occasional allied planes.

There had been that Mosquito last week. Which had seemed odd. And there had been something odd about the planes which had closed with it. The interception had looked wrong. Maybe somebody had been lucky.

It was Charlie Bellman who had convinced the Admiral to listen to Wolf Baginski. In a way, it didn't need much. "Go look at his record. He's been setting up raids for years. And then the Rain Islanders put him in charge of their Jump School. They pick and train their best, and they pick the best of those to do the training. They're almost farmers, planting a seed crop of soldiers.

And when Wolf Baginski said, "That's a stupid idea Admiral," He could explain exactly why. And he had the fix for it. Which involved a very unusual team.

As far as the others being dropped that night were concerned, they were "Special Radio-Navigation Equipment", but that little lie only worked if you didn't know what the standard equipment was. It did mean the the forward end of the cargo hold was partitioned off.

It also meant that Wolf Baginski wasn't looking forward to having to explain failure. In some ways he was very old-fashioned. He regarded Helen Todd and Crimson Otter as exceptional people, rare talents who sometimes did the impossible, but a tiny, primal, part of his mind still classed them as women. And women were special: you didn't send them to war.

It didn't matter to Wolf that Carol Todd was the Duchess of Stepney, as well as Helen's stepmother. He couldn't ignore that Freya Bjorksdottir was the mother of his child. And he tried not to think about what being a field-commissioned Spontoonie warrior priestess meant, but he figured the Nazis would find out.

He still thought of them as women.

And the rest of the team, they were Alfies. One of them Spontoonie born, both of them women, but Alfies nevertheless. Which made Wolf and Alberto feel almost happy. Whatever else might happen, the *Schutzstaffel* and the *Gestapo* would know they had been in a fight.

"He's smiling," murmured Rolland. "Must be having a good dream."

Algekirk snorted, a little derisively. "Might not have many more."

Alberto nudged Wolf with his foot, and said something vulgar in Spanish. Wolf's eyes snapped wide open. The Jumpmaster was still standing and checking his safety strap when Wolf stood up, and shouted "Stand up! Hook up!" in a parade-ground bellow that ought to be audible on the next Alp. Somehow, in the hustle, McKendrick found himself between Wolf and Alberto, almost as if they were protecting him. Wolf would be first out, that was the way they did it at Jump School.

"Remember," bellowed the dispatcher into Rolland's ear, "This is a short drop zone. Move fast!"

Rolland had last jumped out of a 'plane through a hole in the floor, alone. This was going to be different. No need to go hunting for an equipment container, all he needed was carried in carefully-tested Rain Islander packaging. All he had to do was to remember to drop the leg-bag on the end of the rope, which also meant he would know when he was closing the ground. It was, he thought, a pretty decent system.

Behind him, unseen, Team Queen of the United Spontoonie Militia Special Raiding Force stood quietly, checked their gear, and hooked up their static lines. They didn't need to say anything to each other. It was Charlie Bellman who had described all four of them as “field-commissioned warrior priestesses”—that was how he'd got his commission—and it was maybe an exaggeration, but they knew what they were.

And they had all spent their night on Sacred Island. Perhaps even more than Wolf, they knew what was at stake, more than just a almost arbitrary ideal of Liberty. They had started feeling it as the 'plane had crossed The Channel and they had entered German-controlled territory. It was a madness that had built places such as Auschwitz, but there was a method in the madness. And that method, they could not let it win.

Not at any price.

Castle of the Wolf

Chapter 2

McKendrick had never quite become used to the way that the RAF dispatched paratroopers through a hole in the floor of a converted bomber. This jump was Rain Island style, and felt right. He was going to war, and everything was as it should be, half-shuffling out of the wide-open tail of an R.I.N.S. transport plane into the black night over enemy territory. And Rain Island 'chutes were good, soft opening. The 'chutes the RAF supplied were very similar, and what he'd heard, American paratroops would speak with squeaky high voices for a while after each drop.

So there he was, 'chute open, looking up to check for twisted rigging lines, going through the old familiar routine, checking it was clear below and releasing the hooks and lowering the leg bags. They'd put him in a German uniform, but they didn't expect him to drop with one of those god-damn German 'chutes. He could steer, and turn into the wind, and even pick his landing spot. There was not of the frantic, and rather futile, swimming-like motion, dangling from a 'chute fastened to the small of his back, landing in a sprawling un-armed mess.

He caught a glimpse of Wolf's 'chute against the snow, about where it should be, and he could see the slot in the darkness of the trees that was the snow-covered alpine meadow that was their target. He looked the other way, and upwards. That must be Gonzales, the American, near to him, and he thought he could see the next man in the stick, and he looked at the relative distances and judged he'd done OK. Those desk jockeys hadn't done a proper Jump School exit. Oh, they'd jumped, but he was one of the professionals.

And then he felt the weight change on the lines that supported his leg-bags and, without conscious thought, he was in the landing routine. He didn't need to see the ground, a hard-trained internal clock took over for those last moments, and then the thump.

Nobody bothered to check for the others. You never had time in those first moments after landing, bringing the 'chute under control, and letting it drag you a little back to the leg bags. But he was down. And when he walked back into barracks there would be the black glass bead of a map pin just above his jump wings. There was nothing in Kings Regulations about that, it was pure Rain Island, and they'd know he'd made an operational jump.

He shed his parachute harness, and took a moment to take off the jump helmet and put on the cap. It was German Army, but not so different from a Rain Island cap. He wondered for a moment if he could write it off as "lost in action", and keep it as a memento. Well, he had to get home first.

"Kreta!"

"Brunéval!"

That was Wolf, already looking almost too German, a Major of the *Alpenkorps*, worn and honed by war. Not somebody you wanted to mess with, but somebody who was a fallow soldier, a *kamerad*. Somebody who knew what the shadows felt like. McKendrick had a feeling he'd know himself, before very long. What maybe wasn't right was that Wolf was carrying his own rucksack, but the *Alpenkorps* was a little different. And here came Gonzales, the white-striped black fur of his face almost like some movie Indian on the warpath, which didn't seem too wrong.

"Any problems?"

"Nothing obvious." The wireless had been well-packed, but it would need checking. He didn't need to explain that. And Gonzales knew something about operating a wireless in the field.

McKendrick heaved his rucksack on his back and slung the Schmeisser across his chest. He started whistling, not very well, *Lili Marlene*. It was about the only German tune he could whistle.

“Well, that's the easy part done with,” said Wolf.

“*Si*,” agreed Gonzales.

The second drop zone was six miles away, and Team Queen had a pretty easy drop, though it was the first time that a paratrooper, of any nation, had dropped with a bass tuba. It was the bulk that was more of a problem. Six miles, because that put them close to the next railway station on the line up the valley, and they would catch the first train of the day, and so arrive in full view of everyone. Nobody would think they had dropped by parachute the night before. Nobody would think they had come from England. And, with just a little luck, some SS officer would see them in the bar, and commandeer them for the entertainment of his superiors at the Castle.

Not that luck had anything to do with it, thought Carol. It would just need a tiny nudge. They were, after all, a very competent group of entertainers. Personally, she hoped that whoever became the patsy was a gentleman. Or, at least, had had some good manners hammered in to him, so he didn't try any hanky-panky too soon. But there was something in the air, something dark, and, however hard she listened, the familiar sense of the Gods being present was missing.

She wondered what Wolf was feeling. His Gods were more Germanic, maybe more at home here. And maybe with far more reason to be scared.

“It's a bloody army camp!”

“A training camp for the German *Alpenkorps*,” agreed Wolf.

“The place will be crawling with jerries.”

“*Si*,” said Alberto. Wolf thought he was carrying things a little far. “Have a look at the uniform you are wearing. Is it not the uniform of the German *Alpenkorp*? Everyone here is used to seeing strangers in that uniform.”

After a long moment, Algekirk nodded. “Of course...” He lowered his binoculars. “Not a perfect plan, but one that can work. And pretty good for something set up in the rush that this has been.”

Rolland grunted. “A decent enough scheme if you don't give 'em time to think. So where's the damn castle that the SS uses?”

“On the Stone of the Wolves,” said Henman. “The stone... They do that in Wales, sometimes. It's still a bloody mountain.”

“Not so big, by local standards,” said Wolf. “The *Schloss Schwarzbär*—maybe I should feel flattered.”

“How the hell do we get in there? Fly?”

“There's a cable car.”

Forsyte chuckled. “They didn't have cable cars when they built it, and they wouldn't hoist a knight up a cliff in a basket, like one of those Greek monks. There'll be a road. Guarded, of course, but a road.” He looked thoughtful. “That cable car is very convenient for the railway station. Wasn't it supposed to be the palace of some Bishop?”

“Descending from heaven,” said Alberto. “Back to the barn, Major?”

“For now,” agreed Wolf. “We should arrive when the place is busy. Tired soldiers, after a hard day, maybe looking for some fun.” He shrugged. “Except we'll not be tired. We had to rush to make the deadline for the flight. Now we can rest.”

“Sounds good, but if Carnehan starts talking...”

Wolf looked at Algekirk. “The Nazis aren't good at cooperating. If he starts talking, the guy who hears him isn't going to tell the world. He'll want to go tell Hitler in person, with the complete story.”

“Dead men tell no tales,” said Alberto.

“*Frau*,” corrected Carol. “The war, you understand.” And a Duchess, of any nation, knows ways of looking at a man who displeases her. The NCO took a half-step back and straightened slightly, not that he had seemed unsoldierly before. Carol smiled slightly, and dismissed the error with a wave of her hand. “No matter,” she added. But it was on the papers, and you really ought to have noticed. She didn't have to say that.

“Me, also,” said Freya, with her less cultured accent. “And when were you last at the front?” She used the more intimate form of “you”, which English no longer uses, and which can be something of an insult in most European languages. It hit home, but one of the soldiers behind the NCO had the Tank Destruction Badge. There was something about the way he looked at Freya.

“Freya, enough,” said Carol. “Some of these men deserve better than that insult.”

Freya glared at Carol, and that wasn't so much of an act, knowing what Wolf was doing, before muttering, “I apologise,” in a slightly reluctant way.

The NCO looked at the four of them. “No offence, my ladies. My sister's husband did not escape Stalingrad. So, you are to perform at *Zum Wilden Hirsch* tonight?”

“Yes. Music. Comedy. There are only four of us, but we try harder. And we try to take away the war for a while. For our audience...”

“...and for yourselves.” He nodded slowly. “I was part of an amateur theatre group before the war. I know a little of how it can feel, and I wish you well.” He handed Carol her papers. “I am on duty tonight, so, perhaps, tomorrow.”

“I hope so,” agreed Carol.

Alberto was teaching Algekirk and Rolland the German card game *Skat*, which was almost the default card game of the Alfies. Four men in a team, one keeping watch, a three-handed card game suited very well. Of course, he was playing with a German deck of cards; bells, hearts, leaves, and acorns. The pack of cards had been bought by a British agent based in Switzerland.

“So you're an American, and you know a German card game.”

Alberto nodded. “A lot of Germans emigrated to America,” he said.

Algekirk nodded, and carefully looked over his hand. “I prefer Bridge.”

“Do people in Germany play it? You've spent time here.”

“I stuck with chess. Do you know what I did in Germany?” Alberto shook his head. “I was a junior officer in the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*. Pushing paper and trying to get everything I learned back to England. And until now, I was back in London, pushing paper. I think I prefer London, but there are, or maybe were, if one can believe the RAF, some beautiful buildings in Berlin.” He

paused. "If I could end this war..."

"But how? I don't think the Russians would stop," said Rolland.

Alberto nodded towards Wolf. "Rain Island," he said.

"Rum bunch," said Algekirk, "But I wonder if the RAF could have organised that flight in the time." He shrugged, and played his card.

"Damn!" said Rolland. "Your trick."

"Let's say," said Alberto, "That the Russians get half Europe. The rest of Europe has to dance to an American tune, or eventually go under." He played an eight of acorns. "And Rain Island, they're right next door."

"They'll join Canada," asserted Algekirk. "Or maybe like Newfoundland, part of the Empire but not part of Canada."

Alberto nodded. "When my ancestors were Mexican, slavery was illegal. Then America provoked a war, took a great swathe of land, and made slavery legal again." He shrugged. "It's not hard to see who some of my ancestors were. It's sometimes been rough in the Army, but I've made Captain."

"Land fit for heroes, they called it in England, after the last one," said Rolland. "They lied." He yawned. "I think I shall be ready for sleep when we finish the hand."

"Gold will not get you good soldiers," murmured Alberto, "But good soldiers... Well, I hope I'm better than this hand, gentlemen."

"Play it out," said Algekirk. "I already owe you too much. Got to get some of it back."

"Play it out, and get some sleep," said a voice from the end of the barn. "It's still snowing, and it's hard to see any of our tracks. It'll be hard getting down to the village. At least you lucky people get the chance to try Army Union rat-packs. Better than that damn Woolston Pie at Tempsford."

"He's the boss," said Alberto, played his last card, and lost another hand. Muttering Hispanic curses, he settled down to sleep.

"*Die vier Königinnen!*" exclaimed Max. "I am already impressed. The photographs do not do you justice."

"Wait until you see us perform. We are just full of surprises!" Carol kept her mind locked within its shields. There was something strange here, something she couldn't place. Something dangerous, but not threatening. This place was called The Wild Deer, and there was some memory prodding at her. Something she ought to remember, anyway. Germanic, but not Nazi, that was the feel of it, and waiting for somebody.

There was something she half-recognised in what she allowed herself to taste from that sensation.

"This is a wonderful place," exclaimed Freya. "When was it built?"

"Ah. It is not as old as it looks. It was built a few years before the war, after the previous inn was burnt down in a fire." Max looked proud. "You would think it had been here forever, but we have all the conveniences of a modern hotel. And, even with the war, I have paid off the bank already!"

"That's wonderful. You're a lucky man."

"Doubly lucky, to have you here."

Zebbie sat on the tuba case. "*Ich bin ein Hamburger.*" She grimaced. "I have nightmares," she confessed. "I hope this place will be different."

Max nodded. "I thought I heard a 'plane last night, but it might have been one of those big Army trucks. Just the one. You are safe here, I assure you."

"*Ja, ja,*" muttered Zebbie. "Thank you. But I am with my friends. It helps."

"Let us all try to forget the war," said Max. "Ah, but there are all the soldiers. Still, I assure you we have good food."

"I shall look forward to it." said Carol. Zebbie muttered something vulgar about *sauerkraut*.

McKendrick was well hidden, effectively invisible, watching the castle with a telescope. It was, he had discovered, rather better than a pair of binoculars: more magnification, and less weight. He heard the footsteps behind him, called out the challenge, and heard Wolf's reply.

Wolf looked at him, and grinned. "Careful with that thing."

McKendrick holstered his Browning. "I think the Admiral was lying to us."

"Oh?"

"I remember the newspaper stories. You and the rest of your team hitting those pirates." McKendrick grinned. "Well, he didn't actually lie. Alberto was wearing a US Army uniform."

"True."

"So, what's the scoop?"

Wolf wriggled up to the OP. "And that's why you wanted to be a paratrooper?"

"Well, some of it."

"Good. If we come out of this alive, you'll not be able to talk about it."

"But I'll have my black pin."

"Yep."

"It occurs to me," said McKendrick, "That our four desk jockeys have all spent time in deep cover in Nazi Germany. I figure they'd have to be very good, and lucky, or..."

"Or?"

"Working for the Nazis."

"I know a very good, and lucky, man who speaks German like a native. Burned out now, this is his second big war. But four of them? And the Admiral has access to other information sources."

"And he puts in another team, undercover, that those four don't know about."

"He has?"

"Like I said, I'm a bit of a fan. Some people follow film stars. There are four women, walking on the riverbank..."

Wolf took the telescope, re-aimed, and looked. He said nothing, but McKendrick heard his breathing change. He said nothing, and McKendrick did not break the silence.

"You recognised my wife?"

"I think you're a lucky man, sir."

"Freya was doing this stuff when I first met her." Wolf lowered the telescope eyepiece and

looked at McKendrick. "I hope you find as good a woman, but it can be a hard road."

"So all four of them... Spontoonie?"

"Yep."

"This wasn't set up in a hurry." McKendrick sighed. "He thinks he has another traitor, who didn't go to Germany." Wolf said nothing. "Is Carnehan real?"

"Peachy? He's a brave man. That real enough?"

"Guess so."

Wolf nodded. "The fifth man, he has got out four suspected agents. But he doesn't know Peachy is a fake. And those four all know who he is. Alberto and I have a scheme to fool the whole damn lot of them."

"And the ladies?"

"Hole cards. Four Queens."

"And me?"

Wolf shrugged. "You and Peachy; Jokers wild?" He looked through the telescope again. "You're a paratrooper. Feel free to get into an argument with Alberto, but you'll have to trust us."

"Jump School," said McKendrick.

"Jump School," agreed Wolf.

"Sylvie Baginski," said Marta. "It makes no sense. He's sure she'll be waiting for him on the Rainbow Bridge, but this isn't the Bridge."

"I know," said Freya. "We were talking about Smallwolf. She's on a mission from God. A God anyway."

"Odin," said Carol, with a slightly amused tone, "probably thinks Wolf would take his job."

There were chuckles, even from Freya. "He could die tonight," she said. "And what the Germans might do... Sylvie wants him to come out of this alive and sane. But she expects him to be the right man in the right place for something very important to happen. And it's going to need all our power, even then. She said that there was a house by the *Wannsee* in Berlin, where plans were laid. That's what we're all here to fight."

"And Wolf?"

"We share him, when the time comes." She shrugged. "She literally was unable to say just what Wolf's part is going to be in this."

"Ever met Dennis Wheatley?" Carol was grinning. "He's an English novelist, works in an obscure government department that puts together speculative briefings, tries to get inside the Nazi mind." She paused. "Wrote some novels about Black Magic. He wouldn't believe this."

Freya looked across the river, directly at her husband. "I wish this were just a novel, even a bad one."

Of course the Nazis had helicopters. Even if Flettner had decided to get out of Germany, and ended up in Rain Island, he'd left prototypes behind. And there were others. There was somebody

working in the United States, and Avro-Canada was still working on autogyro tech. So Wolf, without any fuss, watched the helicopter settle in the outer courtyard of the castle—a stretch of the curtain wall was missing, demolished in the last century to form a sun trap for the Bishop's pleasure—and saw everything. The helicopter might be Luftwaffe—Göring was very definite that everything with wings was in his hands—but its passengers were not. Two very senior officers, each with an ADC. Rosemayer, one of the OKW officers with routine access to Hitler, and something of the *Führer's* personal errand boy, and the big prize: Heydrich.

Wolf took a deep breath. The Czechs had failed. He would not. And the aidé, now that was interesting. The SS didn't call their people shamans, but Wolf knew what he was looking at. Besides, not even Heydrich would have an *SS-Gruppenführer* as an ADC. And he fancied he could smell death even at this distance.

He muttered a prayer, a simple soldier's one, that echoed a Christian sailor's prayer. "May your wisdom guide me, may your courage inspire me; if I should forget you in the heat of battle, do not forget me." He paused. "Sylvie, maybe we meet tonight. But help me finish the job first."

Castle of the Wolf

Chapter 3

*Es steht ein kleines, kleines Edelweiß
auf einer steilen, steilen Felsenhöh.
Umgeben ist's von Schnee, ja Schnee und Eis,
das kleine Edel-, Edelweiß.*

McKendrick felt his heart sink as he saw the checkpoint at the bridge. This was something that he hadn't really thought of, play-acting his way past a bunch of German soldiers. Except that it wasn't any sprt of play. He turned to Algekirk and said, in a slightly tired way, "I hope we can get to the barracks without any trouble. I don't want to miss the show at the Wild Deer."

Algekirk nodded very slightly before he answered. "The girls are probably old enough to be your mother. Best get a little drunk, blur your vision."

"Let the young have their dreams," said Wolf. "And, young man, hope you have memories when you get old, as I am."

"I hope I can age as well as you have, *Herr Major*," said McKendrick. He stopped, with the others, and, like them, reached for his *soldbuch*. At least the checkpoint was not *Feldgendarmerie*. And it was not uncommon for an experienced *Alpenkorps* officer to take some of his juniors out into the winter snow and work them hard.

"I hope we all live to see that, youngling," said Wolf. "We must all enjoy what we can. Is all well, *Feldweibel*?"

"All is as always, *Herr Major*."

Wolf nodded. "Good. Carry on with your duties."

And it was almost that simple.

Five minutes later, Wolf was leading them past the railway station when he looked around, nodded slightly, and said, "For my next trick..." He gestured to Alberto, who ran up the three steps to a door, worked at it for a moment, opened it, and went in. After a moment, the others followed, Wolf and McKendrick last of all.

The door closed. The neatly painted sign could be translated, as the mood took you, as either "Left Luggage" or "Parcels". Either way, the door let into a chill, dark, room of heavily-built shelves, on which were an assortment of packages and suitcases. It was a somewhat obvious place to hide their baggage, but a place where it wouldn't look out of place.

"You picked the lock?"

Alberto looked at Rolland. "Sure. Who thinks I was a good little boy?"

Wolf said nothing. Rolland didn't need to know that Alberto had used a duplicate key. "Well, you might get a chance at Heydrich's medals,"

"Heydrich? The Hangman?"

The one and only," said Wolf. "A nice bonus. Head of the *SS-Reichssicherheitshauptamt* and other things besides, The Czechs came as close as anyone. Remember, that castle is where the local SS

and *Gestapo* headquarters is, and Heydrich is the top dog for all the German police, reporting direct to Himmler.” He shivered. “It means they must know what Carnehan is.”

“Kill them all. I don't think God will have any problem deciding.” Alberto adjusted the collar of the officer's greatcoat which had replaced the snow camouflage. “I like this uniform.”

“At least you're not disguised as SS,” said Wolf, with a sigh.

McKendrick stuck with German, saying, “The British uniform can look so shabby.”

Henman said, “*Wir sind nur Krieger für den Werktag*,” and shrugged. “That's maybe a bit too literal.”

Wolf stuck with the English of Shakespeare. “Our gayness and our guilt are all besmirch'd, with rainy marching in the painful field.” He stamped his boots. They were proper mountain boots, not the jackboots of movies. “But not too much, I hope.”

McKendrick checked his pistol, a Browning. The Wehrmacht used them too, and if anybody got close enough to check the maker's marks it would be all over anyway. So it was his pistol, the one he'd trained with, and that made him feel better.

“Did you need to do that,” murmured Alberto.

“Maybe not, but it makes me feel better.”

“I know the feeling.”

McKendrick smiled. “I would have been born in Berlin, if they hadn't changed the name of the town in 1916.”

Alberto chuckled.

There all sorts of clichés about Bavarian clothes and music. There are even photographs of Hitler in brown shirt and *Lederhosen*. So Team Queen didn't quite look out of place, and Zebbie, enmeshed in the tuba, was getting quite inventive with her playing. And, lets face it, four shapely women in *Lederhosen*, showing much more fur than usual, and looking happy, were just what an *Alpenkorps* soldier needed to see. And they knew the right songs. More, they were working their audience. In the first five minutes, Carol had everyone toasting the raw private who had been worrying about his wife and newly-born son, even the *Oberst*, who she then kissed most decorously (unless you happened to be his wife).

There was, incidentally, some ribald speculation as to how “Marta” (Her real name was Jade Blossom Parker, and her false papers claimed her birthplace as Hamburg) might be able to play her accordion, with her spectacular build, but when she launched into the *Marsch der Gebirgsjäger*, and Carol, Freya, and Zebbie picked up the words in close harmony, nobody could doubt they were being entertained by professionals.

None of them needed to see Wolf with their eyes when he walked in. He was, on the spiritual level, a white hot burning brand. He and Alberto were Chosen Ones, and that scared Freya: it did not presage a long life. But, she told herself, Wolf was Wolf, and the man who could take him out would know he had been in a fight.

“I am terribly worried about the war,” exclaimed Carol, with a particularly theatrical gesture. She'd seen at least two SS officers in the room already. “I have not seen my husband for three years, and I am so alone!”

“*Ja*,” agreed Marta, “This is not good. All the good men are at war. Only yesterday, I found the

window cleaner watching while I bathed.”

“Goodness, what happened!”

“I was so astonished, I dropped my towel and he dropped his bucket!”

Even the SS Officers laughed as Marta listed the five *Ordnungspolizei*, three *Kriminalspolizei*, and two *Gestapo* officers who “wanted to see every detail.”

“And did they?”

“Only the *Gestapo*. Only a fool refuses a request from the *Gestapo*.”

Of course the audience laughed, but a good many of them would be a little uneasy afterwards. A fringe benefit of the performance.

Charlie Bellman would have recognised the mind-reading act. He'd never mentioned his agent in Berlin to Carol, but the act had been written by the prolific J. Hickory Wood. Of course, the objects were different, and the verbal byplay would never have escaped the eye of the Lord Chamberlain.

And then Zebbie launched into a long and complicated story about how the British War Winning Secret Weapon was a Killer Joke, and anyone who read or heard the joke promptly died laughing. The *Abwehr* had heard about it, and didn't quite believe it could exist. Until one of their agents in Switzerland had been invalided home after getting a chance to read the contents of the British Embassy's waste paper basket.

“But you know how hard it is to translate jokes from one language to another?” Of course, there had to be examples, and half-dozen well-known German jokes got the benefits of carefully un-funny translation. “And this is Britain's secret weapon!”

And Marta read it. “*Wenn ist das Nunstruck git und Slotermeyer? Ja! Beiherhund das Oder die Flipperwaldt gersput!*”

There was silence.

“That doesn't make sense” said Carol.

“It isn't very funny,” said Freya.

“It's not funny at all,” exclaimed Marta.

Zebbie crumpled up the piece of paper and threw it to one side. “I've never heard of a secret weapon that worked.”

“Well, if you heard of it, it wouldn't be a secret weapon.” Freya spun around. “*Herr Major*, do you know any good songs. Come on, don't be shy.”

Wolf, apparently nervous, and a little embarrassed, stood, and said, “I am a poor singer, young lady, but of course, I know *Lili Marlene*.”

“You have a nice voice,” said Freya to her man, meaning every phoneme with all her heart

“Thank you.” And Wolf knew it. “Don't waste effort on me.”

Freya knew what he didn't say, and could sense what he couldn't, and knew that in this place there was somebody else, who she'd never met in this world, and who waited “by the barrack gate.”

Marta started playing *Lili Marlene*, a little slowly and in the plaintive manner that an accordion can play a tune, and Wolf's eyes brightened as suddenly he realised what he was feeling, and he opened his mouth and sang, as though there was nothing else in the world but his memory of a lonely woman waiting for him to come to her.

McKendrick knew, and so did Alberto, and he wondered if the other four could even notice. Other four? Where was Henman? Over by the door, and slipping out, unseen. What to do? Spoil the moment? No, slip away and follow. One thing you learned at Jump School, besides jumping out of perfectly servicable aeroplanes, and trusting your fellow paratroopers: you trusted yourself, and you acted as the situation required. You didn't need detailed orders. You worked out how to fulfil the mission for yourself. Airborne initiative.

McKendrick was thinking like an Alfie. Henman wasn't.

The German Army have big almost-truck motor cars for commanders, not limousines but that sort of size, and there was one parked maybe a hundred yards down the street. McKendrick turned back to a non-existent friend for a moment, and then walked across the street, trying to alter his gait a little as he did. He'd seen Henman at the command car, and if he'd had a Bren gun he would have put a full magazine of .303 in it. But he didn't have a Bren gun and, besides, starting a battle was a dumb move right now. So he acted innocent, just a slightly drunk young *Alpenkorps* officer who was wondering if he was too drunk, if he'd enjoyed the show a little too well.

If there was one thing he got wrong, it was the belief that nobody had noticed him, and the belief that none of the Four Queens would give him a second look. He forgot that he was a Sergeant and a paratrooper, and he hadn't quite realised that he had already been picked by Wolf Baginski.

They were, even without their talents, prepared to take him seriously as a man.

He could hear *Lili Marlene*, and it wasn't just Wolf singing. He stopped, and looked back at the *Gasthof*, and barely whispered the words, a lonely young soldier, hoping that somebody was waiting for him by some barrack gate.

Down the street, behind the command car, two three-ton trucks were disgorging fully armed infantry. Could he warn Wolf and Alberto? Not really, so what else could he do? Stay alive and un-hunted, for a start.

And wait for his chance.

Freya was kissing Wolf, to the enthusiastic cheers of the rest of the audience, when the soldiers, led by Regimental Police, came in. The enthusiasm was the first casualty of the interruption, and the armed men knew exactly who they were looking for. Deserters, was the message, cowards hiding in plain sight. Algekirk, Rolland, and Forsyte didn't even protest as they were cuffed and led away. Well, she reflected, they didn't need to. And, if Wolf and Alberto were cowards, they didn't look it. He clicked his heels, and bowed, and kissed her hand, as if it were a temporary farewell.

And she did not act as if she would never see her man again. Shock, yes, and a little disgust, marked her face, and also sympathy for a man going to his death, however that fate had been earned. It was a woman's reaction, not a soldier's, and not a Spontoonie Priestess. And she knew the night was very young yet.

“*Frau*, please carry on. I regret the interruption, and it would be better to calm the troops.”

“*Jawohl, Herr Oberst.*”

“And try not to mock the SS too much.” A flicker of a smile crossed the officer's face. “All the details...”

“Yes, of course. *Zu befehl.*” It wasn't hard for Freya to look nervous.

He looked at her. “He's not a deserter, far more dangerous. Don't think you kissed a coward. Not

that I'm telling you anything, you understand." He shrugged slightly. "A brave man, facing a terrible fate. By the time they kill him, I doubt there'll be anything left of the man that can remember you."

"That's horrible."

"So don't mock the SS."

"Alley. Left."

Half an hour ago, McKendrick had had doubts about the voice in his head. Not any more. He'd never seen the Spontoons, never heard of a Warrior Priestess, but his granny, so his father told him, had the Second Sight, and whatever he was hearing was guiding him true. And then he heard shouting, new orders. The search was being called off.

"You have to hurry," said the voice.

He almost asked why, but he was no fool. He could guess. Wolf and Alberto.

"Yes. We have one chance. I shall be displeased if you mess it up."

I won't be too happy, he thought, alone in Nazi Germany.

"I shall glamour you with illusion. That will get you close enough."

Wolf hadn't tried to deny it when the SS officer had told him it was no use lying about McKendrick, Rolland had already told him how he'd killed the wireless operator. He didn't know for how long that false memory would hold, but he figured four queens was a good hand. The bastard need not have proceeded to beat him up. Between the rifle butts and the kicks, he figured he had at least a cracked rib. And they didn't know who Alberto really was, or they wouldn't be trying to scare him. They were trying to split their prisoners, psychologically, and that was not something you should waste effort on with an Alfie team.

So now they were in a Horch staff car, speeding out of the town in the road to the castle's main entrance, uncomfortably sandwiched between two SS men, with the officer comfortable in the front seat beside the driver. And there was a *Feldgendarmerie* NCO flagging them down.

"Sorry, sir, more than my job's worth not to check for that deserter." He was coming around to the passenger side.

"You're wasting your time. The man is already dead."

"Not according to my orders, sir." The NCO stooped to look through the passenger window, and Wolf looked directly into McKendrick's face and wondered how on earth he could have mistaken him for a *kettenhunde*. The double-tapped boom of the Browning deafened him, and the soldier beside him jerked as the bullets struck, and the muzzle was already swinging to the front seats, McKendrick's knee against the door. The soldier beside Alberto gave a sort of strangled gasp. There was another double-tap, and Wolf knew his friends would have to talk loudly for a few days. The driver had his door open, and was out and running.

McKendrick took careful aim, with the new braced-triangle stance, and fired two shots, maybe a second apart.

In the dimmed light of the black-out modified headlamps, Wolf watched a wild deer, female, walk out into the middle of the road, seem to look straight at him, and walk on back into the darkness.

McKendrick checked the soldier who had been beside Alberto, and the driver, before he did anything else. He handed back Alberto's knife after wiping the blade on the skirt of the dead man's greatcoat.

"How did you manage that, Alberto?"

"A trick my wife taught me."

McKendrick chuckled. "You gentlemen have remarkable wives."

"Yes," said Wolf. And, he thought, whoever it was who helped you, they knew you could handle it. "My first wife was a remarkable woman too."

McKendrick looked startled for a moment, and then nodded. "I'd forgotten," he said. He took a deep breath. "I think we need to stage a crash into the lake, something that explains why you and your escort don't get to the castle." He smiled. "It's a great advantage to be thought dead, I find."

Alberto laughed.

"Hardly needed to do anything. The guy is damn near pissing himself in ecstasy at the thought of getting some good entertainment for his boss." Marta chuckled. "I kind of like the idea of getting within reaching distance of Heydrich."

"Yeah, well, be careful. The SS have their black magicians." Carol yawned, and made a warning hand sign, a moment before there was a knock at the door. "Yes?"

"*SS-Sturmbannführer* Schafer. I would like to make a request."

Carol started to open the door. "A request, from the SS?"

"I would like to book a performance." Carol began to open the door. "Tonight."

"You're crazy, *Herr Sturmbannführer*. You do realise how tired we are?"

"*Ja*." A moment of silence. "You would be performing for *Reichsprotector* Heydrich. Think of what that might mean for your careers."

"Come in," said Carol. "And if we mess up, the *Reichsprotector* won't have any warm fuzzy feelings for you. So, do you want to risk it?"

He looked at her. "If you are willing to try..."

"Heydrich is such a handsome man," said Zebbie. "I'm willing."

Carol rolled her eyes. "Zebbie, he is married. Freya? Marta?"

"He's SS," said Freya. "What choice do we really have?"

Schafer stood a little straighter. "You are German women, and this is not Paris or Prague, and I am not that sort of fool. And, even if this were Paris or Prague, I do know something of the practicalities of the theatre."

Freya nodded. "I apologise. My husband is a soldier, and seeing all these soldiers has prompted fears." She considered. "Count me in. I'm not going to get a good night's sleep anyway."

"We will make this a night to remember," said Marta.

Wolf was under no illusions about the safety of their supply stash, and he knew that the traitors

would expect certain things to be there. But they didn't know about the suitcases that the Four Queens had left and didn't expect Wolf to have duplicate keys. They would find all the German machine pistols that they expected, and enough explosives. They didn't know about the Rain Island machine carbines, which, Wolf reckoned, beat a Schmeisser hollow.

McKendrick had been trained on the Mark 2 at Jump School, and been sorely disappointed by the Sten gun. He didn't see any need to complain.

Alberto just checked his ugly Mark 8. They were going to be getting up close, and it didn't matter that, with the right rifle, he could hit a man with one shot at 800 yards. The Mark 8 was rebuilt to fire subsonic .45 ACP through a silencer. It didn't look very much like a gun, more like a piece of drainpipe. And the short range didn't much matter.

And then all they had to do was get into the castle.

“We ride up on top of a cable car. It's dark, and the glare from the lights in the cabin will dazzle anyone looking at it. But no foot-stamping. We'll be wearing ice spikes, and jumping onto the roof of the top station. That's the big risk. Fall and it's 700 feet straight down, without a parachute. You Canadians have done a mountain course, right?”

“Yep,” said McKendrick. “Permission to be scared?”

“Granted. We have rope and grappling hooks, and Alberto and I have boarded ships the hard way before now. This castle is a really not designed to keep people like us out.”

“And there I was thinking you'd just knock on the door, sir.”

“Works sometimes,” said Alberto. “And we're all Sergeants.”

McKendrick nodded. “Works for me, boss.”

Wolf grinned. “Kipling wrote a poem about us, before he died. Not really his best work, but I think he got some of the feel. All he had were the newspaper reports, I think. Maybe Doc Bredon wrote to him.”

“And it's thin red line of heroes when the band begins to play...” McKendrick preferred Robert Service, but Kipling did seem to know something about soldiering. “And how do we get out again?”

“I have a cunning plan,” said Wolf.

Castle of the Wolf

Chapter 4

“The view is spectacular in daylight.”

“I don't like heights,” said Marta. “I thought there was a road.” She was sitting on a stack of luggage, eyes firmly closed.

“Oh, there is, but this is much quicker.”

“I wish it was daylight,” said Carol. “I don't think I'd be feeling so nauseous. I can feel this thing swaying but...”

“Shut up!” Marta took a deep breath and clamped her mouth shut.

Carol turned, and looked out into the night. There was a cold wind blowing, and it would be worse here than it had been at the lower station. And she knew very well who was clinging to the top of the car, probably shivering now. None of the three Germans in the car would notice anything, no odd little sounds from above. Partly it was the simple distraction of the company, partly some more subtle manipulation that, the closer they got to the castle, and the *Reichsprotektor*, gradually became more dangerous. But there could be ice on the cable, sometimes falling with a thump onto the car's roof.

Freya looked cheerful, and maybe a little scared, and most of that was acting. Something strange was going on, and Wolf was a blazing beacon in the Otherworld. He'd be spotted. All four of them knew, with a sickly certainty, that Wolf would be caught again. And what then? Carol turned and looked towards the Upper Station. It jutted out from the castle wall, and was a blaze of light in the darkness. There was something odd about the whole feel of the castle.

Maybe it was that it had been a Bishop's Palace, not that that gave any guarantee of saintliness. Bishops Palatine could be a hard-nosed, ruthless, bunch of sinners, doing great wrongs in the name of their God. But there was still the symbolism and intent of the ritual. It still counted for something. And the last hundred years or so had been a better time. The last Bishops hadn't had to lead armies in battle.

So maybe the aura of evil was no more than a mask over some deeper, kinder, holiness. And there was something that almost sparkled within the walls, like the last embers of some spiritual inferno. Maybe, just maybe, she would be able to fan the blaze.

A few feet above her head, Alberto Gonzales finished his prayer to Saint Barbara, Patron Saint of all those who work with explosives or face sudden death, unshriven. He'd last made his confession in a little brick-built church in London, and it felt like a long time ago. The priest, an elderly Englishman by the name of Brown, was used to men such as Alberto, men he knew he would never see again, even if they survived. After all, he had been quietly checked by the Security Service, and ever since there had been that trickle of foreigners, some with remarkable sins.

To him, there had been nothing unusual about Alberto, at first. And, listening to Alberto, listening for the first time in his long life to a Rain Island Catholic, he was not the fool that some priests might have been. After all, neither the Pope nor the Holy Office had made any declaration about heresies, and did not Christ command us to love our neighbours? He found himself rather approving of the middle-aged man he was listening to.

And, after the Mass, Alberto had spent a few minutes with some rather intense young men, Poles and Czechs mostly, and felt extraordinarily lucky. He had not had to flee his homeland. He had fought and won the war for his family's safety. And here he was, off to war again.

Alberto smiled softly. “*Santa Barbara*,” he murmured. “Do what you can for my friends. We're in this together.”

He could make out the shape of the roof, not so steep a slope but covered with snow and ice. He made sure that he had a firm grip on his ice-axe, all he had to do was pick his moment, and trust in his skills. God? All help gratefully accepted, but this was going to be up to him.

Three minds in the cable-car didn't notice the noises and the sudden swaying. They weren't allowed to notice. And then Carol whistled a few notes of music, and four trained minds shut down hard, hiding within their own illusion of innocent thought. Well, not exactly innocent, perhaps, but the thoughts of four women, none yet too old, who were left a little too lonely by the war. And Schafer, whatever else he might be, was a handsome, virile, man.

It never occurred to Schafer that the whatever else really mattered to women such as these.

“And this is the private chapel of the Prince-Bishops,” said Schafer.

“Oh, wow!” exclaimed Zebbie, as the lights suddenly blazed out.

The private chapel was the sort of place in which the word “opulent” would have shuffled away in embarrassed inadequacy. It was an orgasm of gilt and ultramarine, false stars of gemstones scattered across the ceiling, and an orgy of fresco painting. It was the sort of chapel that ought to have been in Italy, perhaps commissioned by a Borgia, both conspicuous consumption and a dazzling display of the proper faith.

And it was designed as a whole. All lines seemed to converge on the altar, and four pairs of eyes followed their guidance.

Carol still thought of herself as Christian, and she briefly bowed her head and crossed herself. It was only half an act.

“Ah, you've noticed. Some and look at our treasures.” Schafer wasn't being encouraged. “You've heard of the Holy Lance?”

Marta might not be Christian, but she was well-read. “The spear that pierced the side of Christ, as he hung on the Cross?”

“Yes, it was recovered during the First Crusade, and now is in the Vatican.” Schafer did not bow his head as he approached the altar. “This is part of the Imperial Treasurer, and it is known as the Hofburg Spear. The claim is that it contains a nail of the True Cross, and the spear itself was part of the regalia of the Lombard kings, the Gungingi.” There was a glow in his eyes, and Freya felt a sudden chill in her blood. “Some say that is a reference to Gungnir, the spear of Odin, but all the Germanic royal lines make some claim of a link to Odin.”

“And the crown,” asked Zebbie?”

“The Iron Crown of Lombardy. The iron band, it is said, is made from another nail from the True Cross.”

Zebbie whistled softly. “That's incredible.”

“There are enough nails from the True Cross to build a longship.” Schafer was dismissive. “If these had any real power, they would not be here, believe me, but people believe nevertheless. They are symbols, nothing more, but Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself with the Iron Crown.”

Carol nodded. “The *Führer* has lasted longer than Bonaparte's Empire. And it was Germany who defeated the French, was it not.” That was as true as any other story. She was inclined towards Mahan's

opinion. Britain had the trade of the world to pay to re-build the armies which Napoleon had defeated. And it had the trade because of the Royal Navy, not just controlling the seas, but the financial and organizational innovations that made the Royal Navy possible. And Britain had the modern equivalent in her Royal Air Force. Parliament had been famously told that the French could not come by sea, and Göring had discovered, the hard way, that the Germans could not come by air.

Carol knew, mind and heart, that Germany would lose this war. They'd missed their chances. They had the wealth of Europe, and, again, England was summoning the wealth of the world. And now she had to hide that certainty.

Because she knew what the Hofburg Spear was.

Behind her, Freya suddenly knew who else was in the castle, and knew her man was going to die.

Wolf had never felt so alive as he did in that moment, pinned against the wall by some invisible force which he knew it was futile to resist. But he was a Rain Islander, and Army Union Landing Force, and he couldn't not resist. Not resisting was something he just couldn't do, and if nothing else, he was a fighter, completely confident in his abilities. Whatever they did to him now, he would take any chance he saw, and he was resolved he would not arrive in Odin's Hall alone and un-served. Even un-armed, they would not dis-arm him.

And here were his enemies, the prizes in the game. It would be suicide, but if he could have fired the explosive in his backpack he would have.

Reinhard Tristan Heydrich, head of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, and with the new title of *Reichsprotektor* that was puzzling the Allied intelligence services, but didn't puzzle Wolf at all. Not now. Heydrich was the Reich's Grand Wizard, the man who protected against all the threats. The spies, the traitors, and the vile magic of the Jews.

Wolf rather thought that the robe Heydrich was wearing was silly. It didn't feel as though it had evolved from some real tradition. Rain Islanders noticed such things. Whatever you called your intermediary, priest or shaman, their beliefs and symbols were real. They had a long and honourable past. And, whatever their differences, they had a mutual respect. How else could Wolf have worked with Alberto for so many years.

And so Wolf futilely raged, drawing every gloating eye in the room, because he knew Alberto and McKendrick were still free, and still acting, and, whatever happened to him, they still had a mission. While these beasts concentrated on him, they had a chance.

Wolf was a fighter, and one of a Alfie Team, and he'd buy his team-mates that chance with his life.

“So that's Heydrich?”

“Yep,” said Alberto. He grimaced. “Ya don't need to save him for me.”

McKendrick nodded. “How did they spot us?”

“They didn't” said Alberto, after a moment. “It's Wolf they spotted. It's Wolf they're looking at. Maybe he's the ultimate commando. Maybe it's something else. But you already know weird stuff is happening.. Well, now he's buying us time. Let's use it.”

“Right, boss.”

“I wonder if the dinner party is still running.” Alberto's smile was savage. “Just so you know, I've been working in the Mediterranean, and the Germans there think I'm one of their best agents.”

McKendrick looked at him. “OK, boss. So you finally come home, right?”

Alberto nodded. “This is going to be the biggest bluff of my life.” He paused. “Can't rig a dead man's switch, but let's see what we can do with a couple of pull-igniters. We might all be running out of options.”

It was a frame drum—what the Irish call a bodhrán—and the rhythm Freya was beating was complex. To her listeners, it was the accompaniment to a dance of dazzling precision by a near-naked zebra, carrying two slender, light-catching, oriental swords. Half a world away, Rain Island shamans were leaving their offices and walking into village squares, and sitting cross-legged in front of ancient statues to beat out the same rhythm. In the factories, workers somehow heard it in the the din of forges, and joined in with the beat. The slap of a palm against a leg, or the beat of a hammer, catching the high spots, another rivet in the hull of another warship.

In the Spontoons, a Hula started. They were bruised by war, not broken, and, as a calendar had, a decade before, they willingly fed the struggle against the Nazis.

Wolf didn't need to hear the drum, because he could feel the pounding of his own heart. They had hung him, naked, from the tree in the courtyard, a few yards from the helicopter. Wolf was a country boy. And he didn't need to see this tree in spring bloom to know what it was. He could recognise a winter-dead Ash tree, and here was Wolfram Sievers, *Reichsgeschäftsführer* of the *Ahenebarbe*, leering as he slowly set out to blind the demon he had in his power.

Black magic is a matter of symbolism and intent, and Wolf tapped to flow of energy, and did not blink. Bound to the ash tree, losing an eye, it was not Wolf who stared at Sievers through the remaining eye.

From the gallery, Alberto watched as Heydrich, returning, suddenly started to turn, started to scream a command that was cut short as Zebbie took seven steps to the beat of that drum, and took his head with her sword. This was no part of his plan, but he could see Freya's face, and he was, like every Rain Islander who heard the drumbeat, caught up in the ritual of sacrifice.

In that hall, Schafer was the second man to reach for a gun. Alberto was the first, and Schafer died.

McKendrick fire three shots, matching the rhythm of the drum without conscious thought, protecting Zebbie against any who might stop her.

Alberto vaulted the rail of the Gallery, and landed by Carol.

“The spear in the chapel,” she said. “Wolf needs it.”

Freya hammered the drum, louder and faster.

“Wolf?”

“Or what wears him,” said Carol.

Rolland stood, reached for his pistol, and spun as a bullet struck him. Zebbie kicked him in the crotch, hard, and took his hand off with her sword. “Bad boy, she said. “That door,” she pointed.

Alberto nodded. “We need the name,” he said. “The fifth man.”

Carnehan elbowed Henman in the gut. “We'll get it.” He didn't sound like any sort of American

any more. "Anything else you want, boss?"

"Nope," said Alberto. "Have fun." He started walking towards the chapel door. "Oh, what the hell, I don't think we need them anyway. Right, Carol?"

"It's Hawkins," said Carol. "Of course, I don't think a judge or jury would believe me."

Freya was still maintaining the drum rhythm. "Accidents happen," she said, grimly.

"Didn't you go on the 'plane then, Hawkins?"

"Can't take the risk," said Hawkins. "I know too much."

"Oh, of course."

"Besides, we've had no radio contact. I don't think there's anyone to pick up."

"Quite," agreed the Admiral. "Damned waste. But there might be something yet. They might have damaged their wireless. And we know there's a transmitter in the castle. Even if something's happened to McKendrick, enough of them know enough Morse to get a message out. Maybe even voice direct to the 'plane."

Hawkins hesitated for a moment and then nodded. "Yes, that is true." He sighed. "And if Carnehan has cracked, that's it for the invasion, wherever they planned it for this year. I expect the Russians will end up occupying most of Germany, at least, and ignoring all the agreements."

"I know you don't like the Russians..."

"Look at what they did to Poland, sir."

The Admiral chuckled. "Quite..." he agreed.

"I think I shall take a walk," said Hawkins. "I suppose you'll be in the wireless room?"

The Admiral nodded. "We'd better take turns."

"Like MacArthur, sir, I shall return."

The Admiral chuckled. Hawkins raised his hand in temporary farewell and turned away to walk away down the corridor. The Admiral turned to enter the wireless room, closing the soundproof door behind him. Inside, he could faintly hear the sound of a drumbeat.

"What's that noise. Lieutenant?"

"Don't know, sir. Maybe some sort of freak of transmission. It could be a maladjusted broadcast transmitter somewhere, probably a harmonic it shouldn't be putting out."

The Admiral nodded. "I once heard drumming like that in Canada. A recording?"

"Too long without a break, sir."

At the far end of the corridor Hawkins slid back the lift door and stepped through.

"Dealt with," said Freya. She kept on drumming.

"Dealt with?" Alberto walked past, carrying the spear. "And this?"

"Give it to the guy hanging one-eyed on the ash-tree in the courtyard. And I don't know if it's Wolf or not, so you'd better be polite."

Slowly, Alberto nodded. "I'll pray for you both," he promised.

"Thanks."

He noticed, as he walked to the main doorway of the Great Hall of the castle, that he, McKendrick, and Carnehan were the only men left alive in the room. And there was a lot of blood. Decapitation, he knew, could make a big mess. Some of the blood was on Zebbie's arm, a dulling red against the black-and-white striping. The way she was moving, he doubted it was hers.

He opened the door carefully, but there was no need. The main door into the courtyard was wide open and a ghastly light shone from outside, like nothing he had ever seen before. There were flames as well, but almost muted in the light they cast. He stepped over a body, on its back. The soldier looked as though he had been scared to death. Carefully, Alberto put that thought from his mind, and stepped out into the courtyard.

He never clearly remembered what happened next, or what he saw. There was a gigantic, almost spectral, figure, a one-eyed bear, and he genuflected as he presented the spear. He was sure it wasn't Wolf, but something else, and as the figure strode away, laughing, Alberto saw Wolf. There were shrivelled corpses scattered across the courtyard. But Wolf seemed whole. Bloody faced, but whole. And he could still walk, maybe as if he were drunk when he was cut from the tree, but walking. And with each step he seemed to gain strength.

And inside the Great Hall, Freya stopped drumming. "Wolf!"

"Freya!"

Wolf blinked. "Mission accomplished?"

"All seen to. Now we just need to get out of here."

Wolf nodded.

"You'd better put some pants on before you turn out heads," said Carol. And then, more quietly, "I thought we'd lost you."

"I've been making a mistake," he said. "It isn't Odin's Hall I'm on the list for." He rubbed his left eye. "Wireless room first. Then we plant a few bombs, start fires, and take the cable car. You got the parachutes here, Carol?"

"You are all right, Wolf?" Freya looked at him.

"I'm alive." He forced a grin. "I feel awful, but I'm alive."

"Good enough." He caught the pair of pants that McKendrick tossed to him. "How was it for you, Peachy?"

Carnehan laughed. "I think they were trying to kill me with kindness."

"Even Heydrich?"

"Now, he was starting to scare me."

"Folks, he scared me." Wolf laughed. "And he's dead now."

Whatever was happening, McKendrick thought, they were starting for home. All they had to do was make a parachute jump from a cable car, which couldn't be any worse than the balloons at Ringway. And then get to that airfield. You couldn't call it easy.

And was Wolf still sane?

Castle of the Wolf

Chapter 5

The teams split, McKendrick and Wolf to the radio room, the Queens to the magazine and telephones, and Alberto with Carnehan to the fuel tank that warmed the castle and fed the lights and electrical gear.

McKendrick was still in German uniform, and he walked in as if he owned the world. "Any problems with the *funkgerät*?" He made a gesture with the left hand. "No, attend to your duties."

The two SS NCOs didn't really have a chance. One was half-way through saying, "No traffic, in or out, but the equipment is working," when McKendrick closed the door and fired two shots.

He opened the door again and let Wolf in.

"You know what this stuff is?" Wolf leaned against the wall. "Try the shortwave first. You should be able to work London with this power."

McKendrick shoved a corpse out of the way. "I should be able to work the Spontoons with this gear, if the atmospherics were right." He considered for a moment. "Send in German?" Wolf nodded. "I'll try the fifteen megacycle band first, that's our best bet. Keep an eye on the door, Sarge." He clamped on a pair of headphones, plugged in the Morse key, and started slowly turning the tuning dial. He stated picking up a carrier wave, French by the sound of it, probably one of the SOE stations talking to one of their agents, turned through the signal, checking the frequency as he did, and came to the empty space he was looking for.

Wolf grinned. He knew Morse, but he wasn't this fast as sending. He could read it but, no really surprise, he was finding it hard to concentrate. Watch the door, McKendrick is a good lad, he told himself.

"Signal from our people," said the wireless telegraphist, as his pen raced across the paper, "Definitely Agent Berlin's first, and I think he's showing off a bit."

The Admiral nodded, feeling a little more cheerful than he had.

"Here's the codewords coming through."

"Ask him to repeat them, please."

A stutter of Morse. "Odd, that, he's mis-keyed the second word."

"It's a security check," said the Admiral. He took the message slip and looked over it. Blast, all the suspicions were correct. He took a typewritten sheet from his pocket, and reminded himself of the messages. "Sergeant, when you finish with Berlin, contact Station Anarchy and send the message Green Seven Topaz Hula." He leant over the desk. "I'll write it down for you."

"Sir."

"And don't stop trying. Some brave people are relying on that message getting through." He smiled slightly. "I think I had better see if Brigadier Hawkins is back."

"How long before it would be useless to keep trying, sir?"

The Admiral considered. "Dawn, I suppose."

"I imagine the Brigadier will be looking happier than he had been. You've both been worrying."

"Am I so obvious?" The Admiral chuckled. "I think it will be something of a surprise for him."

An *SS-Obersturmführer* was shouting down the telephone when Carol and Zebbie burst into the switchboard room, and he was sounding unprofessionally scared, before he stopped sounding like anything at all. Dead men tell no tales. And no need for explosives: Zebbie picked up the fire axe from the rack in the hallway, and quickly, almost silently, severed the heavy bundle of cables that led to the outside world.

Carol set explosives anyway. There was nothing wrong with leaving a little surprise as a distraction.

Zebbie set the axe back in the rack while Carol closed the door. "What do we do after the debrief?"

"Oh, I shall have to do a little partying, hon." Carol glanced both ways. "Tripwire," she said.

"So you get all the fun?" Zebbie handed Carol a frag grenade.

"Heh, you're coming with me. We might even get to kiss all the girls and insult all the men." It was a simple strap of woven tape, hardly a ribbon, but more than enough to tie the grenade in place.

"Works for me. In uniform?"

Carol almost giggled. "Not as priestesses."

"Wouldn't that be a stock for your stepson..."

Carol just nodded. "Back to the rendezvous."

"So the explosive bursts the tank, the white phosphorous sets it alight..."

Alberto very carefully reached around the edge of the door, and connected the pull-cord to the hook he had screwed onto the inside of the door. "Close it, please."

Carnehan pushed the door onto its catch and locked the door. The chances of anyone looking inside before the timers went off was minute, but Alberto was making very sure.

"Peachy, this goes off, and the central *Gestapo* records for this part of Germany go up in flames."

"I wouldn't want to be still here when they do."

"We'd better get to the rendezvous, then."

"He fell down the lift shaft?"

"Right down to the basement, sir. They're still trying to get the corpse off of the top of the lift cage."

The Admiral nodded. "Damn shame," he said. "He must never have realised that the mission had worked." He paused. "No, forget I said that, Squadron Leader." No, Hawkins couldn't have known. He'd fallen long before the coded signal had confirmed his guilt. They might never know which other agents he might be in contact with, but he might have left something in his flat.

“I've taken steps to ensure his flat is secure, sir. Discreet steps, but this does seem an odd sort of accident.”

“Good man. I don't recall him ever taking work home, but we have to be sure.” And it is very convenient that there is no trial. Almost too convenient. “I want the entry log secured.”

“Sir.”

“Squadron Leader, if your wife had still been alive, and Brigadier Hawkins had not behaved as a gentleman should...” He paused. “No, that doesn't seem like Hawkins, but there are other reasons to kill a man.”

The Squadron Leader nodded. “I see the possibility.” He sighed. “Whatever happened, we need to know what happened,”

“Quite.”

“Six men, scared,” said Marta. She didn't need to risk peeping around the corner to know that.

Freya checked her watch. “Grenades, then. We're out of time to be subtle.”

They each took the pins out of two frag grenades, one in each hand. And they each released the levers and let most of the fuse burn before they threw.

“That last grenade was close.”

“Not close enough,” said Marta.

They stepped around the corner and into the armoury and magazine. Five dead, one in the magazine. They didn't try negotiating, and they didn't care about his screams as the white phosphorous grenades burst around him. He stopped screaming soon enough, before they even reached the stairwell. It would be a fire, not an explosion. That's how small-arms ammunition burns.

They were the last to arrive, and found McKendrick looking dubiously at a rather small parachute pack. “Look, Sarge,” he was saying, “This seems a bit small.”

“They're based on the 'chutes which pilots use. New synthetic materials.” Alberto shrugged. “Aim for a snow drift.”

“Oh, thank you very much indeed.”

Wolf was sitting on the end of the bed, shivering slightly as Freya laced tight a pair of boots. He looked up. “I think Odin left this place to us. He had bigger things to deal with.” He was under-dressed for an alpine winter. “This next bit is dangerous. We're jumping without static lines—I remember you wondering why you did that training, McKendrick—just like a pilot. No trace in the cable car. The stuff we have to leave here just adds to the fires. Any of us might get smashed up. Carol, the map.”

Carol spread out a map.

“That line is the cable. We jump, and aim for this cluster of buildings by the road. With the usual winds, we should make it with no problem. One of those buildings is where they keep the post-bus: delivers the mail, carries people between the town and the outlying settlements, that sort of thing. Also used an ambulance, so it's kept fuelled and ready to start.”

“They will hate us,” commented Alberto.

“Next map.” Carol turned the map over. “Oh, clever. Well, we go thirteen miles down-valley to that *Luftwaffe* airfield. It's there because the *Führer* has a very nice residence in these parts, overlooks

the next valley over, and Göring would really not want another embarrassment from the RAF. Incidentally, fat Hermann is a heap of crap, but he insists all captured aircrew are treated properly. Peachy, your pilot and navigator are safe.”

“So I was told, boss.”

“Anyway, thirteen miles, in something that amounts to a heavy truck with a snowplough. And we have a chance of blowing out at least one bridge as we go, and bringing down some phone wires. With any luck, they won't even know we're on the road anyway.”

“Hallelujah, Sarge.”

“Unless they've commandeered the bus for the rescue column,” said Marta.

“They have trucks to move a whole battalion at that barracks. They don't need it.” Wolf grinned. “I shall leave a receipt.”

“Naughty boy,” said Freya, with a trace of affection.

“Anyway, we get there, wait by this crash gate, and watch as our favourite KV-17 pilot demonstrates her pylon turns, before doing that special landing trick and picking us up. Then it's up and away, and look forwards to breakfast. I expect we shall be served real eggs.”

“Omnivore,” sniffed Zebbie.

“Incidentally, they have spare Army Union outfits. If we have to make an emergency landing in Switzerland, we do not want to land in German uniforms. And don't let on how well we all speak German.”

McKendrick was cinching tight his parachute harness. He looked up. “Sarge, I think we'll get back. Now, hadn't we better get moving before some dumb German fuck starts thinking instead of screaming?”

Wolf grinned. “McKendrick, you almost make all this worth it.”

“One moment, sir,” said the soldier standing by the telephone. “The Upper Station are making one last check of the equipment at their end.” He paused. “*Ja?*” A moment more of silence. “There have been explosions, and the main lighting circuit in the castle has just failed.”

“They don't rely on the main generator.” The *Hauptmann* considered for a moment. “We have to at least try. And there are ways of getting back down even without the winch.” He stepped into the cable car with his men and shouted. “Tell them to bring me up, as fast as they can!”

It was McKendrick who made the crazy dash from the controls to the cable car, and Marta and Carnehan together who made sure that he took the ride. There was no time for idle chit-chat. He had to take his small residue of weapon and explosives and reattach them to his parachute harness.

“I think they have lanterns in the other car,” said Carol. She looked along the line of the cable, both ways. Part of the castle roof blew out. “Yours, Alberto?”

“Maybe.”

She slid the door open and joined the tight lock-stepped stick.

There was the bumping rattle of the tower. “Red on!” chanted Wolf and Alberto together. Fifteen long seconds passed, carefully counted, and then eight voices screamed “Go!”

The 'chute was just big enough, McKendrick thought, a couple of minutes later, as he shed his burden. And the buildings were no more than thirty yards away. It wasn't the moonlight which lit the scene but the fire, high atop the Wolfenstein. And, in spite of all his years of old fashioned social training, he didn't think twice if it were a man or woman who was going through the basic patterns of fire and movement in the snow. They were in it together, whatever might come, and he trusted them.

It was, he thought, Alberto who opened the garage doors. It was Marta who took the driver's seat and started the engine. It was Peachy and Carol who pulled the doors closed again—why call attention to the empty garage and scrambled on the bus as it paused before turning out of the yard onto the road. Freya was almost cradling Wolf, and he seemed to look as though he needed it.

On this road, in these conditions, it took almost ten minutes to reach the bridge that Alberto planned to blow. He'd chosen well, a steel arch, single-laned, that could be quickly set with explosives that would kick it off the abutment. There were hands enough to do the job quickly, as well, and set the charge on the pole for the telephone and telegraph wires. It all used the new detonating cord, and as they drove away, all the explosive went off with one sharp crack.

"They could use wireless," said McKendrick, a little doubtfully.

"Army to *Luftwaffe*," explained Wolf. He was looking better with some rest, but a long way from good. "They don't talk easy." He grinned. "We Rain Islanders get it right."

McKendrick nodded. You couldn't build a set that could handle everything, but, from his Jump School days he recalled how they organised their wireless networks. It was part of standard planning, warships and aircraft and boots on the ground. More of a war machine than anything else he'd ever come across, except maybe Combined Operations.

It was another twenty minutes to the edge of a wood overlooking the airfield, near the end of the single runway, about fifty yards from a gate in the perimeter fence.

"Ten minutes," said Carol. "And if Crimson Otter misses her navigation, it's because she's dead."

"Won't be good," said Zebbie.

"I've never been to Switzerland."

McKendrick was carefully scanning the fence. "Seen one mountain," he said, "I figure you've seen 'em all."

"You ain't seen Rain Island's mountains. Or the Spontoons." Wolf coughed. And that didn't sound good. "We can all go and see 'em."

"Good idea," said Carol. She opened her window and poked her head out into the frosty air. "Incoming, about seven miles."

"Early," said Alberto.

"Not by very much," said McKendrick.

"True," said Alberto, "And she had to be take off long before anyone knew which specific time we'd be making for. Freya, Carol, you take care of Wolf. Marta, ready to drive? The rest of us, we might have to do a little more fighting."

McKendrick realised that Zebbie still had her swords. But she was carrying a machine carbine.

"I hear it," said Wolf.

"We're going home," said Freya.

"I can see you," said Wolf. "Both eyes, and I never expected that." He held her close, and

whispered something.

“Don't be silly,” said Freya.

McKendrick could hear the aero engines now.

Antoinette used a hand signal. All guns cocked and loaded. She wasn't plugged into the intercom circuit. Besides, this was a combat rescue mission. They were picking people up, possibly under fire, and she had a Vickers gas-operated with a hundred rounds of British .303 BVIZ to add to any confusion on the ground. Oh, it was meant to deal with any enemy aircraft she saw, and she had the orders in her pocket, but this was a war and anything here might be a target.

The gun ports opened: more noise and an ice-cold wind.

The KV-17S was more than just a transport aircraft.

Crimson Otter looked about as feral as a cat can, wrapped up in winter flying gear. She was on oxygen, which means better night vision, even at sea level, but she needed it for the microphone in the mask. “Target one identified. Starting attack run.” The throttles were already full open. In the hold, an amber light started flashing. Keep clear of the guns. Hang on.

Down in Target One a bored *Luftwaffe* officer looked up, and peered out into the night. It was probably one of those show-offs from *Kampfgeschwader-200*, making a low night pass to show off.

With a KV-17S the pilot uses a reflector gun-sight to aim the wing at the target, which can rather surprise the target, because they think the 'plane is already going past them. Maybe, they think, an observer is using a camera.

When Crimson Otter pressed the button on the stick, the solenoids on the guns released the bolts, and the noise started. There were four 20mm cannon, which was the armament that Rain Island had been putting on their fighter aircraft since 1939, and 8 Brownings, the Rain Island version of the .50 that armed US aircraft.

The airfield's control centre disintegrated: the glass watch-office on top and the room beneath with the radios and telephones connected to defend the *Reich*. Whatever happened now, even if a Messerschmit got off the ground it was out of contact with anyone who could guide it. German radar was good, but even an R.I.N.S. night fighter had to get close to the target.

Crimson Otter had the layout of the airfield clear in her mind, and carried out a precisely judged turn before firing again, not turning as she fired, but throttles back, and slow hosing down of the parked aircraft and the single hangar.

There wasn't really anything left that could be an aircraft. Unless some ingenious airman used the fires to fuel a hot air balloon.

Antoinette was rather disappointed with the landing and pickup. Oh, nothing wrong with it, a fast landing, props slammed into reverse pitch as the wheels touched, a bus bursting onto the airfield, and catching up with the plane as it stopped.

There was no fun to it. Nothing to shoot.

No, wait, a truck was starting from somewhere near the barracks. She leaned into her gun, laid the sight on the black blob, and tapped the trigger. Shoot, correct aim, and shoot again. And there was the whoomf of fuel, another blossom of flame in the night and distant, running, dots which rolled in the snow, or not. Job done.

“Come on,” said Alberto. “We're going home. Together.” That felt pretty good.

“Spoilsport, husband,” she said. The ramp door started closing, and she made sure her gun was safe. “Went the day well?”

Alberto shrugged. “I’m not really sure I want to know what happened to Wolf. But...”

She nodded. “He’s part of the team.” She paused for a moment. “I thought I saw a deer in the front of the hold.”

Alberto shrugged. “I think Wolf and Freya had some help.”

Antoinette had come to the Spontoons long after, but she knew the story. She nodded, and then sat down on the side seating. “Sit down, you duffer,” she said. She had to shout. She’d tuned the engines of this KV-17S like an Indy racer, and they were loud.

Alberto sat down. He was going home, with his wife beside him, and his friends, and it was going to be a good day.

Castle of the Wolf

Epilogue

They'd slipped back to New Stepney House, and changed into uniform. It was proper to show respect, even for anarchists. Besides, Smallwolf reckoned, you couldn't dismiss as irrelevant somebody who had been with Dad in the war.

Alice did wonder if the taxi driver was thinking of Carnaby Street, as she paid him. It didn't matter.

The Ravenmaster was waiting for them. One-eyed Jack, the other Yeoman Warders called him, but Jack wasn't his name. Nobody seemed to know his real name, or be bothered by that gap. "My," he said. "I hadn't quite realised what you'd look like."

"I guess it's the medals," said Smallwolf.

"Partly," he agreed. "You look even more like your father."

"He has a lot to live up to, but he doesn't do too bad." Maria knew exactly how she looked.

"The Kuo-han business, I suppose."

Alice nodded. None of them had just the UN Medal.

"We congregate at the guardroom, have a drink, and then go to watch the ceremony. And these days it is symbolic. You're not stuck until morning."

"I'm not sure I approve of symbolic," said Smallwolf.

The Ravenmaster chuckled. "There's a side gate, of course."

The sherry wasn't something any of them would have used for cooking. Cooking boils off the alcohol, anyway, so there's better be a good flavour left. It was something to appear to sip delicately, though Maria suspected Smallwolf would consider high explosives plenty delicate enough. She noticed Alice taking advantage of a plant-pot. The plants already looked sickly.

"A fighter pilot, my dear?" The chap in the dinner jacket seemed doubtful. His wife—you wouldn't really bring a woman who didn't have that sort of commitment—was a little too young and a little too curved.

"There's an old joke," said Alice. "How do you find the best pilot in the room?"

"And?"

"You don't. She'll find you." Alice shrugged. "You're old enough to have been a pilot on the war, or something. I'm the pilot here who's current."

"Oh, it was my brother who was the pilot, and he didn't come back from Berlin, one night."

Alice nodded. She hadn't won her medals for being safe or decorative. And the ejector seat had worked.

"Who comes there?"

"The keys."

“Whose keys?”

“King George's keys.”

“Pass King George's Keys. All's well.”

The three of them stood together, slightly apart from the civilians, their medals and badges catching the half-lights of dusk and the floodlights which shone on the courtyard. Smallwolf knew that he was listening to more than seven centuries of history, and there was so much that would not have been without it.

And Alice saw the flash of white gloves as the Escort to the Keys came to the foot of the Broadwalk Stair and into the fullness of the light. The Escort halted, and she knew that when she saluted she did not just salute the Keys. She was saluting the myriads of soldiers that had pledged their lives over the centuries.

“God preserve King George.”

Alice didn't say “Amen!”.

Maria did.

“So why shouldn't they have a one-eyed Ravenmaster?” She looked up from her book. “I think he approved of you, Smallwolf.”

Smallwolf folded his copy of the *New Musical Express* and tucked it into his rucksack. “Good,” he said. “Whoever he is, a Yeoman Warder is something very respectable.”

Alice opened her eyes. “That he is,” she agreed.