

ALCHEMEA
BOOK III
A TALE OF GOLD & EARTH



ZOZIMOS

ALCHEMEA PART THREE:
A TALE OF GOLD & EARTH
BY ZOZIMOS

Special thanks to
My grandfather, Stanisław, for helping to kick Hitler's ass.

This tale is dedicated to those who first fought against the threat of
Fascism.

This is for those who continue to fight.
Those who lost everything.
And those who gave it.

“Deep within the self is the Light of God.

It radiates throughout the expanse of His Creation.

Through the Guru’s teachings, the darkness of spiritual ignorance is dispelled.

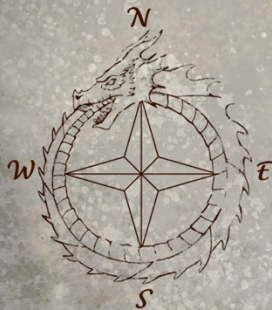
The heart lotus flower blooms forth and eternal peace is obtained,
as one’s light merges into the Supreme Light.”

- Guru Amar Das



Europe November 1922

- Weimar Republic
- France
- Kingdom of Italy
- Austria



1. Venice
2. Salzburg
3. Vienna
4. Munich
5. Berlin
6. Paris
7. Amiens

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I

On Cold Winter Morns

Saturday, December 3rd, 1922
Venice, Kingdom of Italy

Through the white clouds shined a parhelion, its light refracting into a bouquet of colors in the winter sky.

Land lay ahead. As the boat slid forward through the icy black waters, the Piazza San Marco became more visible in the frosty haze of the horizon.

Jack and Sanwar stood at the bow, watching it draw near. A biting wind stabbed their faces in greeting, and Jack almost wished he were back in the swelters of Syria again. It had been close to a year since he had felt cold like this, and now he could feel it down to his bones. He hated it.

Luckily, Hokmah had at least considered this, and arranged for him and Sanwar to be gifted winter coats. They had also been gifted free passage from Gaza, forged British passports, and an address written down inside of Godfrey's diary. After three weeks of being ferried clandestinely around the Mediterranean, this was to be their final destination.

It was flaking when they reached the dock. Snow fell and melted on the water, but in the Piazza, it stuck, and covered the marble with a different shade of white. The boat was small enough a craft to dock beside a line of bobbing gondolas draped in tarpaulins. Its gangplank landed in the snow, and the crewmen helped the passengers aboard.

Not a soul was in the Piazza.

In spring, the square would be filled with patrons at the café across from the Doge's Palace, and the arcade beneath the latter's decadent façade of would be swarming with travellers. There would be songs and laughter filling in the air, coffees to be drunk, rich foods eaten, and a bask of sunshine. Yet, not a soul had dared to brave this bitter winter's morn, save two.

Jack and Sanwar passed the Doge's palace in total silence, but for the soft crunch of their boots in the snow. The wind whispered as they crossed beneath the Lion of Saint Mark high on its lofty pillar perch. The winged bronze beast had long patinaed into green, but now donned a snowy coat. Its open maw was collecting flakes, and Jack amused himself by thinking that the wind was coming from within those jaws. He thought the wind should be a roar and not a whisper, though even a whisper of this chill could make him shudder. He pulled his thick black peacoat tighter about himself, and blew some warmth into his gloves. Sanwar did the same, although at least his head was covered. Jack wanted out of this cold already.

"Whither are we going?" Sanwar asked, shuddering from the bluster.

"Captain didn't know the address."

"Wondrous," Sanwar remarked. "It would appear that no one is about to grace us with directions either..."

"Wait. There's someone over there-"

Jack paused. A group of people stood near the edge of the Piazza, where it opened into the street. He almost took a step towards them until he fully registered the men that he was seeing.

There were three of them in long black coats and brimmed black caps, all hanging about and smoking cigarettes outside

the empty café. Their leader was the shortest of the bunch. He had a sable fringe around his collar, and a bright brass pin upon his hat. His thin black mustache seemed to twitch as his little beady eyes met Jack's.

"Never mind," said Jack, and turned the other way.

The blackshirts threw away their cigarettes, and followed them.

The streets of Venice were labyrinthine. In trying to lose their tails, Jack and Sanwar quickly became lost themselves, and the thickening fog only made things worse. Its bleak, grey veil hung over the canals, shielding any nearby bridges or alleyways from view. The world just seemed to vanish fifteen feet ahead, as if it had never been there to begin with.

Jack and Sanwar halted their hurried pace to try and take stock of their surroundings. It might have been imprudent to pause here otherwise, but they had no idea of their direction, and at least the fog could provide some temporary concealment from their pursuers.

They stood beneath the streetlight on the banks of a canal, but had no other landmarks for reference.

"No bloody means to tell which way to go," groaned Jack. "And still nobody about to ask directions. This place has about as much cheer as a bloody graveyard..."

The only other soul in sight was a single gondolier, steering his craft along the murky waters of the canal below. He sang no song, and his striped shirt was hidden beneath a heavy woolen sweater.

"Have we coin enough for transportation?" Asked Sanwar.

"Let me check the fund," said Jack, and upended his boot.

A single *lira* clinked upon the ground.

"No."

Jack put his shoe back on, and looked about. The only path appeared to be the one straight ahead, continuing on this side of the canal. He had no idea if it would take them closer to their destination, but he hoped at least it would take them farther away from those blackshirts.

However, on the other side of the canal was a curious sight. It looked to be a medieval church, adorned with saints and angels. However, its doorway was half submerged, and its lower walls were lined with algae. Clearly, no parishioner had prayed there in some time, yet this was not the most curious detail about the place.

A Hospitaller Cross hung above the entrance.

“Jack...” Sanwar urged.

Footsteps echoed somewhere in the fog.

He and Sanwar made haste around a corner to avoid them—
-And inadvertently walked headlong into the blackshirts.

Before either man could react, the both of them were shoved against the wall of the nearest building. Neither man resisted. After all, their captors had pistols and batons hanging from their belts.

The two grunts quickly found their sword belts underneath their coats, and threw the blades aside into a snowdrift. Once they had been sure that no other weapons were to be found, they stepped back, allowing their leader to advance.

Jack and Sanwar remained pressed against the wall as he approached.

Now in spitting range, Jack got an unpleasantly good look at his oppressor. He resembled a villain in a picture show. Just like his mustache, the man was small and skinny, perhaps six inches shorter and five stone scrawnier than Jack. His jaw was short and specked with salt and pepper stubble. His eyes were sunken in and dark beneath the lids. When he grinned

at them, it revealed several golden teeth inside a yellowed smile, and his breath reeked of cheap tobacco.

What Jack feared most about the man, however, was the bright brass pin that hung above his breast and in the center of his cap. It was the symbol of the Roman *fasces*, a battle ax bound within a wooden bundle. Above the *fasces* was a star, below it was a flaming grenade.

Jack had heard about this new idea called “Fascism”.

He liked it none at all.

“*Passaporti*,” the leader demanded, his hand outstretched.

Jack and Sanwar obliged him by handing over the documents. The blackshirt, however, had a sharp eye, and jammed his hand into Jack’s outer pocket. He held the diary in front of Jack’s face as if he had been smuggling contraband.

The leader looked far too long at their papers, then laughed to himself when he opened the diary and glanced at the address. It was definitely the only part of it he could read.

“*Inglese?*” He asked with a smirk, then stared long and intently at Sanwar. He made to give the passports back, but tossed them in the snow instead, beside the swords. The diary, he spat on, then threw down last.

“*Non credo che lo sia inglese*,” he said, drawing out his baton, and flicking in Sanwar’s direction. His eyes narrowed down to little more than slits.

“We don’t speak Italian,” Jack said, even though the message had been clearly understood. “*Non parliamo-*”

One of the grunts jammed the butt of his baton into Jack’s stomach, sending him to the ground. Jack’s knees landed against a chunk of ice that had fallen from a rooftop. He groaned.

From the ground though, he still saw that the head blackshirt was not quite done with Sanwar. He placed his baton gently on Sanwar's cheek.

"I say you," the man continued in horribly accented English. "We no think you are *Inglese*. We no like outsiders here."

"I do not very much like fascists either," Sanwar replied. "So the repulsion is mutual."

The blackshirt snarled, and pulled back his baton to strike. Sanwar was faster, though.

A jab to the nose staggered the man backwards before he could even swing his blow. He stumbled back with a bloody face, surprised that he had been struck in the first place.

The other two grunts reached for their guns, but Jack knew an opening when he was handed one.

He grabbed the hunk of ice off the ground, and brought it down the nearest man's head. It shattered with an audible snap, and the blackshirt dropped his pistol halfway out its holster, then toppled into his partner. The two slipped and floundered on the slick street, falling in a mass of flopping arms and legs.

"Shall we?" Sanwar asked. He had already retrieved the diary, their swords and the passports from their would-be attackers.

"*Bastardi brutti*," the gold-toothed blackshirt growled at them as he finally regained his composure.

Jack kicked his legs out from under him.

The man went arse-first into the snow.

"Let's," Jack said.

They refastened their effects, and took off running.

They had made it only a few dozen yards when they heard a whistle blow from behind them. A dozen yards more, and

another band of blackshirts apparated from the mist. This lot was just as ugly as the first, and certainly more numerous.

Jack and Sanwar skidded to a halt. With men ahead and men behind, there was nowhere to run. Except...

A gondola came floating down the canal that very moment.

Jack did not hesitate. He leapt for it.

Sanwar sighed, and leapt right after him.

The boat tossed this way then that as Jack landed, jumped off, and reached the other side, then did so a second time when Sanwar did the same. The poor gondolier cried out for the Madonna to save him from capsizing. His prayers swiftly turned to curses when the blackshirts opened fire, their bullets punching holes in his lovely lacquered hull.

By then, Jack and Sanwar were already on other side.

A blackshirt, emboldened by the chase, leapt for the gondola in hot pursuit, but misjudged the distance, and plunged right into the freezing slate grey waters, much to the gondolier's amusement.

Jack and Sanwar did not look back at clownery behind them. They just kept on running, winding every which way in the narrow corridors that were the city's streets.

They emptied out into a quiet little *campo*, and nearly collided with a little old woman carrying firewood.

"*Scusi signora, scusi,*" Jack attempted to apologize through his heavy panting.

The woman asked him something with a tone of concern, but Jack could hear the shouts of men growing louder behind him, and barely caught a word from her. His Italian would have hardly stood to scrutiny besides. Still, he did think of something right then.

He pulled out the diary, flipped open the cover, and pointed.

“*Dove? Dove?*”

The woman took a ponderous amount of time to read the address.

All the while, Jack and Sanwar were looking all about, as the sounds of shouts and footsteps closing in from every side.

Then, the woman said something, and gestured off towards the other side of the *campo*.

“*Grazie,*” he and Sanwar said together.

They resumed running.

The woman could only shrug, and wonder about these strange foreigners. Maybe they were French.

The street took Jack and Sanwar to where it suddenly became quiet, and the sounds of the chase abruptly vanished. The houses were shabbier here, their façades painted less gaudily than the brightly colored ones of other neighborhoods. There seemed to be a stillness about the place, an aura of crackling tension about the air. The two men slowed down to a walking pace, and looked about. Curiously, all of the angels and crosses present on most buildings were absent. Six-pointed stars replaced them instead.

“So this is the *Ghetto,*” Sanwar murmured.

“We must be close then,” Jack mused. It made sense now. After all, where else would Hokmah have sent them?

None of the street signs matched the address in the diary, though. Unsure where else to go, the two men veered off down a side street, which took them underneath a long arched tunnel. It may have roofed them from the snow, but it funneled the biting wind right into their faces. The heat of the chase already wearing off besides, so its bluster just made Jack cold again.

“Bollocks,” he grunted, and wiped his teary eyes.

His vision was blurred by them, so he had to do a double take when a line of shapes stepped out in front of him and Sanwar. He almost did not believe it when a shout called out for them to halt, and a host of long dark coats stepped closer into view.

This was no mirage, however.

The blackshirts had cut them off.

There was no more running now. These men had looped around to get ahead of Jack and Sanwar, so if they turned and ran, the blackshirts would shoot simply them in the back with ease.

Yet, Jack and Sanwar would not run.

They drew their swords instead.

The blackshirts advanced with pistols drawn, relishing in their newfound victory. An unfortunately familiar face was leading them, grinning a gold-toothed smile underneath a twisted, blood-caked, broken nose.

“Aw fuck this,” said Jack.

“My sentiments exactly,” Sanwar replied.

The blackshirts stopped a dozen feet away, and aimed.

“Oh shite,” Jack uttered, but not at the imminence of his approaching death.

Rather, it was at the imminence of what approached behind the blackshirts.

Silent and huge, the red-eyed giant appeared.

Without a murmur, he brought his fists down hard, knocking two men to the cobblestones with just his initial blow.

The other fascists noticed their companions fall away and spun around, but by then, another had been thrown into the tunnel wall, and a fourth was punched aside. Desperately, the

men tried to mount a defense. Yet, this red-eyed mountain of a man was deathly quick, and tore through their ranks with an avalanche of blows. Fists found bones, and broke them. Men fell down, then crawled away to escape the punishment.

Only the gold-toothed man was left standing.

Somehow, he had enough wits about him to aim his pistol, and shoot it point blank into the giant's chest.

The bullets flattened on impact, then clattered onto the stones.

The gold-toothed froze.

The giant reached forward. His fist simply curled around the pistol, and squeezed. The metal squashed into his palm like it was made of clay.

The fascists ran.

When they had gone, the giant turned his gaze to Jack and Sanwar. However, he made no motion to attack them. Instead, he simply stood there, staring down at them with gleaming scarlet eyes.

In that moment, Jack got a frightful look at their erstwhile savior. The man was tall, taller than any Jack had ever seen before, maybe seven feet or more. His shoulders equaled half his height, and his chest was thicker than an oak tree. The long black coat he wore could do little to hide his imposing frame, nor could the wide-brimmed hat upon his head conceal the face beneath. His visage was oddly plain and free of wrinkles. It made no expression of triumph or concern at the events that had just transpired.

It simply stared.

Jack and Sanwar simply stared right back.

“Don't be frightened,” a voice called out after a lengthy moment. It was oddly feminine for such an enormous man,

or so Jack thought until a small, dark-haired girl of sixteen or seventeen stepped out from behind the giant's stationary mass to claim it. Her eyes were bright and knowing, and her demeanor friendly, unlike her impassive companion. Her English was quite excellent as well.

“Who are you?” Asked Jack.

“I believe thanks are in order before interrogations,” Sanwar chided him.

“Sorry. Thank you. Now who are you...please?”

The girl laughed a little.

“My name is Rachel, and please save your thanks for later,” she said as politely as she could. “Now, you must hurry, and come with me quickly.”

“Where are we going?” Jack asked, more curious than apprehensive.

“My grandmother's house,” she told them. “After all, she is expecting you.”

II

Winds Blow Most Cruel

“Where are you taking us?”

Jack’s words echoed down the empty passageway, prompting Rachel to turn around and put a gloved finger to her lips. Still, after walking through the darkness for a full five minutes, Jack felt an explanation was in order.

Immediately after their altercation with the blackshirts, Rachel had taken them down an alley, where she pressed a loose stone on an ivy covered wall. The ivy had grown to obscure the hinges of a secret doorway, and before Jack and Sanwar knew it, they were following her into that very passage.

They might as well be following her with their eyes closed, however. Rachel naturally led the way, and so carried the torch. Therefore, only she could see what lay ahead while the rest were left in near total darkness. The only other light came from the eyes of the giant, which floated phantomly in the gloom behind Jack and Sanwar. It remained unclear if he was positioned in the rear for Jack and Sanwar’s protection or to prevent their escape.

Jack shivered, not from the fear of the thought, but from the chill down here. There was a dampness in the air as well, with the stale, dank scent of water damage. Somewhere distant even, a drainpipe was dripping faintly.

Finally, the passage ended in a stairwell. The steps spiraled upwards towards soft bands of streaming light. They followed Rachel to the landing, which lay directly underneath a sewer grate. The small girl stood on her toes to push the steel bars loose, then climbed back out into the cold, dry air. The men

followed suit. The giant emerged last with surprisingly little difficulty, and dropped the grate back in place.

They had appeared in the alcove of another alleyway, which then emptied out into a little *campo*. Here, a series of slantways building were all squashed together, centered around the square with its meager park green. Really, it was more yellow in hue, with the dead grass peeking out from underneath the snow.

Rachel led them out of the alley and over to a building across the way. Some stairs led to the door of a tiny topfloor apartment, that when opened, blasted Jack and Sanwar with warmth and light.

“Come in, come in,” a creaky old voice urged.

An invitation was hardly needed. The air alone was like a hot bath to shake off the cold, and Jack felt instant relief stepping through the doorway. The singing aromas of lemon juice and stewing vegetables filled his nose at once, prompting pangs of hunger to remind him that he had not eaten in quite some time.

A smiling old woman was sitting at a table inside. The stovetop was just inches from her back, and the sink just one foot from her shoulder. Four places were laid out before them.

“Please come in!” She offered again in her lively Italian lilt. “Take off your boots and your coats, and sit down. And don’t worry about the stew. It was simmering before last night, so I’m not committing sacrilege, I promise!”

She laughed goodnaturedly as the big man took their coats and hung them in a closet, his touch surprisingly delicate. Jack and Sanwar then took their seats at the table, and wiped the condensation from their facial hair with the napkins at their places.

Rachel turned to the giant, and said, “Emet. *Yeshan.*”

At once, he retreated into the darkness of the closet, and the light in his red eyes faded away. Rachel shut the door behind, then flipped a switch beside it before joining the others at the table.

“Welcome Jack and Sanwar,” the old woman said once she was seated. “Of course, you have met my granddaughter, Rachel. My name is Maria Rossa. I am a friend and colleague of Hokmah’s. Welcome to my home.”

“We are to make your acquaintance,” Sanwar returned. “Forgive me for asking, but how knew you of our arrival?”

Maria only smiled at that.

“They had some trouble with D’Orato and his men,” Rachel interjected. “Emet and I were lucky to find them in time.”

“Lucky indeed,” Maria said, knowingly. “I apologize that your arrival to the city has not been so welcoming. Things have been changing here in Italy. In Europe. The world. These are strange and dangerous times.”

“Ever since that bastard Mussolini took power, the fascists think that they can run these streets,” Rachel added bitterly, though Maria quickly quieted her with gentle raise of the hand.

“What brings you gentlemen to Venice?” The old woman asked.

Jack placed their copy of the diary on the table.

“If you are a friend of Hokmah’s, you’ll know what this is,” he said.

Maria lifted the book in weathered hands, cleaned the spittle from inside with a napkin, and furrowed her brow in thought as she looked through it. Given the deepness of the wrinkles upon her face, it was clearly an expression she wore

often. After a moment, those wrinkles relaxed into a kindly smile.

“The Language of Birds,” she concluded. “Though, I do not know the hand that penned this.”

“Godfrey D’Amiens was the author,” Sanwar answered. “A knight who allegedly discovered the secrets of the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“You have proof?”

Jack and Sanwar exchanged a look.

“We may have seen the Stone,” said Jack. “Or...one of them at least.”

Maria’s eyes widened in delight.

“Then, I can definitely help you. If Hokmah has entrusted you with this, then I can trust you as well. I know the Language of Birds, and I will help you translate the diary.”

“Splendid!” Sanwar clapped his hands together. “That is most generous of you, Maria. Thank you.”

Jack could feel himself smiling as well. Normally, he would be hesitant, but the old woman seemed true enough. Besides, Kether had saved his life and Sanwar’s, and now Maria and her kin had too. Any mistrust at this point was undeserved.

“But first, let us eat,” Maria said. “I am sure you two are starving, and the stew is ready. Rachel, would you bring our guests the bread and salt fish?”

They were just about to rise when there came a heavy rap on the door.

Rachel and Maria knew at once.

“D’Orato! Hide!”

Before either man could register what was happening, Rachel had grabbed the diary and their boots, and shoved them into their arms. Then she shoved the two men themselves into the closet.

“Stay quiet!” Rachel whispered.

Another bang sounded at the door, followed by a shout.

She only had time to shut the door before the gold-toothed man and two blackshirts came bursting in. Through the narrow slats of the closet door, Jack and Sanwar could see the scene playing out before them.

“*Buongiorno, Sergente D’Orato,*” Rachel addressed him, but D’Orato snarled at the polite address. He had a great big bandage on his nose, which likely did little to improve his mood, though wonders for his appearance.

He and his two cronies entered the apartment, and began rummaging about the place. D’Orato all the while was barking out questions at Maria, who answered them with total calm. Neither she nor Rachel moved from as the men scoured high and low for any evidence. They opened an empty bed room and the bathroom, but of course, found nothing.

It was D’Orato however, who noticed the four places at the table, and got very quiet.

His gaze suddenly shifted to the closet.

Jack’s heart sank.

Instinctively, he and Sanwar gripped their swords.

D’Orato approached, and flipped the switch beside the wall.

Jack felt a sudden rush of air as the wall swung round. There was a moment of silence before a muffled growl came from the other side, followed by a shout of commands.

Then again, Jack and Sanwar swung back around and found themselves looking through the slats once more.

The blackshirts were edging towards the open door now, though D’Orato lingered a moment to sneer. Next to the shortness of Maria, he almost looked imposing.

Not to be without final word, he sidled over to the stewpot and spat in it.

He and his men then slammed the door behind them.

Rachel opened the door a few minutes later.

“He thought it was a light switch,” she said with a smile of relief.

“Thank God he’s none too bright,” Jack replied. He loosened his grip on *Lann Dhearg*.

“What a thoroughly repugnant fellow,” Sanwar added.

“The stew is still good,” Maria said, fishing out the spittle with a ladle before washing the utensil off. “His filth will be calcinated from the broth, I promise. Come, sit and eat. There is much work to do tomorrow.”

Lunch was a much needed relief. Maria had made an excellent stew that could not be soured by D’Orato in the slightest. Jack and Sanwar ate, and made polite conversation for a while, most explaining the details of their previous escapades in the desert. After some while, Maria then showed the men where they would be staying.

The bedroom was small to begin with, and the only space was on either side of a narrow cot. Makeshift beds of cushions, pillows, and blankets had been laid within those spaces, which were narrow enough themselves. Hokmah apologized, but this was the only space she had to offer. She would have otherwise given them the bed, but it was admittedly too short for men of their stature, and barely wide enough to fit one of them, let alone two.

Jack and Sanwar thanked her anyway, and fell immediately asleep. By then, it was already dark.

It was dark when they arose the next day too. The snow had ceased, but grey clouds still clung to the sky. Outside, the

residents of the *Ghetto* were dusting off the steps of their apartments, and clearing away the *campo*. Maria and Rachel were awake themselves, and kindly asked Jack and Sanwar to lend a hand, to which they happily obliged.

The work did not take long, but Jack suspected there was another purpose to the task. As he and Sanwar shoveled, Maria continually introduced them to her neighbors. They were shown the butcher, the cobbler, the tailor, the baker, and many others. The whole community was fascinated by the sight of the two tall strangers from faraway lands, who towered over them like giants. Of course, almost none of them spoke a word of English, though that did nothing to stop them from trying to commune with Jack and Sanwar in Yiddish, Italian, or the peculiar Venetian dialect. Jack learned that nods and smiles usually sufficed.

“Any of these people you can trust,” Maria told them. “They will look after you. You may go freely anywhere you please, as long as you do not leave the *Ghetto*.”

Her last few words were said especially grave, although they would have understood the point regardless.

Once the manual labor was finished, the true work began in proper. Rachel poured tea as everyone gathered around the kitchen table. Maria meanwhile was poring over the diary, tracing her ancient fingers across each line in turn.

“The Language of the Birds, I have not seen in some time,” the old woman said wistfully. “I suspect you tried to translate it yourselves?”

“To little effect,” Jack lamented.

“Perhaps you were translating into the wrong language to begin with.”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow. “How do you know this hidden script?”

“My dear Sanwar, many secrets have been passed down among our people for generations,” she answered with a smile. “From the time that we were slaves of the Pharaohs to when the Latin and Saracen ruled the Holy Land, to the centuries thereafter, my people have endured through the providence of knowledge.”

“So what language should we have translated it into?” Jack asked.

“Hebrew, of course.”

She laid the book out on the table for all to see.

“If you look closely, there are twenty-two distinct symbols in total, just as there are in Hebrew. You will also notice that the shapes of these symbols flow from right to left, and not the other way.”

“Which is probably how an Arab scholar was able to translate them, I’d imagine,” Jack mused. “Like Mister Jabir al-Hayyan.”

“Precisely,” Maria beamed. “You are as clever as Hokmah said.”

“But not clever enough to see the obvious, though.”

Maria waved a dismissive hand. “Be kinder to yourself. No one can know every language. I shall help you. Give me some time, and I will translate this book for you.”

They did as they were bidden. Maria set about to scribbling down her translation on a notebook, and they set about to helping Rachel around the flat. Meals needed preparation, which meant gathering firewood for the stove and cutting plenty of herbs and vegetables.

The chores later took them into the secrecies of the room behind the closet. During the blackshirts’ intrusion, Jack had not gotten a good look at the space, but now he had a view in full when Rachel flipped the switch.

Hidden on the other side of the false wall was an entire chemistry lab, replete with all the accoutrements and even a ventilation shaft that looked to be disguised as a separate chimney.

“*Nonna* blames any strange smells on her cooking,” Rachel laughed as she handed them both brooms. “The whole neighborhood thinks that she is one of the worst cooks, but won’t say anything because of her age. Actually, she’s probably among the best in Italy. After all, she knows the chemistry.”

Jack and Sanwar were tasked with sweeping the already impeccable floors while Rachel dusted off Emet’s clothes. The giant slept on the other side of the wall, exactly where she had left him, and remained still as a statue while she cleaned him. Rachel caught Jack staring.

“First time you’ve seen one like Emet?” She grinned.

“Not even close.”

By the time they had finished their work, so had Maria.

“This Godfrey knows more than any Alchemist I have ever read,” she mused. “His writing seems to cross between a variety of sources, never fully refuting them, but combining them into something different. And he knows more about the Stone than any other.”

“What did you find, Maria?” Sanwar asked as they joined her at the table.

“A formula.”

Everybody hushed, and leaned in closer.

“Godfrey writes that four primary ingredients are necessary to crafting the Philosopher’s Stone,” Maria went on. “He writes in detail about their properties, and that each substance belongs to one of the four worlds of Jewish Cosmology.”

“The four elements,” Jack and Sanwar said in tandem.

“Precisely. Godfrey includes that according to the Emerald Tablet, the following four compounds are needed to complete the Great Work: *Aqua Permanens* for Water, *Aether* for Air, *Adamant* for Earth, and *Celestia* for Fire.”

“Magnificent!” Sanwar exclaimed. “These are the pieces that Godfrey sought after all these centuries! These are the constituents to formulating the Philosopher’s Stone! Finally, we have them! Does he state where they may be retrieved?”

Maria furrowed her brow.

“I see nothing,” she said after a time. “But I do not see why they should be excluded. There must be something more...”

Sanwar was crestfallen.

“Aye, that’s Godfrey for you,” Jack said with a rueful smile. “Loves his puzzles, he does. Load of bollocks, but that’s the game we Alchemists play.”

“I think that will be enough for today.” Maria put the book down, and yawned. “It is late, and I tire easily at my age.”

“There must be an answer,” Sanwar mused. “Surely, we can resume our efforts tomorrow, this time with the assistance of Jack and myself.”

“Aye,” Jack said, urging Sanwar along. “Tomorrow.”

Maria was right. It was late.

Outside, dusk was already upon them. The days were growing darker.

The mystery was not solved the next day, nor the next. As much as the four of them struggled, no answer would come. After two days, Jack and Sanwar realized that they had received scant fresh air, and decided that a break was worthwhile.

Together, they wandered the quiet snowy rues of the *Ghetto*.

They walked in silence for a time in the slantways streets, each still trying to puzzle out the answer in their heads.

“Bloody bollocks,” Jack said at last. “I’ve got nothing.”

“Consider me vexed as well,” added Sanwar. “Perhaps we should converse on different subjects for a time.”

“Aye, it’s a been a while since we’ve had a real conversation. It seems like the last four months have been a blur, like I’ve lived whole lifetimes in less than half a year. And still, there’s more to go. Do you ever wonder if Godfrey’s just stringing us along for a laugh?”

“Even if he were, that string is something for me to grasp onto from this day to the next,” Sanwar replied. “Were I to let go, I fear that I might be just another vagrant soul lost in the maze.”

“I just...I wouldn’t want our sacrifices to be all for nothing.”

Sanwar looked at his friend.

“Neither would I, but we have seen it, Jack. We have indeed seen that the Stone is real! Godfrey speaks true. Something in my heart tells me that the end to this quest draws near. And when it does come...”

His friend trailed off to the thought hanging in the air, as he stared off down the alley at some far distant thing that was not there.

“And when it does, then you can go home?” Jack finished for him.

“Yes,” Sanwar replied. “Home.”

“Aye. That would be nice.”

They walked along in silence after that.

That silence was broken some minutes later by a sudden shout.

“Amici! Vieni qui! Rapito!”

To their left, a man had appeared in a doorway, beckoning him for them to step inside. Jack remembered him from Maria’s many introductions as Samuele, the florist. Without another hesitation, he and Sanwar ran inside his shop.

The outside’s bitter cold was jarringly replaced with a steaming interior. The great glass windows of the façade doubled as both a greenhouse and a marquis. Patrons could not only look in and see the lovely shrubbery, but the windows allowed for ample sunlight as well. He had not just flowers and shrubs, but plants of every shape, size, and color.

Samuele hurried the men through this lively front, one filled with hanging pots of long green tendrils and sprawling shelves of enormous leaves and rainbows of petals. He stuffed them behind a jungle of towering monsteras in the back of the room, and crouched beside them.

“Fascisti today,” the florist whispered, attempting to pronounce the English word as best he could.

Jack understood the gist of the message even before he heard the chants a few minutes later. When that happened, all of Venice received the message loud and clear.

“Vive L’Italia! Vive Mussolini! Il Duce ha sempre ragione!”

Long live Italy! Long live Mussolini! The Duke is always right!

These were the words shouted to the drumbeats as a crowd stormed past. Through the thicket and at his low angle, Jack could only see the marchers’ shadows streaming by, but their banners were proudly visible. There flew of course, the tricolor of the Kingdom, but right beside it was another; a white skull with a dagger in its teeth, armed

against a sable field. This morbid standard billowed in the biting wind.

The heat of the flower shop poured creeks of sweat down Jack's neck. He fought to stay as still as possible while the footsteps of the crowd thundered without end. He felt suddenly so exposed by the large greenhouse windows, like he was on display, if not for the paper thin veil of the monstera. Should anything come through them, the three men would have nothing to protect themselves.

Jack's thinking seemed almost preternatural when several of those great big windows shattered.

The spray of glass nearly reached them at the back as something landed heavy thudded on the floor.

Jack ventured a glance.

A trio of head-sized stones lay beneath the broken panes, amid heaps of glass, clay, and scattered dirt. Whatever plants displayed behind those windows that had remained intact were knocked over on their side, leaking soil onto the shelf.

Some minutes later, the crowd had vanished.

The men stayed hidden for quite a while afterwards.

Finally, when they decided to emerge, Samuele stood in silence. Jack and Sanwar tried to thank him, and offered to help him clean the mess, but the florist only shook his head.

In the end, they simply walked away as the man took out his broom, and began to sweep away the bits of dirt and broken glass.

Rachel squeezed them nearly to death when they made it back to the apartment.

"I'm so happy that you're both alright!" She exclaimed, ironically almost choking the life from them with her

embrace. “We only just found out there was a rally, but you were already out! You’re not hurt, are you?”

“Safe and sound,” Sanwar reassured her.

“We had some help from the neighbors,” Jack laughed, finally wrestling himself free from the embrace.

“And there is more good news,” Maria added, palming the diary.

The men sat down to hear it.

“Godfrey disguised the Hebrew with the Language of Birds, but the Hebrew was also a disguise itself. Well, in a way.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asked.

“The answer was so obvious,” Maria chuckled. “Those who speak Hebrew should know that each letter has a corresponding number. This is known as ‘Gematria’.”

Jack knew the concept. The letters began with *Aleph*, which was one, then continued with *Bet*, which was two, and so on. At the eleventh letter, the numbers went by tens, and at the nineteenth, they went by hundreds.

“So, Godfrey’s true intention was to leave us behind a set of calculations,” Jack started.

“Perhaps the proper amounts and compositions of each substance needed in synthesizing the Philosopher’s Stone,” Sanwar finished.

“Precisely,” Maria confirmed. “Rachel helped me put together the sums while you boys were gone. We wanted to test what happened when we did. Indeed, we found the number of grams and percentages of each compound, how to prepare them and for how long, but there was something else...”

With her wrinkled hand, she beckoned them to the table, where she opened the diary to a bookmarked page. Rachel

placed a notebook beside it for cross-referencing the Language of Birds with Hebrew, and opened to the corresponding page as well.

There were four couplets hemmed inside a square in both books.

“A curious thing,” Maria said, pointing to them. “These come right after the passage about the ingredients, yet they are ungrammatical. They are simply loose words, listed together. Even the Gematria makes little sense. Most are words, but some are just letters.”

“*Adam, Yarweh, Dehab, Tzah-di,*” Jack read the first line aloud, then the second. “*Abedah, Bedeel, Hayah, Mem.*”

It was a bit unnatural reading from right to left, yet he read them well enough for Maria’s approval, as she did not correct his pronunciation. The final symbols, *Tzah-di* and *Mem*, curiously were but single letters from the Hebrew alphabet.

“Why just letters?” He asked.

Maria had no answer for him. No one said anything for a while. They stood in silent puzzlement for a while, until at last Sanwar spoke.

“Maria, have you a map?”

Rachel found one buried in a drawer somewhere. It was doubled sided, with one side being a map of Europe and the other being of the municipal area alone.

Sanwar unfolded the large sheet, and spread it across the table.

“What are you thinking?” Asked Jack.

“Why tell us the ingredients, yet not where to locate them, especially if they are rarities? Humbly speaking with a high degree of professionalism in Alchemy, I recognize not a single substance listed, so it is not as though these items are facile to procure...Aha! There! Behold, *Tzah-di, Mem!*”

“Of course!” Maria exclaimed. “We use those letters for directions. North and east!”

Sure enough, Sanwar had found them on the Hebrew map’s compass rose.

“Now,” he said. “May someone kindly read to me the values of each line, with north being the first?”

Jack did the honors.

“Forty-five, twenty-six, eleven.”

“And the next line?”

“Twelve, twenty, forty-six.”

Sanwar traced his finger along the map northwards, then east.

His finger hovered over the paper a moment, before he flipped it over, and found the exact same point on the other side.

“My word,” he murmured.

“What is it?”

Everyone gathered around him.

“The location is right here in Venice,” Sanwar said, his finger planted firmly on the spot.

“I do not know this place,” Maria said, looking at where he pointed.

“Don’t worry,” Jack told her. “I think I do.”

III

Penitents Pray in Solitude

At night, the narrow streets were all aglow from the hazy yellow light of the street lamps. The lonesome fog made them hazier still, and appear as if their bulbs were will-o'-wisp.

Weird shadows played their masquerades amidst the silent canal as Jack and Sanwar came down its way, back to where they had first encountered D'Orato and his blackshirts just days before.

The two men stopped at the corner.

The Hospitaller church stood there on the far side of the canal.

Jack had feared that in the altercation, it had just been his imagination, but here the building was, real enough; or rather it was surreal, the way the fog drifted across the familiar dart-point cross above the door.

"Shall we?" Sanwar asked.

Jack nodded.

They were as ready as they could be, armed with only their swords, their wits, and a small attaché of common chemicals that Maria had loaned them. Knowing Godfrey, there was likely another Alchemical puzzle to be solved inside the church, although Jack was less concerned with that than with running into a patrol of blackshirts in some dark alleyway.

A nearby bridge crossed over to the other side of the canal and into a side street. However, there was no foot path to the church, only a slender causeway, which was several inches underwater and only wide enough to walk one foot in front of the other.

So, Jack and Sanwar crossed over, stepped their boots into the icy water, and shimmed along that narrow causeway with their hands pressed into the church walls for balance.

After some minutes, they reached the entrance. The bronze double doors had gone from yellow to turquoise with age and had a pair of lion's head knockers with large metal rings clasped between their jaws.

Jack tested the doors. They did not appear to be locked, but they were damn heavy and swung inwards. Without much room for him and Sanwar to get their footing and apply their weight, pushing them open would take a considerable amount of effort.

With a mighty heave, they shoved their bodies into it, which resulted in a hollow metallic boom echoing throughout the entire city. The doors then scraping against the stone floor, producing a grating, high pitched screech, which was loud enough to equal the first cacophony.

Jack and Sanwar looked at each other, and cringed.

"After you," Jack said sheepishly.

"It might as well be after all of Venice now," Sanwar remarked, and gestured for Jack to go in first.

Once inside the church, they tried to close the doors behind themselves, but to no avail. The heavy bronze was held fast in place, and would only make more noise if they attempted to force it.

"Let us make haste here," Sanwar warned, flicking on a torch.

More ankle-deep water was waiting for them in the vestry. They waded through its murk, and as they continued into the nave, the water gradually subsided until the stone was fully dry. Pausing a moment, Jack could see the reason; the whole building had slanted upwards, and now the chancel at the far

end rested higher than where they stood. The incline could not have been more than just a few degrees, but the difference was noticeable.

The interior lacked the customary brilliance of Catholic sanctuaries, not only because of darkness but decay. Any pews that remained were rotted and rife with fungus. Any icons along the walls were blackened by mold. Statues to saints in alcoves were so eroded as to have no features left, save coats of lichen growing over them. There no windows here nor any candles to give the vestry any light either.

“Bloody spooky...” Jack uttered. Even his murmur resounded throughout the empty halls. They were obviously alone, and yet there was heaviness about the rancid air as if they were not.

Sanwar shined his torch about the place.

“Look there,” he said, pointing to the chancel. He and Jack ascended the steps of the dais. Just beyond the altar, Jack finally saw what his sharp-eyed companion had spied from far away.

The mural looked as luminous as the day that the artist painted it upon the altarpiece. A familiar image gleamed at them with swathes of color; a great green lion devouring a golden sun. Blood ran down the lion’s maw to spill upon the earth. Above both icons flew the image of a banner on which was a written a phrase in Latin:

Visita Interiora Terrare Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem.

“Visit the interior of the earth, and purifying, you will find the hidden stone,” Sanwar translated.

“Vitriol,” Jack put more simply. The phrase was an acronym for the name Alchemists used instead of sulfates. He noticed too, the symbols for two of the Alchemical

aspects, Sulfur and Salt. “Aye that confirms it. Sulfur and Salt. Vitriol is a salt with sulfur in it.”

He opened attaché on the altar. Sure enough, amidst the many vials of substances was one containing the pale blue crystals of ferrous sulfate.

“But where to use it?” Jack asked himself. “And how?”

The altar was otherwise empty, and nowhere else seemed to bear any other Alchemical iconography, save for a single downwards triangle upon the floor.

“Water...”

“Jack.”

Sanwar shined his light upon the baptismal font. The stone plinth was overgrown with ivy, and inside its basin sprouted a single withered stem. Sorry jaundiced petals wilted at the end of its stylus. No roots were visible, as the vegetation was surrounded by a moat of murky water, but Jack wondered how they could even grow through the metallic basin in the first place.

“Here goes nothing,” he said with a grimace, and poured the crystals of vitriol into the water. He stirred the solution with a glass rod from their kit until they were dissolved, then gazed in wonder at what swiftly followed.

Almost at once, the water cleared and the flower flourished. Its stylus thickened and lengthened several inches, and emerald leaves fanned out from every side. The wilted yellow petals arose with life, and budded into a blooming shade of crimson.

Jack and Sanwar took a step back in amazement, then another as the font rotated counterclockwise and descended into the floor. A black void was left in its absence. After a moment’s hesitation, the men ventured forward to gaze into it.

Curiously, there was water directly underneath the stone. Inky blackness sloshed about for just a moment, then became so suddenly luminous that it almost blinded them. Jack and Sanwar recoiled, only returning to the well once it had subsided.

Gazing into the void, they saw at last the source of the sudden flash, a pair of glowing, bulbous eyes staring back at them, unblinking.

Giuseppe D'Orato growled, and tried not to scratch his nose. The cold was causing it to drip into his bandages, where it would stay and moisten. He wanted nothing more than to rip the bloody, snotty gauze from his face and throw it into the canal, but it was keeping all his splints in place. D'Orato hated enough doctors to begin with, and his reset cartilage was doing little to improve his opinion of them.

That blow from the giant Arab had shattered his nose completely, and D'Orato was still paying for it. He had given chase after taking the punch, then had the nose bandaged at the behest of his men so that he could search the *Ghetto* for bastard who had thrown it. That should have been the end of, except that his mother had pestered him to no end until he had gone to the hospital that night. A quack doctor there had bitched about how D'Orato had waited too long to have it reset properly, but D'Orato knew the man was covering his own ass for any potential mistakes. He cared not a single shit if the doctor protested, because D'Orato was not interested in appearing anything but terrifying. He did not need to look pretty. He was just glad the injury had not stopped him from going on patrols.

Patrolling was one of the best parts of the job, and Giuseppe would gladly endure the bitter chill and

uncomfortable bandages in the name of duty. Besides, he could not allow himself to look unmanned in front of Gianni and Silvio or any other of his men. After all, Gianni and Silvio had taken their share of the hits from the two criminals, and that had not stopped them from coming out tonight or nights before, so why should it stop him?

He was the leader after all.

The three men walked along the empty streets wearing those cuts and bruises like medals. Anyone who saw them would know their power. Anyone who saw them knew to step aside and pay respects even without the bandages. In this new Italy, wearing a blackshirt was like wearing a crown.

“Think we’ll find those cunts tonight, Giù?” Gianni asked him.

“I told you that they fucking ran,” he snarled. He had searched for the past few nights, and found no trace of his two attackers. D’Orato had hoped they would still be in town, and had warned the police to station guards at every dock and train station. Yet again, there was no trace of them. Some of the gendarmes even joked that D’Orato had just slipped on soap and faked the story, disbelieving that these criminals could have escaped their own careless grasp. D’Orato remembered the faces of those gendarmes who had laughed at him. He would deal with each of them in time.

Now, he was more concerned with the safety of his city. The place was riddled with dangers; Slavs, Jews, Blacks, and Gypsies were flooding these once lovely streets, and filling them with crime instead of honest business. Soon enough, Venice would be overrun and not an Italian would be left in Italy, only all these “immigrants” who had replaced them and leached off all their labor. D’Orato’s father had lost his small plot of farmland a few years back, because there were no men

to work it, only these lazy foreigners who did not want to work at all. D'Orato would deal with each of them-

A sound rang out through the night, a sound like heavy metal slamming down on stone.

D'Orato started running before he knew exactly where it had come from. He let his instincts guide him like a wolf did when it had caught the scent of blood. Gianni and Silvio followed close behind as best they could.

Finally, they emptied out into a familiar place, the street where they had fought just days before.

"There!"

D'Orato spied it first.

Across the way was an abandoned church whose door was curiously open.

"Run and find more men," D'Orato ordered Silvio. "Gianni and I will stay here and keep guard."

"How many men, Giù?"

"As many as you can find! Now hurry, damn it!"

Silvio went running off, and Giuseppe turned back to the church. He and Gianni drew their pistols. There was only one way out of there, and it was the way those criminals had come in. Whenever they appeared again, Gianni and D'Orato would be ready for them.

Tonight, they would kill two dangerous men and take them off these lovely streets.

Tonight, they would bring more glory to the *Patria*.

The creature floated just below the surface, with only its smooth, elongated head visible. Soft blue light shined through its sleek, translucent skin. Tiny bubbles filtered out of its slit-thin, downturned mouth as reedy gills flapped along its neck. Though its enormous eyes were pupilless, that blue

light shined deep within them, and shimmered with the faintest hint of knowingness.

Something compelled Jack to crouch down closer, and Sanwar as well. They stooped beside the hole, so they could look upon their visitor more clearly. It mirrored them by placing its head above the surface.

“What are you?” Jack whispered to it.

A high-pitched sound escaped its mouth, and reverberated throughout the empty nave.

The creature then brought forth a long, scaly arm from underneath the gloom. At the end of its limb were leathery, feathery fins. Yet, when the being had fully raised its arm, those fins suddenly stiffened, and revealed a hidden hand beneath them. This appendage had spindly fingers sprawled out like a bat’s, complete with fleshy webbing between them.

The creature held its palm out as if it had touched an unseen barrier, and held it there a moment before Jack realized what the gesture meant.

Gently, he placed his palm atop the other’s.

The creature made a sound akin to the first, and raised another limb out of the water. It held its leathery fins pronated until Sanwar placed an open hand beneath it.

Only then did the creature place a small, wet vial in his palm.

It was a curious little thing, no longer than three inches. Cyan liquid sloshed about inside the minute vessel made of frosted ultramarine glass. With the utmost delicacy, Sanwar accepted the item, and placed it securely inside his breast pocket.

Either man was unsure of how to voice his thanks, so the creature decided for them by sinking beneath the gloom once more, and vanishing altogether.

“Well,” said Jack after a long while. “Three more to go, I suppose.”

“I want to leave,” said Sanwar.

No further discussion was needed. They headed back down the steps, through nave and flooded vestry, and out the door they came.

It was when they had both stepped into view that D’Orato opened fire.

Sparks burst off the thick bronze doors as across the canal D’Orato and a second man fired their revolvers.

Jack and Sanwar stumbled on the ledge, trying to shimmy their way back to firmer ground. It was a hurried, frantic dash to the street as the two men spider crawled against the church wall. At one point, a bullet dashed the stone between Jack’s fingers. Instinctively, he jerked back his hand, lost his footing, and plunged one leg knee deep into the canal. Sanwar grabbed him, and yanked him onto the cobblestones. They fell and landed together in a heap on the hard damp street.

In this moment, they were prone and it would have been the perfect opportunity for a pot shot, but thankfully, this was long range for a revolver, maybe fifty or sixty feet. What was more, D’Orato and his man had probably gotten overexcited while waiting for their quarries to appear, and so had already spent all six rounds shooting erratically. Now he and the other blackshirt were fumbling to eject their empty casings and load in new ones, but in their fury, spilled their fresh cartridges all onto the street. The blackshirts scrambled to collect them as rolled about the cobblestones, giving Jack and Sanwar more than a chance to get on their feet and run.

They took off down the nearest street, but skidded to a halt when they saw four more men rushing towards them.

Jack and Sanwar backpedaled, only for D'Orato to finally regain his dexterity, load in the final round, and resume fire.

“Shite, shite shite!” Jack cursed to himself, then juked down another path, right before several gunshots whiffed behind him.

He and Sanwar went running down another maze-like street full of side paths and alleyways, but stayed to straightest most visible ones. If they took a wrong turn down any one of them, they could be caught fresh in dead end, and its namesake would prove quite literal.

“To the canal!” Sanwar shouted as they ran, seeing a way out down one of these foggy lanes.

Jack knew his thinking at once.

They turned off down the path, which opened out onto another canal. This one had steps leading down to a walkway that ran underneath a series of a bridges. Jack and Sanwar hurried down them right as several blackshirts appeared on the other side.

D'Orato's men took aim from the other side, but the bridge did exactly as Sanwar intended, and blocked them from a clean shot.

A few did try, but the bullets slapped uselessly into the architecture. Most of the blackshirts just swore, and shouted at each other. Jack and Sanwar tried not to laugh as they vanished into the mist.

They had to move a bit more slowly as they went, as the stone walkway was slick and not completely straight. However, this did not stop them from nearly colliding headlong with a pair of pedestrians who strolling down from the opposite direction.

Jack halted, and nearly apologized, until he saw that both of them were wearing black.

“Aw fuck,” he groaned as the two blackshirts reeled back in surprise.

They must have been on a nightly patrol, since there were only two of them, and they had no weapons drawn yet. However, that changed the moment they laid eyes on Jack and Sanwar.

In a sudden flash of steel, the blackshirts whipped out switchblades, and brandished them with sadistic glee. They looked at each other with a grin, then slowly made their advance.

Jack and Sanwar drew their swords.

The blackshirts stopped, and their eyes went wide.

“*Fungulo...*” One of them uttered before Jack chopped his hand off.

Still clutching the switchblade, it went flying off into the canal.

The second man tried to run, but Sanwar ran him through from behind. He and Jack ended the encounter by kicking their two opponents into the canal. The one who was still alive found it difficult to stay afloat with just one hand.

The victory was short lived, however.

Up ahead, a group of blackshirts apparated from the fog. Jack and Sanwar turned to flee, but were cut off from behind as D’Orato’s group appeared a moment later.

The two groups put away their firearms as they closed in, and drew melee weapons instead. Switchblades, truncheons, chains, and knuckledusters all appeared in hand. Shooting here risked hitting their comrades on the other side of Jack and Sanwar. Besides, the blackshirts outnumbered them four to one, rendering firearms unnecessary. From the way the fascists grinned at them, they were looking forward to pleasures of dismemberment anyway.

D'Orato himself unsheathed a dagger from his belt, and waved it about in front of his face for Jack and Sanwar to see. A straight, spear-pointed blade taunted them from the end of its riveted ebon hilt. It was a lovely thing to look upon, and would be just as horrid a thing to die upon as well. D'Orato gave its flat a lick before turning the point towards them.

Jack and Sanwar stood back to back to meet the advance. Jack knew to let Sanwar face D'Orato, so the two of them could finish what was started. He hoped that Sanwar would give the bastard more than just a broken nose this time.

"Jack, if this is to be the end," said Sanwar. "I would just like to say that I love you most ardently, and have been honored to share even a portion of my life with yours."

"Likewise, my friend," said Jack. "But I ain't dying because from a fucking fascist and neither will you."

"Shall we then?"

"Let's."

Then, the fight began.

The two men lunged forward, taking their opponents completely by surprise. They had likely expected Jack and Sanwar to anticipate attacks since the pair were on the defensive. However, if fencing and the battlefield had taught Jack anything, it was that defending only ever delayed defeat. A fighter needed to defend to stay alive yes, but to win, he needed to attack.

His first blow slashed one man across the face, and opened his jawbone down to the chin.

His second drove the others back as they tried to rush him in revenge.

They regrouped and held their ground, lunging out every so often with half-hearted attacks. Jack had the advantage of three feet of steel, so they were loath to get in close. Their

strategy would be for one or two of them to occupy his blade while someone rushed in and seized his open flank. The only trouble was that the walkway made for a natural chokepoint, easily defensible by a single, skilled opponent, and that an injured man lay bleeding in the middle of it.

One of the blackshirts tried to drag his wounded fellow out of the way, so Jack punished him with savage strike to the shoulder. The second man fell back with his arm dangling by the sinews, but his friends ignored him and rushed at Jack instead.

Jack was quick enough to step out of distance and evade them, but only barely. He resumed his stance, and the two uninjured leapt back before they ran onto the end of his sword point. They paced back and forth just out of measure, waiting for another opportunity.

Sanwar's battle meanwhile was invisible to Jack, but he had heard several screams behind him and had been not yet been stabbed in the back, so he knew that his companion still held ground.

It looked as though they might yet win this skirmish, until a shout came from across the water.

Jack braved a glance aside.

A blackshirt had appeared on the far side of the canal, holding a pistol in one hand and waving away his comrades with the other. Suddenly, the men on both sides scurried back, and Jack realized that he and Sanwar were right in the line of fire.

Without thinking, Jack sprang forward, and snatched the pistol out of a wounded man's holster. In a blink, he wheeled about and fired.

His shot blew the newcomer away in a spray of gore.

However, in saving Sanwar and himself, Jack had also doomed them both.

The diversion was the opportunity his two opponents needed. They rushed him at once, and tackled him to the stone. *Lann Dbearg* flew from his hand as the three of them hit the ground together, and clattered on the walkway. Jack was on the bottom of the pile, and had all the wind knocked out of him, while his attackers crawled on top of him and tried to pin him down. Jack punched and kicked to stop them, but he was outmanned, and a hand shoved his chin down to expose his neck. Upside down, he watched as Sanwar was being swarmed himself by three opponents, yet there was nothing Jack could do to save his friend, or even himself.

One of the Italians had Jack pinned with a knee upon his chest, while the other had his hand pushed into Jack's chin, and his knife raised to strike down upon Jack's throat. Jack jammed a hand out to catch his wrist and lock it, but the second blackshirt had both hands free, and went for his own knife to stab him in the guts.

Jack struggled, frothing at the mouth to grab something, anything, with his free hand.

He may have lost *Lann Dbearg* in the collision, but found a grip on the holster of the nearest wounded man. With a feral cry, he wrenched the pistol free and wrestled it between the knife-wielder's thighs. In one swift motion, he turned the barrel on the man's genitals and fired.

The blackshirt gasped as the bullet went in his groin and traveled out his collarbone, then fell over into the canal.

The second man had hesitated from the shock of seeing this, and ditched his puny knife for the heavy pistol on his hip.

Jack was already turning his own weapon on him by the time he had it out, and they squeezed the trigger at the same time.

The blackshirt's shot knocked Jack to the ground with a hole in his shoulder, but Jack's had put a bigger one in the Italian's brain.

Groaning in pain, Jack flopped over onto his stomach.

Sanwar had killed one man with his own blade, and struggled with another who was jamming a brass-bound fist into his midriff. Sanwar shuddered from each blow, but kept his knife dug deep into the man's ribs.

Jack aimed a careful shot, and blew the attacker off his friend.

When the gun smoke cleared, D'Orato was the only one left standing.

He stepped forward, pistol leveled, and blood streaked across his face. Blood was running from his bandage nose too, as it had likely broken all over again during the chaos.

He sneered as he stood over the two men.

"*Ciao bella,*" he grinned. His golden-tooth glimmered in the lamplight.

Flat on the ground, Jack pulled the trigger of his gun.

It clicked.

Empty.

D'orato laughed.

Then strangely, the laughter caught in his throat.

The canal had started glowing.

Azure luminescence replaced the gloom. So suddenly, the water was alight with an eldritch radiance. Jack and Sanwar were held captive by his beauty and frozen from his terror. D'Orato turned away from them, and let the pistol fall from his hand and clatter on the stone. Entranced, he walked to

the water's edge to gaze upon the shimmer, so brilliant and blue. He could not form words. His mouth just seemed to gibber. He knelt at the edge, eyes cast down as if awaiting some response.

A pair of leathery, feathery fins reached out and grabbed his head, then pulled it underwater.

D'Orato did not resist.

He simply lay face down in the canal until his chest stopped heaving.

Eventually, the light faded away.

Sanwar helped Jack to his feet. Together, they watched a streak of shining blue go shooting off down the canal. Somewhere down the watery lanes, it blinked out altogether and the waves went dark once more.

When it was gone, Jack turned to D'Orato's sodden corpse.

"Bella ciao," he said.

IV

And Hear False Voices

Sunday, December 10th, 1922
Salzburg, Republic of Austria

Snow was falling when the train pulled into the station. The passengers were greeted with a cruel wind when the doors opened, as a roaring gale swirled about the track to air its wrath upon the world.

Lord John Henry Saxon stepped out onto the platform, and into the cold. An ermine coat billowed about his enormous frame. The chill did not bother him as it would other men, but it had soured him considerably by snuffing out his cigar. Bitterly, he tossed the half-smoked end down onto the tracks.

Taggart and Doctor Rothstein limped out after him, their faces crinkled in the galeforce winds.

“Jesus, it’s bloody cold,” Taggart grumbled, then fumbled to save his bluster from nearly being blown clean off his head. He drew his trench coat tighter about himself, and shivered.

The Doctor was practically wobbling beside him, but seemed to be enduring the freezing clime much better.

“Gentlemen,” he said with a wavering voice. “Welcome to Austria.”

Down the track, they could see the landscape spanned out before them. White-washed buildings rested along the snowy banks of the Salzach River. It was not yet midafternoon, but their windows were already aglow beneath the wintry sky. The busy streets were lined with tall trees bare of leaves and drooping streetlamps. A solemn fortress stood atop a high

hill above the city, but even that was dwarfed by the majestic, snowcapped Alps far off in the distance.

“You said there’d be a car,” Saxon yawned.

He was loathe to say it, but somehow, he missed Palestine. Even though the nights there could be chill, they were still much warmer than this. The temperature here had to be easily below zero, and he had half a mind to get right back on the train and journey all the way back south again. However, he knew that a logistical nightmare was waiting for him back in Palestine, and that Austria was the only place to where he could both escape and progress his goals.

After all, Saxon had spent almost a month delegating the whole disaster back in his Jerusalem factory to the lawyers and accountants, so that he could travel over sea and land with no other company save for the boorish Taggart and the loathsome doctor, just to be in what might as well be the bloody tundra.

He just hoped that this trip would be as worthwhile as Rothstein had promised.

The Doctor now pointed across the platform with his cane at a man in a double-breasted black coat and driver’s cap.

They approached him, and let Rothstein do the talking. He and the chauffeur exchanged some words in German before the Doctor confirmed that this was indeed their man.

“It should only be a short drive from here,” the Doctor assured them.

Saxon only rolled his eyes, and let the chauffeur take their luggage.

The man noticed that Taggart carried a briefcase, and tried to take it until Taggart resisted. With a grin, the Scotsman revealed that the handle was chained fast around his wrist.

“This one stays with me, mate.”

The driver may not have known any English, but he certainly understood.

After that, he led them all out front to where a mustard-painted Opel was parked and waiting. Even in the passenger seat, Saxon was uncomfortable. He had all of the automobiles in his collection custom-crafted in order to accommodate his impressive height. In this dreadful machine however, his head touched the ceiling and his knees were pressed against the dashboard. The chauffeur only betrayed a smile for the briefest of an instant, but it was enough that Saxon noticed. He groaned.

To make matters worse, the drive was not as short as Rothstein had made it seem. Saxon checked his Rolex, and saw that they had been driving for close to an hour before the city was even out of view. After another hour passed, he had not even seen so much as a roadside hamlet or even other people on the road.

Thankfully, the weather had held throughout the journey, for if the snows delayed them, they would have been stranded in the storm, and at that point, Saxon would have asked the driver for directions and braved the rest of the way on foot.

Promise came as they ambled down a lonely forest road. It was a detour from the main highways and onto local backroads, which meant that the path at least was taking them *somewhere*.

However, it did not mean that somewhere was good.

The dark primeval pines of the forest likely homed good sport, red deer and roebuck, even wild boar, but there was an unsettling quality about them. They reminded Saxon of the old fairy tales told to every child; of the dreary, haunted places where said children were lost, then found by witches, wolves, and all manner of nasty things. Of course, Saxon

believed in none of that anymore, but still, it was an unpleasant thing to think about.

The chauffeur must have seen him staring out the window, and said something in German.

“He says this is his lordship’s hunting grounds,” Rothstein translated. “Or rather that it was. He says that his lordship has only a third of this land left for hunting.”

“And when will we be seeing his lordship’s castle?” Saxon asked. He was damn cold and in need of a drink. He wanted to be out of this cramped little car, and in a place that could give him one.

“Now,” said Rothstein.

Sure enough, they broke through the trees a moment later.

Now unobstructed by the foliage, Castle Bodenburg loomed over them. Its great grey walls and towers stood atop a bald and mournful height. They were taller even than those of Salzburg’s fortress, and far more menacing. There were few large windows to let light in, as they would compromise the castle’s defense in times of siege, nor was there any ornamentation beyond the practicality of turrets and crenellations. It was a stark beauty, lovely in both its strength and its severity.

The forest ringed the entire hill, but there were several hundred yards of dead ground between them and the bottom of it, where a jagged, winding path then led up the slope. As the car climbed along it, Saxon imagined himself a knight from an invading army traversing this path by foot, all while stones and arrows were raining down upon his head.

Hundreds would have died before they ever reached the walls. He could only imagine what a handful of men with his rifles and machine-guns could do to an attacking force.

Provided the enemy did not bring any long-range artillery,

not even a full division of infantry could penetrate those defenses.

A barbican protected the outer walls, although its portcullis had been lifted when they reached the hilltop. The chauffeur drove through it, then across a long, rectangular ward to a second gatehouse, larger than the first. Once inside the inner ward, he finally parked in front of the keep.

The chauffeur opened the doors for all of them, finally allowing for Saxon to escape the damnable car. His feet crunched into about an inch of snow as he stepped out into the ward, and surveyed his new surroundings.

A variety of service buildings lined the hexagonal walls of the inner ward. There were stables, kennels, a tool shed, smithies, and others. Some stairs led to the parapets of those walls as well, although no sentries patrolled them. Behind Saxon was the inner gatehouse, and ahead of him lay the castle's keep.

This was where his lordship and all his household lived, and it was far grander to behold in close. The battlements rose sixty feet above Saxon, and were flanked by two roofed towers, which were even taller. Their bases connected with the parapet, giving full view of both wards and the entire valley below.

A pair of heavy oaken doors were the main entrance to the keep, and from them, a trio of footmen appeared to ferry away Saxon's and his companion's trunks, while a skeletal old butler followed out to greet them. He and the Doctor gave each other icy pleasantries in their ugly native language before everyone was escorted inside.

The butler brought them into a long, dim great hall, at the end of which sat a granite throne. The only light came from a few thin arrow loops and from an open hearth before the

seat. A fire burned there deep within, but its warmth was scarcely felt.

A figure shifted in that distant seat as they approached.

“*Herr* John Henry Saxon, *Herr Doktor* Rothstein, *und* Mister Taggart,” the butler announced in a creaky, dusty voice that echoed down the room.

“Come forward,” the figure called to them in accented English.

It must have taken half a minute just to reach him.

When they came close enough, three enormous Dobermanns in spiked steel collars snapped from sleeping positions on the floor to full, snarling attention until their master calmed them.

Lounging high upon his throne, sat a man whom Saxon thought to be the most grotesquely fat and wretched creature he had ever laid eyes upon. He was of middling height at best, but must have weighed some thirty stone. A pair of sunken yellow eyes peered down at them through comically minute spectacles. A thick gray walrus mustache connected with a set of generous mutton chops across a reddish, jowly face. He was dressed a butter-colored tunic with a red silk sash and thick brass buttons straining around his midsection. A sable cloak draped lazily across his shoulders where it spilled about the floor.

Beside the man was a tiny little thing, a skinny young woman a third his age and a fourth his weight. She was pale and pretty clad in a modest sky blue dress, and had long shiny waves of golden-strawberry hair. She glanced at Saxon with frightful eyes of crystal blue, then looked away.

“*Baron* Wilhelm Arnolf Helmuth *von* Dreckland III *und* *Frau* Zofia Antonia Vasilova *von* Dreckland,” the butler addressed them with a bow.

Saxon and the others did likewise.

“A honor to meet you, *Herr Dreckland*,” Saxon addressed him. It was of course, a lie. Saxon was more interested in the castle than the man, but he always aired on the side of flattery.

“You remember my title,” the Baron said with a gleeful, wheezing laugh. “At least someone does in this damnable, godforsaken country.”

“A shame that it was robbed of you, *mein Herr*,” Saxon cooed.

“Shame? It’s a bloody outrage!” The Baron lumbered to his feet. His shout tremored throughout both the empty hall and his immense gullet. His eyes narrowed in on Saxon. “And I distinctly remembered that your weapons had a hand in deciding these matters, Lord Saxon.”

“Saxon Arms helped win Britain the war, yes,” Saxon shrugged. “But had nothing to do with how the treaties were signed and how the land was parceled out. And don’t they say, ‘the pen is mightier than the sword?’”

The Baron planted his buttocks in the rocky chair once more.

“Indeed,” he grumbled. “I blame the Marxists for penning that damned paper. Them and the Jewry. Now all of my land has been repossessed for the nature of ‘the public good’. As if I did not care for my lands and people’s before! What greater good is there than for a master to care for his own? But the real question is, what are you doing here, Lord Saxon? Especially with *him*.”

The Baron turned his sallow gaze on Doctor Rothstein. His hounds did the growling for him.

“You did not mention *Herr Doktor* in your telegram, Lord Saxon,” he said. “I find that to be most dishonest.”

Saxon spoke before the Doctor could.

“I apologize if the wording was misleading,” he interjected. “However, the good Doctor is a member of Saxon Enterprises Unlimited, and has been in my personal employ for some while. However, had I mentioned his name, surely you would have turned down this unique opportunity outright before I had a chance to explain myself.”

“The Society has ex-communicated Doctor Rothstein with good reason,” Von Dreckland glowered. “I will need a better one to justify his presence in my house.”

Saxon grinned.

Taggart knew to hold out the briefcase then. He gripped both sides as Saxon produced a key from his coat pocket, and opened it for all to see.

There, inside the case were gleaming bars of golden bullion.

“Is this reason enough? For a start?” Saxon asked.

The Baron von Dreckland paused.

“I’m listening.”

Sunday, December 10th, 1922

Treviso, Kingdom of Italy

“Alright, you can come out now.”

Jack and Sanwar brushed aside the hay, and blinked as they crawled off the cart and out into the sunlight. The cold air was crisp in the lungs, and smelled a whole hell of a lot better than horse feed. It took them both a few more minutes after catching their breath to stretch their legs. Traveling for several hours underneath a mountain of the stuff was less than comfortable, and Italy’s roads were hardly smooth enough to begin with.

Rachel helped the two men wipe the loose straw from their clothes by the roadside. Their driver, Gianmarco, had parked his cart down a little forest path where they were unlikely to be seen. Both he and his horse watched the two men's grooming with great amusement.

It was all very comical to him, but necessary for Jack and Sanwar's safety. Venice had gone on lockdown the morning after their midnight raid on the Hospitaller church. Ten dead blackshirts in the streets had caused quite the commotion, and every port and train station would have police stationed looking for the two strange foreigners who had drawn so much attention from D'Orato days before. Maria had devised this plan to smuggle them out to nearby Treviso on the mainland, where attention would be lesser. She had also done the favor of providing them with help from Gianmarco, who had a farm nearby the city, bagged lunches, and money for a pair of train tickets. What was more, Rachel had eagerly volunteered to see them safely to the station. After all, Jack and Sanwar had to find their next clue.

"We should be close now," she told them, plucking one last strand from Sanwar's beard. "You two can sit in the bed and ride the rest of the way in the open."

"*C'è la cacca,*" Gianmarco warned Jack right before he nearly stepped in a pile of horse droppings.

Jack spat out a few loose straws.

"*Grazie.*"

He and Sanwar clambered back onto the cart. Gianmarco gave the reins a tug, and they were off again.

They trundled back onto the main road, then carried down it for a while before the platform appeared. It was one of those quiet country stations with only a handful of passengers standing by the tracks. There were no walls around it, so one

could see out into the horizon as they waited and look out at the verdant hills and valleys of Italy's Treviso province. Even in winter, the landscape was evergreen.

Rachel paid for the tickets, and handed them to Jack and Sanwar.

"You should get there before dark," she said. A long journey lay ahead, but it was still early, since they had departed from Venice before dawn. "I'm sorry. I don't know where you'll stay or how you'll find your way. I wish that we could help more."

"You've done more than enough," Jack chuckled. "Don't worry. Sanwar and I always find our way about somehow."

"Rather, I prevent Jack from getting himself lost," Sanwar corrected.

"And your shoulder?" Rachel asked. "How is it?"

Jack gave it a test spin.

"Good as new. If not better. Thank God for him."

He looked to Sanwar with a smile. Not only had his friend carried him from the aftermath of their fight by the canal, but he had assessed correctly that applying a drop of the *Aqua Permanens* would instantly heal the gunshot wound he had suffered. It had been worth a guess, as hospitals would have aroused too much suspicion.

"I had experienced a similar scenario, and made a fortuitous assessment that this compound would produce the same result," said Sanwar, touching his own arm. A sniper's bullet nearly tore the damn thing off in Palestine, yet here he was hale as ever thanks to the powers of the Stone.

"You know, it's funny," said Jack. "Four years fighting in Flanders and France, and not a single gunshot wound. Then, some blackshirt bastard nicks me in a gutter brawl. Bloody unbelievable."

“Use the liquid sparingly,” Rachel was sure to warn them. “You will need the rest of it for the Stone. So, no more getting shot!”

Jack and Sanwar only laughed, and promised her that they would try. It seemed unlikely.

With no other words to say, they stood there awkwardly for a while until the train arrived. Then, Rachel said her good-byes and gave them each an enormous hug. Jack and Sanwar waved to her as they boarded, and she got back on Gianmarco’s cart.

Then, they parted ways forever.

Jack and Sanwar found some decent seats by the window.

“Going to be a long ride through the Alps,” Jack said, settling in beside his friend. “Do you want to discuss the diary or maybe give ourselves a break and play some Twenty Questions?”

Sanwar did not answer.

He had already fallen fast asleep, his head leaned against Jack’s shoulder.

“Some conversationalist you are,” Jack said, then shut his eyes as well.

Softly, he began to sing himself to sleep with a half-forgotten tune:

*Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag,
And smile, smile, smile...*

He dreamt that they were in the crater once again, starving.

The cold was seeping through their bones. They rationed water, and barely spoke.

Then, he was back in Scotland.

He stood beneath the rowan tree, and she was right across from him. He slid his ring onto her finger, and she slid hers on his. It was a simple golden band, but Jack had worn it once with pride.

He could almost smell the Highlands. He could see the great stone walls of Cairndow standing by the loch, red harts running through the hills, and heather growing in the glen.

Suddenly now, he was in the trench again, the pistol pressed against his head, her letter dissolving in the rain, and a curious melody running from his lips.

He pulled the trigger.

Jack awoke. His body ached.

He blinked, and looked around.

Sanwar lay asleep beside him. Out the window, they passed a fallow field where a farmer was sowing seeds of winter wheat, toiling away before the last few days of the season escaped him.

In an instant, he was gone, and only minutes later, a distant city appeared on the horizon.

Jack roused Sanwar at once.

“What ever is the matter?” Sanwar mumbled groggily.

The ticket collector answered for him.

“*Wilkommen in München! Willkommen in München!*” He called out as he traveled down the aisles.

Jack grinned.

“We’re here.”

If ever there was a classic image of the medieval city, it was Munich. Red-tile roofs topped white-washed buildings, and wood-framed shops and stony archways lined every lane and corner. Gates still kept their merlons and their parapets, and the spires of cathedrals retained their Catholic bravado.

This was Bavaria.

Brisk air nipped their faces as they stepped out onto the platform. Even inside the station walls, the chill of evening blew in. Jack and Sanwar walked outside to fading light and an overcast sky. Light flakes fell alongside the last few stragglers of autumn leaves.

The last time they had come to Germany had also been in winter. The two men had crossed over the enemy line, leaving their old lives behind them in a burnt out crater on the battlefields of France.

The Great War had ended on that day. They said it would be “the war to end all wars”, but the wars went on in Germany. Revolutions had taken root in the wake of the armistice, and with them came the counter-revolutions. Each side wanted to sow a new Germany in the absence of the Kaiser, but for some, that meant watering Her soil with native blood. Jack and Sanwar had avoided most of the major cities as roving bands of the *Freikorps* cut down the revolutionary ilk. They were former soldiers summoned as a militia to quash the insurrection without breaking the stipulations of the Allies’ treaty. They drove tanks and armored cars through the streets, uprooting any resistance to the new republic or anyone they deemed to be resisting.

Those were fearful days. Everyone had looked at Jack and Sanwar with suspicion then, just as they did now. Passersby shot odd glances in their direction, and hurried past. Many of their faces were sallow, pale, and gaunt, and their eyes were hard as flint. Both men were accustomed to staring by now, Sanwar especially, but usually these looks were of confusion and curiosity, and not such outright hostility.

“More cheer in a bloody graveyard,” Jack muttered as they went past. “I don’t think they’ll even tell us where we can get a room for the night.”

“I wonder if any hostel will permit us on premises this evening, let alone their floor,” Sanwar yawned. The gray skies likely did little to improve his sleepiness.

Jack still felt quite weary himself. That was until he looked right down at the ground.

“Well fuck me!”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow. “Dare I ask?”

“I just found a hundred marks!”

Sanwar raised his other eyebrow.

Jack pulled slid the crumpled note from underneath his boot, and showed him that it was genuine.

“So what do you want to eat tonight? I’m partial to *filet mignon*, myself.”

Yet Sanwar did not seem so enthusiastic.

“What’s the matter?” Asked Jack.

He pointed.

Behind them, a boy was coming down the road pushing a rusty wheelbarrow; a rusty, squeaky wheelbarrow piled high with stacks of one hundred marks.

Jack’s jaw nearly dropped.

“Where you going with all that?” He asked the boy in German.

“To the market,” replied the youth. “To buy a loaf of bread. Better burn the one you’ve got. It’ll be worth a tenth as much tomorrow.”

The boy with the rusty wheelbarrow went squeaking off, and paid them not another glance.

“Aw fuck,” said Jack, and threw the wrinkled bill into the nearest drain.

V

The Fold Falls Silent

Jack's stomach grumbled.

He and Sanwar had just eaten the food that Maria had packed for them, but it had been their only meal all day and it was not enough. The dried fruit, hard cheese, and bread she had given them was fine eating for a charcuterie board, but not for a proper meal. Jack and Sanwar had devoured every morsel of it as they walked the streets, leaving naught for the birds but a few crumbs and seeds.

Overhead, the sky was turning grayish-blue as the wintry dusk set in. Jack cursed how every day was growing darker, and therefore colder. With the coming night, the air had gone from bitter cold to deathly so. On the frozen ground, snow had finally begun to stick.

Jack and Sanwar shivered on a park bench, determining their next course of action. They had been in Munich less than half an hour, yet were already regretting it. Four years ago, they had survived in the many shelters for homeless veterans across Germany. It was a pitiable existence, but there had been bread and soup at least in those days.

Yet all of Munich's doors seemed closed, both literally and figuratively. Few places were open at this hour, and fewer people were open to approach. Mostly, they had kept their heads down and avoided the men altogether.

"I have not the faintest notion of where to shelter," said Sanwar finally.

"Let's just keep keep moving," Jack suggested. "See if we can find some hole to crawl in for the night. Or keep our blood flowing at the very least."

He rose, and helped Sanwar to his feet. Together, they took off down a random street, seeing what makeshift shelter they could find. If worse came to worst, Jack knew they could survive tonight in the snow, provided they stayed out of direct wind.

It was tomorrow that worried him, however.

By now, most of the streets had cleared. Everyone had done their errands, and run home for supper, which made Jack ruefully hungry to think about.

Yet, they did not walk alone.

For the past short while, a tall dark shape had been on their tail. Jack had noticed him some time after the park bench. As he and Sanwar tread the snowy sidewalks, the figure had trailed a safe distance behind them, always slipping into the shadows of an alcove or an alley to conceal his movements. They were good too, but Jack had a practiced eye by now.

“We have a shadow,” he whispered to Sanwar.

“I know.”

“Take a right. We’ll pay him a surprise.”

They turned down a narrow alleyway, then quickly split apart, stacking against the walls on either side of the corner.

After several minutes, they heard a pair of shoes crunch slowly to a halt around that corner. The walker lingered there a moment, likely confused as to why his quarry had so suddenly disappeared, before taking a few hesitant steps into the alleyway.

Jack sprang on him at once.

He grabbed the man, and shoved him against the wall with one arm braced across his chest as a restraint. The force of it was enough to send the diary flying from Jack’s coat pocket

and the hat from his opponent's head. He had the man exactly where he wanted him.

Only, Jack saw that it was not a man at all, but curiously, a frightened woman. Still, he did not release her.

"Who are you?" He demanded of her in German. "And why are you following us?"

"Who are you?" She shot back, equally demanding. "You are not from around here."

"And you're not in a position to be asking questions."

"Are you?"

The hammer of a gun clicked back.

Jack glanced down at the pistol aimed directly between his legs.

It was a tiny thing, but enough.

"Attempt to violate me, and I will geld you like a horse," she warned him.

Jack released her mostly out of sheer disgust.

"Violate? What? What the hell is wrong with you?"

The woman recovered, and kept the gun on him, until Sanwar stepped out of his position and pointed *Cadarama* at her throat.

"Kindly tell her to put the gun away please, Jack."

He relayed the message as politely as he could, and added that he and Sanwar were not the types of men that she suspected. After a moment's trepidation, she glanced at Sanwar, then conceded, and stashed the pistol inside her purse. Sanwar returned the gesture by sheathing his sword.

"Now, ask her-" he began.

"I speak English," she interrupted him.

"How grand!" Sanwar exclaimed. "That makes our lives all the easier."

“I followed you because I wanted to know who you were,” she continued. “Two men looking like you...it’s confusing why’d you be here. I noticed you outside the train station on my way home.”

“And who did you think we were?” Jack asked. He was careful to ask his questions as neutrally as possible. People often revealed more when you let them say it in their own words.

The woman took a while to answer in any words, hers or otherwise.

“I wasn’t sure.” She hesitated. “Fascists? Spies?”

There was a pause.

Then, Jack and Sanwar burst out laughing.

“Hardly,” Jack replied. “I take it you aren’t either, then.”

“Do I look like one?” Her cheeks flushed with indignation.

It was then that Jack noticed a Star of David hanging around her neck on a simple chain of brass.

“Not even a little,” he said more soberly.

He reached down, and picked her fallen hat from off the ground. He was sure to wipe away the snow before he handed it back to her.

The woman did not immediately accept, but instead reached down to grab the diary, which had landed half-open in the snow. As she lifted it off the ground however, she paused, and flipped through several of the pages.

“This is...Gematria,” she recognized.

“Indeed, it is, madame.” Sanwar bowed his head. “You have knowledge of the Kabbalah?”

“Hardly,” she replied. “Who are you?”

“Jack MacGregor and Sanwar Singh Dhamija, at your service,” Sanwar said as courteous as ever.

“And your name, ma’am?” Asked Jack.

Again, she hesitated.

“Inge. Inge Eicher.”

She traded the diary for her hat, a simple black beret. She readjusted it on top her head of curly hair.

“You told me your names,” she said, once it was fixed. “But you did not say who you are.”

“Long story,” said Jack. “And it’s damn cold. Better to pretend you didn’t see us.”

He and Sanwar nodded, and turned to walk away.

Yet, Inge called after them.

“Wait.”

They turned back.

“You have come to a dangerous place,” she said. “Do you at least have some place to stay?”

Jack and Sanwar exchanged a look.

The door creaked open to a shabby, three-room flat on the top floor of an even shabbier apartment building.

Inge kicked the snow off her boots, and ushered them inside.

“It’s not much, but it’s home,” she said, flicking on the light.

Kitchen and table were at the front, a door to the shower and bath on the right, a worn-out leather sofa at the far end, and one last door beside it, leading to what was presumably a bedroom. A floral cloth draped over the tabletop, and there were houseplants in the window sill.

In the light, Jack also finally got a better look at their hostess. She was a tall and willowy woman of around thirty-five, with a head of chestnut curls, and shining emerald eyes. Faint laugh lines were etched around those eyes, and the corners of her mouth. Her cheeks were rosy, even without

the flush of the chilly evening. She shook the snow out of her hair, and hung her coat on a nearby wall peg. Beneath it, she wore a plain black turtle neck and a plain black skirt. She hung their coats as well.

“You must be hungry,” she said, going over to the pantry. “I am afraid that I haven’t got much. Some canned food and bread crusts.”

“Anything is greatly appreciated,” Jack answered.

Inge was already busying herself with plates and the tea kettle, so Jack and Sanwar seated themselves at the table. A moment later, she brought a pair of plates and mugs over to them. Dinner was a few canned *brats* and potatoes with a side of knobby *challah* bread; hardly a meal in its own right, but a veritable banquet to two starving vagabonds. They ate gratefully.

“Where’s your plate?” Jack asked Inge, after downing a sausage.

“I ate at work.”

“What do you do?”

“Today? I was tending a bar.”

“So, you possess multiple sources of employment?” Sanwar asked.

“One must,” Inge replied. “Days I work at the pictures as a projectionist. Evenings I work at a *biergarten*. Other days, I help at the soup kitchen.”

“And tomorrow?” Jack asked as he sipped his tea.

“My day off. For once.”

Suddenly, there was a thud on the table. A calico cat had appeared out of seemingly thin air, and was now patrolling his kingdom. He found Sanwar a particularly enticing post to rub his head.

Inge brightened instantly.

“I was wondering when he would come to say ‘hello’.”

“Such an affectionate creature,” Sanwar cooed. “Has he a name?”

“Schnitzel,” said Inge.

“Schnitzel? Any reason you named him after the stuff?”
Asked Jack with a grin. Schnitzel padded over to him once he had seen that Jack had a piece of *brat* and some scritchies waiting.

“He was a stray,” said Inge, beckoning the little fellow over. He found a place inside her lap. “I found him eating leftover *schnitzel* out of a restaurant bin. I had better food though, so he stayed with me.”

“Guess you have a habit of taking strange men home with you,” Jack remarked.

He had meant it purely as a joke at his own expense, but the comment had made Inge frown. The change was small, yet it was there in the way that her eyebrows fell a little and the corners of her mouth drew in. Jack felt that maybe he should apologize, but Inge had already gotten to her feet and had turned away. She put their dishes in the sink, then moved over to a closet and withdrew some blankets. She extended them to Jack and Sanwar.

“One of you can sleep in the bed, the other on the sofa.”

“Nonsense,” said Sanwar outright. “The bed is your own. Jack and I will be quite content on the floor.”

“I’m content on the floor,” Jack assured him. “You take the sofa.”

“Very well then,” she said, and hurried off towards her door.

“Inge.”

She turned.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“Of course,” she said. “Goodnight, Jack.”

“Goodnight.”

Sunday, December 11th, 1922

Bodenburg Castle, Republic of Austria

Saxon awoke to snow on the window sill. The sun shone brilliantly in a clear blue sky when the servant opened the shutters, and brought him his breakfast. He shivered as he ate. It would surely be a cold day, judging from the draft inside this dreary castle, though at least there would be no more damn snow.

He chased his breakfast with a whiskey and a cigar, then rose to be dressed. Von Dreckland was so short staffed that the same man who had served his meal also acted as his valet. The servant was some venerable, droop-faced Bohemian with translucent skin and liver spots dotted atop his hairless pate. He had no English either, so the morning banter that Saxon usually enjoyed with his man was now nullified. Saxon hoped the Baron would remedy his staffing problem shortly, otherwise this was liable to be an egregiously long winter.

The Baron himself was down in the Great Hall when Saxon found him. Apparently, he had predicted Saxon's desires, as servants bustled through the enormous main gate, carrying tapestries, furnishings, and food from trucks parked inside the inner ward. Saxon shuddered from the chill, which drew von Dreckland's attention. Upon seeing him, the Baron clapped his hands together. A glowing grin spread across his waxen, rotund cheeks.

“Good morning, *Herr* Saxon,” he exclaimed. “So glad to see you are awake? How was your sleep? Good? You look hearty

today. I have taken the liberty of refurbishing my estate, all thanks to your generosity, of course.”

“Are you sure all of these...*particulars* are necessary?” Saxon asked. He had rather hoped the gold would be spent on business expenses, not luxuries.

“Why of course! After all, this castle must be fit for the Society, if group functions are to be held here.”

Saxon dared to ask.

“The Society?”

“Thule,” the Baron replied, somewhat bemused. “Surely, *Herr Doktor* Rothstein has told you that he was once one of us?”

“Once?”

The Baron waved a puffy hand at him.

“All in the past,” he said. “His membership will likely be renewed, besides. The important thing is that you are here...and that the Doctor can continue his work.”

“Yes. That is important. Say, where is the old boy? I’d very much like to speak with him.”

“Either in the library,” the Baron answered. “Or in his ‘laboratory’.”

“Laboratory?”

“Yes, I gave him the conservatory for his work,” explained the Baron. “The room was unoccupied and out of use for quite some time. There is good ventilation with the windows.”

“And did you ever get all of the Doctor’s ‘effects’ from the train station?”

“They are being brought in now.”

Von Dreckland pointed, although the gesture was unnecessary. A team of porters came huffing through the door at that exact moment, led by the chauffeur who had

driven Saxon yesterday. The men were hauling a massive cylindrical object draped in tarpaulins. Red-faced, they dragged it through the hall while von Dreckland barked for everyone to get out of their way. He then to Saxon, and wheezed.

“Whatever has he got in there?”

“All I know is that it cost me a fortune to carry it through customs,” Saxon answered. He had practically bribed every official from here to Trieste for its safe transport and no questions asked. “Just get it upstairs without a scratch.”

“Anything for my honored guests,” von Dreckland assured him.

“Thank you.”

Saxon turned to depart. He did not relish interacting with the Baron any longer than was necessary. Besides, he had business to discuss with the good doctor. However, he had one final thought before he went to look for him.

“You ought to have hired fighting men first,” Saxon informed the Baron. “If you want protect your riches, you first need men to guard them.”

“The matter has already been attended,” Von Dreckland grinned. “They will be here soon enough.”

Saxon liked the way he said that none at all.

He gave a curt nod anyway, and left the Baron to his business. As he exited the hall, von Dreckland’s continued shouts at serving men bringing foodstuffs echoed thunderously along the cavernous chamber.

“A *krone* for a quart of wheat, and three quarts of barley for a *krone*; but do not damage the oil and wine!”

The Doctor was right where the Baron said he would be. The library lay on the first floor beside the north tower.

Grand stained-glass windows lined the room's east wall, letting in a rainbow of light from an inner courtyard sequestered behind it. Rothstein was using the light for reading a bouquet of dusty tomes spread out on the table in front of him when Saxon entered.

"I was told that I might find you here."

Rothstein put down his current reading. Saxon's booming voice was much too loud for most settings, let alone the library, and reverberated in this large and empty chamber. However, his presence anywhere could never be denied. So, Rothstein sat back to listen.

In the center of the floor was a golden seal, adorned with a rampant lion. Saxon sauntered past it with a curious glance, then went over to the table, where he lifted the cover of the nearest book, a pedigree of the entire von Dreckland lineage. The yellowed pages of the genealogy were trimmed in gold foil, and its cover bound in hard red leather paled by years of bleaching sunshine.

"Was this what you were looking for?" Saxon asked. Now within earshot, his voice had dropped down to a growling rumble.

"As engrossing as the ancestry of our host may be, that was not the prime document I sought," answered Rothstein. He showed Saxon the other book instead: "*Codex Rosae Occultae*", "The Codex of the Hidden Rose."

He placed it front of Saxon so that he could see. Black moleskin flowered with golden ornaments adorned the cover.

His lordship ran a gigantic hand over the smoothness of it.

"So, what can this Paracelsus fellow tell you that the Emerald Tablet can't?" He wondered.

“As I have told you,” Rothstein explained again. “The Tablet is only the recipe. This, my lord, shall reveal to us *where* those ingredients are hidden.”

Reverently, he re-opened the Codex to his previous page. The cover may have been one thing, but the parchment within far surpassed its beauty. Every page had been illuminated in a tapestry of color, cinnabar, orpiment, and ultramarine.

For a moment, Saxon was entranced by its sheer beauty, but then he grimaced and looked away.

“We’ve been at it for months,” he groaned through gritted teeth. He leaned his weight upon the table with both hands. The wood creaked beneath him. “And we aren’t a damn bit closer to making this bloody Stone!”

His lordship was most impatient.

“We needed the texts,” Rothstein reassured him. “And I needed a new laboratory. Lest you forget as well, my experiments have yielded most fruitful results, even without a complete formula.”

“And what have you got to show for it? I need to see something after all.”

Rothstein grinned.

At the moment, von Dreckland’s ancient butler had appeared. Zimmer, the man was named, and Rothstein knew his business instantly.

“The Railway has just delivered your...effects...from the station,” the man icily declared in German. “Shall my footmen bring it to the laboratory?”

“At once.”

Zimmer nodded, and quickly made himself scarce.

“You wanted results, and so you shall have them, my lord,” the Doctor said to Saxon. “Come, let us away to my laboratory.”

He shut the books and returned them to the shelves, each exactly where he had found them, all except the *Codex Rosae Occultae*, which he kept tucked underneath his arm. Saxon gave him a curious look as they strode over towards the northside tower.

“So, you have mentioned that you once were part of this...Thule Society,” he said. “But you never mentioned why you left.”

“I was requested to do so.”

“Is it rude if I ask why...?”

“Not at all,” the Doctor said. “They felt my methods were ‘too extreme’.”

It was brightness more than restfulness that awoke Jack that morning. The sun shined through the window right onto his eyes, which roused him rudely. He groaned as he peeled himself off the floor, an effort which cracked every vertebra down his spine in quick succession.

He groaned.

Sanwar, normally the early riser, was still sprawled out on the sofa, his legs dangling over the armrest. Schnitzel nested on his chest, a fluffy splotch of color against Sanwar’s cobalt shirt. He opened one eye when Jack stood and subsequently cracked both his kneecaps, but quickly shut it again.

Jack just let them rest.

Instead, he busied himself with what was left of the *challah* for breakfast. He had only eaten a few bites when the front door opened, and Inge entered with some oranges and a bread loaf.

“You are finally awake,” she said, putting everything down on the table, and hanging her coat on the wall. She then joined him.

“What time is it?” He asked.

“Almost noon.”

“Jesus.”

Jack had opened his eyes several times in the past few hours, then shut them again, thinking that darkness had meant the hour was still early. In Scotland, winters could be near full dark, with scant hours of twilight in the midday. A man could sleep through all those months thinking it had been a single night. It had been years since Jack had seen a winter like that though.

“We should be going,” he said, without making any great motion to do so. His sleep had given him no rest at all, and weariness still ached his body.

“And where are you going, exactly?”

Inge leaned back in her chair, arms folded.

Jack could only return a sheepish grin.

“Got a map?”

She found one in a kitchen drawer, and gave it to him. He spread it across the table, keeping the corners pinned with the oranges, then found the diary among Sanwar’s belongings. He read each of the words in order, and found their respective values on the map.

“Bamah, Chessed, Agadah; Achad, Bet, Adamah.”

His finger hung over the final coordinates.

Inge blinked.

“That’s just a few hours west of the city,” she said, and scratched at her curly-hair. “You got all of that from the Gematria?”

Jack could only shrug.

“Who are you? What are you even doing here? And what is so important about this spot? There is nothing there.”

“Nothing?”

“Just an abandoned mining town.”

“That’s something, not nothing,” Jack asserted.

“Well, the trains will be shut down for the day,” Inge returned wryly. “They will be clearing snow from the tracks probably until evening.”

“So, we’re stuck here another day?”

“Unless you would like for me to kick you out.”

“Not at all,” Jack said hastily, worried that he had somehow offended his hostess.

However, Inge simply cracked a thin smile.

“You can stay...” She began. “But I would like to know why you are here.”

“You wouldn’t believe me even if I told the truth.”

“And what if I did?”

“You’re either far too trusting or far too mad.”

“Or,” she said. “The rest of the world is just far too mistrustful and close-minded.”

Jack considered her carefully.

“Well, maybe I just don’t want to put a kind-hearted person unnecessarily in harm’s way.”

Inge’s smile faded. Her green eyes went listless. She seemed not to look at Jack then, but through him, as if she could see the wall behind his back.

“I am already in harm’s way by virtue of my being,” she said after a long silence. “At least if you tell me your aims, then maybe I can help you, and it might all be worth our while. This city is a dangerous place, not so? We all have to trust somebody.”

Jack hesitated.

“Tell me what it is you want first,” he said.

“Ultimately? An end to sickness, hunger, empire. War.”

“And if someone were to have that solution, what you would do?”

“Depends...do they want it for everybody?”

“There’s no other way it could be.”

“Then I would die for that solution,” Inge answered. “If needed.”

Jack leaned forward in his chair.

“I was right. You are far too trusting.”

Yet, Inge remained stone-faced with her arms still folded.

“Or maybe I can just tell whom to trust.”

Jack shrugged.

“There’s a rare substance hidden somewhere at those coordinates,” he said, finally. “Sanwar and I need it to create a very important...chemical.”

“A weapon?”

“In the wrong hands, yes.”

“And in yours?”

“The solution you wanted.”

Inge nodded.

“Then, I’ll do my best to help you get there.”

“Wait. You will?”

“Yes. I will. Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow then,” Jack agreed.

“For now though, would you like to visit some museums?”

“Museums?”

“This is Munich,” she said. “We have got to enjoy the day somehow.”

They came blinking out into the wintry brilliance, blinded by how clear-skyed it was. Granted the sunshine made the

day no warmer, as the wind still chilled their bones, but it made it considerably less gloomy. One might not have guessed there had even been a storm the night before.

Inge led Jack and Sanwar down the building's snowy outdoor staircase and through a courtyard to the street. She carried with her some of the groceries that she had purchased that morning in a brown paper bag, dry goods, tins, and canned food mostly. There seemed to be an unusual heftiness to the parcel though, as her arms clutched it tightly. Yet, when Jack offered help, she rebuffed him.

"I just need to make a quick errand," she explained, not that either man protested any.

A short ten minute walk brought them through a neighborhood with signs in Hebrew, synagogues, dingy cafes, pawn shops, and delis. Some folks nodded to Inge and offered pleasantries. They then gave Jack and Sanwar some quizzical looks, yet otherwise remained silent.

They came to a soup kitchen just outside the neighborhood, where a line of people of all ages winded down the street. A man in an apron and a black beret stood outside smoking a cigarette. Inge approached him with a smile, which he returned before offering a measured glance to Jack and Sanwar. She said something to him, which brought his attention back. The two then exchanged some words before she handed him the bag, and rejoined Jack and Sanwar.

"I see you participate much in charity work," Sanwar remarked, but Inge shook her head.

"Not charity. Mutual Aid. Are you ready then?"

"If you are," said Jack.

Their first stop was the botanical garden.

By now it was quarter past noon, and the streets were cleared for vehicles and pedestrians. The sun's warmth had begun its slow work of melting the black ice on the footpaths, though the snowbanks on the edges of the street were stacked almost a meter high in some places and would linger there for weeks to come.

Despite the late hour, the trio kept a lethargic pace. The two men were recovering from the exhaustion of the past several days, while Inge seemed more intent on taking in the sights than reaching their destination.

"I have never quite grown accustomed to these dreadful European winters," Sanwar yawned. "Come November, the weariness inevitably seizes control of my body."

"You have been in Europe for some time?" Inge asked.

"Six years more or less," he replied. "Jack and I were cordially invited for an extended holiday."

"I see," said Inge. "Well, I invited myself."

"Medical corps?" Jack guessed.

"Yes. Field hospital. I learned English tending to British prisoners."

"On behalf of the British Empire, we apologize for overworking you," Sanwar said with a bow.

Inge only shrugged.

"It was war."

They then crossed through the city's main square, called *Marienplatz*. The plaza was a long rectangular space, penned in by a bustling café on its south face, and a line of stores to the east and west. In its center was *Mariensäule*, a gilded statue to the Virgin. On its north side stood the immensity of the City Hall building. Its baroque façade, lined with arcades and buttresses, made it look more like a grand cathedral than a house of governance. A mountainous spire

billowing above the square only added to the effect, and when its clock struck the hour, a thundering *glockenspiel* rang out. As the sonorous chimes echoed throughout the square, a clockwork puppet show clicked across an open arch high on the tower. Two knights tilted in the center, and the one in blue and white, representing Bavaria, won the day.

Some of the passersby had stopped to watch the show. Inge included herself among them, and therefore, Jack and Sanwar did as well. It was an amusing several minutes before they resumed walking.

“Is it for a special occasion?” Jack asked her.

“No, it happens every day.”

“Seen it before then?”

“Every day.”

The gardens were just a short walk away, awaiting with blessed warmth. Though the grounds were a snow-coated field, the greenhouse within was a steaming jungle. Every chamber was a swathe of greenery, made ever more luminous by light bouncing off their foliage from the great glass ceilings above. There were pools with lily pads and even songbirds flying about. Sanwar was pleasantly surprised to find several native plants from Punjab; Indian Rosewood and Gum Arabic trees, and even a long line of Cayenne peppers.

“This feels like a diversion,” Jack said as he walked in awe among the swelter. He could not help, but contain his enjoyment however. For once, he felt almost...normal.

“A welcome diversion,” Sanwar added. “We can afford to spend a day.”

They found Inge again in the floral section. Although the blooms about her were a multitude of brilliant hues, she stood fixated on just one.

Although the petals had not yet opened, there was no concealing their distinctive bulbous form and the milky residue running down their stems.

Jack and Sanwar silently joined her to admire them.

“Poppies,” she said. “They still need some time to bloom.”

“They will soon,” said Jack. “And they’ll be the loveliest of all, I’m sure.”

Inge smiled a little.

“Want to see something else?”

“Gladly,” he and Sanwar said together.

Next was the Paleontological Society.

Within its walls were housed the bones of long dead beasts, fierce, gigantic creatures that belonged in folklore rather than the halls of science. Inge knew all their names, as if they were longtime friends, as well where the bones had been discovered and by whom, and the creature’s habitat and diet. Both Jack and Sanwar were well-acquainted with prehistoric life, but her knowledge was more vast in scope. Her words were few and matter-of-fact, as if her concision of information were a practiced technique. Jack had half a mind to tell her that her fourth job should be giving tours, though he restrained himself so as not to interrupt the lecture.

“I have always liked this one the best,” she told them, stopping in front of a display at the room’s far end.

“*Spinosaurus Aegypticus*.”

Only a handful of bone fragments compromised the actual display. The rest was a speculative drawing of where the pieces would fit on the animal’s enormous reptilian frame. According to this model, Spinosaurus stood four times the height of a man and fully upright, with its sail-backed shape in a perfect semi-circle.

“It is so strange and fearsome,” she explained. “Totally unlike the others. As the name implies, the bones were found in Egypt.”

“Most intriguing,” Sanwar thought aloud. “Although its skeletal design is quite incorrect.”

“It is not so?”

“No, the spine should be held parallel to the ground with the weight resting above the hips. In a similar fashion, the tail should also be erect, not lagging flaccidly about the ground. There would be flanges along the length of it like a newt’s, and its skull should be crocodilian in fashion, long and narrow. The sail as well, should have asymmetrically arranged chevrons.”

“How do you know that?”

Jack and Sanwar just exchanged a look, and grinned.

“Just trust us,” said Jack.

Dusk fell shortly after.

They had only been out a few short hours, and yet the sky was darkening, and the wind grew chill once more. Inge covered herself with a scarf as she led them towards the final museum, hiding all of her face save her emerald eyes. She walked at a quickened step, her long strides leaving Jack and Sanwar struggling to keep pace.

“We only have an hour before it closes,” she urged them. “Hurry.”

“It’s not the end of the world if we miss it,” Jack panted.

“Yes, it is. This is the best one.”

Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks, and did a double take.

“This way,” she grimaced, heading off a different path. “It’s a shortcut.”

She vanished into a gloomy alley.

“Aw fuck,” Jack groaned.

They had no choice but to follow. Inge with her black coat had blended completely into the shadows until she re-emerged into the light at the end of the street. There, she paused a moment, and looked out between a set of buildings. It gave Jack and Sanwar time enough to rejoin with her.

Across the water, beyond the city bounds, it stood. Dark walls hung heavy in the waning light. An empty field lay between it and the edges of the road. From this great distance, its size might have seemed diminished, but not its presence. Inge’s gaze remained transfixed on it.

“Is that a-?” Jack began.

“The prison,” Inge finished. “Stadelheim.”

She continued on. They hurried after.

Some minutes later, they were at the doors of Inge’s final destination; the *Pinakothek*.

A menagerie of fantastic artworks awaited within. Frames of paintings, portraits, triptychs, and more lined the vast, empty walls of every room. Each room was made the emptier by a lack of patrons, and Jack feared to even breathe, for the sound would like echo forever down the halls. The only other soul they saw was an aging nightguard who reminded them of the impending closure.

“I just want you to see one room in particular,” Inge said, and brought them to the Renaissance wing.

Most were familiar with the Italian Masters, but the Germans had giants of their own. The sixteenth century in particular had produced a flourishing within the motley of states that eventually became the Empire, and then Republic. There were vibrant portraits and monochrome woodcuts. The biblical shined alongside the historic, the light against the shadow, and the simple with the elaborate.

Jack suddenly had the urge to draw again. He had not done so in quite some time. So long in fact, that he had almost forgotten that he could or that he missed it. He glanced at all the artworks, and was struck with pity, knowing that he could never be among them.

Inge was fixed on one in particular.

The woodcut depicted a truly horrid scenario. Four riders descended from the heavens, felling mortal souls like stalks of wheat as they rained down. The scene was all in black and white, but Jack could almost see the bloodstains and the yellowed teeth of the riders' hellish steeds, and he could certainly hear the screams.

"Albrecht Dürer," Inge informed him. "Published in his series from fifteen hundred and eleven. It's my favorite."

"Why's that?"

"I find it. Comforting."

"Comforting?"

"Yes. It just feels...familiar in a way."

"All too much," Jack admitted.

He stared at it a while longer.

"Curious," Sanwar remarked, stopping at one of the displays.

"You are an admirer of Augustin Hirschvogel?" Inge asked.

"I confess, I know him not," he stated. "But I am an ardent admirer of his subject, Paracelsus."

"The Alchemist?"

"Precisely. Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim. A Swiss born Alchemist and prominent figure of the German Renaissance. He traveled a large portion of the known world for both the acquisition of Alchemical knowledge and its distribution. He died in Salzburg. Some say that he was murdered."

“I only know him from the portrait.”

“I am surprised that you are not more familiar. He greatly influenced your field of practice.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes, he practically invented the field of toxicology. You see, he was one of the first to believe that the mineral world could be utilized for medicinal purposes and not the vegetable.”

Inge smiled.

“And now you have taught me something. I thought Alchemists were only interested in turning lead to gold.”

“Only the foolish ones,” Jack muttered.

Inge raised an eyebrow at that.

“Come on,” she said. “It’s almost close, and you must be hungry. I’ll buy.”

Dinner was street food.

Inge found a vendor smoking *brat* out on some lonely corner by the lamplight. Jack watched her trade the man a handful of cigarettes, then in turn receive three of the sausages tucked into toasted buns, each covered with mustard and sauerkraut.

“Neither of you smoke, do you?” She asked, returning to them with the food in hand.

“No,” said Jack, accepting the sandwich from her. A rogue dab of mustard dribbled onto the napkin it was sheathed in.

“Good, it saves me the rest of the pack.” She checked the carton, which was down to just three skinny ones, then tucked it into her coat pocket. “Money is useless around here,” she told them. “You must have something else to trade. Cigarettes are good. Food is better. Silver or gold is best.”

“*While you’ve a lucifer to light your fag...*” Jack softly sung to himself.

“*Smile boys, that’s the style...*” Inge completed, almost instinctively. She had a surprisingly deep and dulcet singing voice. When she finished the line, her eyes met his, and Jack realized that he had been staring. However, Inge had grace enough to smile rather than say something to embarrass him.

She turned to Sanwar.

“Not enjoying your *bratwurst*?”

The poor man was grimacing between each bite.

“He doesn’t eat usually eat meat,” Jack said on his friend’s behalf.

“I will when options are scarce and it is presented,” Sanwar responded once he had swallowed his bite. “Although to my knowledge, this is my first experience of tasting pork.”

“Delicious, isn’t it?” Inge grinned at him, and took a bite of her own.

“Wait, aren’t you-?” Jack started, but she only shrugged at him.

“It’s Germany and it’s almost nineteen twenty-three,” she said, chomping into the sausage. “Besides, I don’t believe in Hell.”

“Well, neither is there Hell in Sikhism,” Sanwar added, and kept eating.

“I’ve fallen in with a load of heathens,” said Jack.

“You’re in good company.” Inge gently nudged him with her elbow. “Say, you want to see a picture?”

“A picture?”

“Yes, I can get us in for free.”

Jack looked to Sanwar, who shrugged.

“A motion picture would be sublime,” he agreed.
“Although you are not intent on staying out all night, are you?”

“Just until you want to go home,” she said.

“Then a movie it is,” said Jack.

They three of them finished their food, and tossed away the dirty napkins in a nearby wastebin, or rather, they tried to until Inge abruptly stopped them. Gingerly, she withdrew a crinkled paper from atop the waste pile, and smoothed out its pages.

The name “*Völkischer Beobachter*” screamed across the top in bold black lettering, the two words separated by an eagle clutching a ringed swastika. Jack noticed the top headline at once:

“Blackshirts Murdered in Venice! A Communist Plot?”

Inge’s eyes scanned the column as fast as if she were typing the words herself. She flipped through the pages with much more slowly though, and scanning each thoroughly, until halfway through when she stopped. Seconds later, she tore the paper and discarded the pieces into the bin once more. Among the shreds, Jack noticed a particular cartoon inked onto the paper: a hairy, big-nosed rat with a Star of David emblazoned on its side.

“Is everything all right?” He asked Inge.

“I always like to keep up to date on the news,” She replied, equally as innocent.

“Even fascist news?”

“Especially.”

“How about that picture show, then?”

“Sure,” said Inge, and began leading them off down the street. “You know, you never told me where you arrived from yesterday.”

“Oh, you know. Out of town.”
Sanwar raised an eyebrow.

VI

Wolves Show Their Fangs

Saxon tried his damndest not to shiver. Howling winds buffeted their faces, and yet von Dreckland had insisted that they wait outside to receive his “guests”. One of the servants had spied them coming up the winding path, and informed the Baron at once. It was thus decreed that the entire house be present in the inner ward.

The servants stood like guardsmen in a line to one side, their ranks bolstered by a slew of brand new hires. Meanwhile the Baron and the Baroness, Saxon, Taggart, and Rothstein stood opposite. Even the Baron’s hounds were present, sitting stiff as statues before their master’s heels.

Six trucks drove through the open gateway a minute later, flanked by several motorcycles as a guard. The trucks parked in a staggered formation in the center of the ward, with their rears to the Baron. Once they had stopped, scores of men emptied out from the canvas covered beds, and rapidly formed a triple rank parade in front of everyone. Each man wore a dark gray woolen coat and a dull steel helm atop his head, which bore a skull and cross-bones motif on the sides. Rifles were slung around their shoulders, and they carried knives, pistols, grenades, and bayonets on their belts. The men’s jack boots clicked readily into place as they snapped to full attention in perfect synchronicity.

Then, came their commander.

Major Heiman Wolfhard Berg emerged from the passenger’s seat of the foremost car. Von Dreckland had spoken of his extensive war record; how he had led stormtroopers against the Russians on the Eastern Front,

then helped put down the Uprising in Bavaria with the Freikorps when the war was done. He had fought in a dozen more battles since then in Prussia, the Baltics, and Silesia in the east. According to von Dreckland, the Major had the “black blood” within him, a wild, primeval nature only possessed by the rarest men of the Aryan race. The ninety men before them had all served under Berg’s personal command, and now formed a company of hand-picked irregulars known as the *Völkerschutzgruppe*. Everyone just called them the “VSG” for short.

What was not so short however, was Berg himself. Von Dreckland had spoken so much of the man’s exploits that he had neglected to mention his height. Even from a distance, Saxon knew that the man had a mountainous stature, for he towered over everyone around him. He must have measured close to seven feet and weighed almost thirty stone.

A long gray trench coat further exaggerated his height, and clung tightly to his thickly muscled frame. Instead of a helmet, a black-billed cap rested atop his lofty head, with the skull and crossbones in its center. An enormous revolver hung on his right hip, and a huge, broad knife on his left. As he neared the Baron, he removed a pair of black leather gloves, pocketed them, and stuck out a massive hand.

He and von Dreckland shook, and laughed while exchanging their pleasantries. Immediately, the Dobermanns were all over the Major, leaping at his barrel chest to lick his face. He laughed as he patted their heads, and gently pushed them down.

“Garmr! Geri! Freki!” Von Dreckland called them back, allowing Berg to continue.

The Major smiled, then went to accept the Baroness' dainty, ringed hand. He kissed her jewel-studded fingers delicately, before turning to Saxon.

"Major Berg, is it?" Saxon addressed him. He was not used to looking up at someone when he spoke to them, and found that he despised the fact.

"It is." The Major spoke with a gravelly voice. "You must be Saxon."

Now that Berg was in front of him, Saxon had a better look at the man. A pair of small, gray eyes peered down at him, hard as flint, and his heavy lantern jaw looked chiseled out of granite. A series of scars had also chiseled away at his face. Fencing was a common sport among the aristocracy, but the Germans had always done it differently, choosing to wear minimal headgear and use live steel during competitions. They wore the resultant scars as a badge of pride and manliness, and although Saxon could see that some of the scars on Berg were from clean cut saber strokes, he could not distinguish them from those acquired on the battlefield.

Berg's uniform was equally as decorated. A multitude of medals clung to his chest, not least of all, the Iron Cross. Proud beside it was a brass pin in the shape of a larch tree, with the letters VSG inscribed on its trunk.

"Come to protect us then, Major?"

"With my life," said Berg. "The Baron informs me that you are close to unlocking the secrets of the Philosopher's Stone. That must be protected at all costs. The Thule Society will spare no expense in assisting you, and the VSG is at your service."

"Very kind of you. I can attribute all of my success to Doctor Rothstein, of course."

Saxon hurried to divert the Major's attention elsewhere, and it worked, as Berg turned to the Doctor next.

"Rothstein," he said flatly. "I have heard tell of you. You left the Society before I joined unfortunately.

Rothstein... That is not a Jewish name, is it?"

"My blood is pure," Rothstein seethed.

"Good."

Berg then turned back to his men. Behind him stood another officer. The man was of average height, but was completely dwarfed by his superior so as to look a child next to him.

"Baron, this is my deputy, Captain Hauptmann," Berg introduced with a glowing grin. "Where shall he bivouac our men?"

"The servants shall show them to their quarters," the Baron replied. "You and the Captain will have your own rooms on the second floor near my study."

"I trust they will be close? I need my officers nearby."

"Of course, Major. And you and Hauptmann will do me the honor of dining with us this eve?"

"Heartily."

"Excellent."

Von Dreckland clapped his pudgy hands together, and at once the staff escorted the VSG away, while the Baron and his wife showed the officers inside the keep.

Saxon and his retinue followed lazily behind.

"Lot of pomp and circumstance that one," Taggart muttered, and nodded in Berg's direction. He then produced a flask from inside his pocket, and took a swig.

"A lot of arrogance," Rothstein added acidly.

"Just keep at your work," Saxon reminded him. "And leave Berg to me."

Jack made sure that he and Sanwar did not sleep late this morning. Come first light, he jumped to his feet and began collecting his pillow and blanket off the floor. Sanwar took a more deliberate approach, hoisting Schnitzel off his chest and depositing him on the sofa's back, then swinging his legs over and slowly stretching to his full height.

"I don't think it's midmorning yet," said Jack, hastily folding his blanket with large sweeping folds. Sanwar was painfully reorganizing his corner by corner. "We should be able to catch the next train and be there before the afternoon."

"In a hurry somewhere?"

They turned.

Inge sat at the table with an orange in hand. She dug a thumbnail into it, and with a spiral motion, made a single peel that unraveled the entire rind. Her laugh lines were slightly furrowed, and dark circles had formed beneath her emerald eyes.

"To the train station," Jack answered, a bit bemused.

"We're going to the place I'd mentioned yesterday."

"I remember," she said. "And you should not go alone."

"Are you stopping us then?"

"No, I am warning you."

"Against?"

"The Thule Society."

The name hung heavy in the air for a moment.

"Who pray tell are they?" Sanwar ventured.

"Powerful people. Dangerous people. They are a secret society, but their presence in Bavaria is not so secret. Their influence is growing, and they have many connections. They may, for instance, be looking for two men of unusual

description who know something about those dead fascists in Italy. They may also be curious to learn what those men are looking for. Say, the Philosopher's Stone."

"How would they know about that?" Jack asked. "And how would you?"

"They're obsessed with the Occult. And I pay close attention to people like that."

"Like us?"

Inge shrugged.

"You may reach your destination alone," she went on, finally spreading the orange apart into individual segments so that it resembled a blooming flower. "It is probably a few hours by foot to that town from the nearest train station. Then what? You may have what you seek, but you'll have no guns, no money, and nowhere to go. And by then, the Thule Society will be after you. Anywhere you go in Europe, they will know."

"We need only be here a short while," Sanwar stated. "Is it so impossible to travel undetected?"

"Difficult, given your appearance and your 'activities', let us call them," Inge said. "At least in Munich, I can offer you some protection for now."

"But we can't stay here," Jack bristled.

"I know. So let me help you."

"How?"

"Don't leave yet. Come with me."

The Black Rose Tavern was still a few hours from opening, but Inge knew that Sie would be there, managing the books or doing organizational work for the RSB. So, she fiddled with her keys in the lock, opened the door, and led Jack and Sanwar inside.

Normally, the *Biergarten* was alive with lamplight and patrons laughing over tall glasses of *Weissbier*. Springs and summers especially were the liveliest, when the outdoor seats were put out in the garden and the bar stayed open long past midnight. Yet now, the place was emptier than ever, and not just because it was closed. Many years had passed since Inge had seen this place like how it used to be before the War. Barley, hops, malt, and most of all wheat, were now triple the price they were in those days, and fewer folks had coin to spend on common comforts like a nice, cold pint.

The shutters were drawn, so the empty hall was dim. However, the small window opposite the back door offered enough illumination for her to make out Hans' large frame wiping glasses behind the bar. He stopped his work when the door swung in, smiled at Inge, then frowned when he spied the two men behind her.

"You're in early, little sis," he said. "Friends of yours?"

"I wanted to speak to Sie, Hans," she told him. "Are they here?"

"Yeah, sure."

Hans dropped the rag, wiped his burly hands on his apron, then hung it from a peg on the cellar door. Inge told Jack and Sanwar to have a seat, then crossed to him behind the bar. They hugged.

"What's going on? Who are these guys?" Hans asked a second time. He spoke in a grumbling whisper.

"You heard about those blackshirts in Venice?"

"Yeah, sure."

Inge rolled her eyes in their direction, and it finally dawned on him.

“No shit,” he said. He scratched his graying stubble while he looked them over. Inge stepped on his foot a little so that he would not catch their gaze from looking too long.

“Just keep them occupied,” she said. “Get them some beers. Keep them busy while I talk to Sie.”

“Yeah, sure. They speak any German?”

“The Scotsman does. The Indian not so much, but he catches on quickly.”

“So how am I supposed to talk to them? What do I say?”

“You’ll think of something.”

“Anything for you, little sis.”

She smiled. She liked it when he called her that, and she knew that Hans liked to see her smile. They hugged again before she walked through the back door and into the hallway behind.

Straight down led to the office on the right and the open doorway of the kitchen on the left. Behind her was the cellar door, beside her was a broom closet and the backroom. A chair creaked in the office, so Inge knew that Sie was there and not downstairs taking inventory. She tapped on the office door window, and the shutter flew up instantly.

Sie was on the other side, hunched over their desk, the account book sprawled out before them. They grabbed their knobby cane, and used its crook to open the door.

“Do me a favor, and pull the shutter down again,” they said as Inge came in. She did so, and shut the door behind her. Sie put their reading glasses down beside the book, and wiped their eyes. “You’re an hour early for your shift, so something must be going on.”

“I’ve got some people that I think you should meet.”

Sie leaned back in their chair, and swiveled around to face her more fully.

“Who?”

“The men who killed those blackshirts.”

“Where are they?”

“Out front.”

Sie sighed, as they removed their beret and ran their fingers through their hair. They could only shake their head.

“You brought them here.”

“Where else? I can’t leave them out of sight, and I needed to get a hold of someone. They could be useful.”

“Or could they just be murderers, Inge. How much do you really know about them?”

Inge recounted the events of yesterday; how she had tracked them from the train station, and how they had spent the following day together. All the while, Sie just stared at her nonplussed until she ended with the abandoned mining town and the Philosopher’s Stone.

“And you know that the Thule Society has been seeking the Stone since their inception,” Inge pressed. “What if these men have answers about it?”

“Magic stones, enchanted cauldrons, Viking artifacts, and the God damn Holy Grail,” Sie scoffed. “Thulians believe in a lot of nonsense. Sounds like you’re starting to believe the same. Whoever *these* men are, they certainly adhere to the same Occult delusion.”

“They’re not fascists, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“But they are at best, mistaken. At worst, insane. I’m not sure what you want the RSB to do about them either way.”

Sie turned back to their desk, and started shuffling some papers around. “Look, I’ve got enough on my mind right now, Inge. A meeting’s been called tonight.”

“It has? Why?”

“Rosa told me that Berg was seen in town.”

Inge tensed.

“He was here this morning before he crossed into Austria,” Sie continued slowly. “He’s got men with him, all headed to Bodenburg most likely. Word is there’s going to be a rally. I’m more worried about that than magic stones and sorcery right now.”

“Don’t you find it suspicious though that Berg suddenly reappears not two days after these men arrive in town? Don’t you think it’s more than a coincidence?”

“No coincidence. The Nazis probably want a public demonstration for avenging those men in Venice.”

“Even if it’s only that,” said Inge. “Wouldn’t you want two more fighters on your side for when the rally comes?”

“I’ve already made it clear. I don’t know if we can trust them.”

“Then, why don’t you talk to them, and find out for yourself?”

Sie sighed and paused, weighing her words. Their brow often furrowed when they were entrenched in their thoughts like this, further deepening the wrinkles etched there over the years; years which had eroded more than just the skin.

“Ever the idealist you are, Inge,” they said at last, shaking their head.

“Well, someone still has to be. Isn’t that what we’re fighting for, after all?”

Sie just sighed again.

Jack watched as the big man, Hans apparently, drew *Weissbier* from the tap. He held it at an angle so that the glass would not fill with foam as he poured, and twisted it to a standing position at the end, so that it finished with a perfect frothy head. Its heavenly golden nectar gleamed against the

dimness of the room. The sheen of it was enough to wet Jack's throat.

Hans deposited the drink in front of him.

"Your friend doesn't drink?" He asked, taking a seat across from them.

"I abstain, thank you," answered Sanwar. He may not have known much German, but he knew that much at least.

"Doesn't drink, doesn't speak much German," Jack said. "But he's a good friend and true."

"He's not a German...are you?"

"Scottish."

Jack took a long swig of beer to prove it.

"You speak good German."

"I learned during the War," said Jack, wiping the foam from his mustache with the back of his hand. "Came in handy."

"So, you served then?" Hans grinned. In his eagerness, he removed the burgundy beret atop his shaven head, and gripped it tightly.

"Both of us." Jack tipped the glass towards Sanwar. "Unfortunately."

"So did I! Here, look!"

Immediately, the barkeep pulled down the collar of his shirt to reveal a gnarled scar beside his heart.

"Sniper," he said proudly.

"Why is he exposing himself to us?" Sanwar asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Hans is showing off his battle scars from the War," Jack answered.

"I won this at Passchendaele." Hans thumped his chest, and grinned from ear to ear. He then asked if Sanwar had been there.

Sanwar grimaced.

“Yes...I certainly was.”

A look of newfound admiration swept over Hans' simple, honest face. The man was taller than Sanwar by several inches, and had graying stubble on his stout square jaw, but his demeanor had suddenly transformed into that of a schoolboy in the presence of their favorite ballplayer. His already big blue eyes widened with glee, giving him an almost puppyish appearance. He just leaned back and kept on grinning, leaving an awkward, pregnant silence on the air.

Jack hoped that Inge would not be much longer.

He felt that they were out of place enough in this gloomy, vacant beer hall without this Hans character trying to make idle small talk. The only other company were the lions' heads and floral motifs carved into the support columns. The two images were an oddly mix of beautiful and bestial, which perfectly described the auras of this place.

Thankfully, the back door swung open not too much later.

Inge stepped through, followed by a second person. The latter was heavy-set, and walked with bated steps using a knobby wooden cane, as one of their legs sat higher than the other. Like Inge and Hans, they too wore the beret, though theirs was gray. Their hair was nearly the same color, though some streaks of bronzy blonde still shined through. They wore a plain black dress besides, covered over with a heavy brown leather jacket. They and Inge joined the others at the table.

“I am Sie,” they said in English. Their accent was milder than the typical rise and fall inflection of the Bavarian dialect. Jack guessed that it belonged to Berlin or somewhere thereabouts. “Inge tells me that you are enemies of fascism.

That is good. But are you friends to our cause? That is what I want to determine.”

“Inge has shown us nothing but hospitality,” said Sanwar. “We would be ecstatic to reciprocate such generosity in any way you deem fit.”

Sie seemed unfazed by Sanwar’s characteristic eloquence.

“Tell me why you are in Munich,” they demanded. “I want the truth.”

“We seek the Philosopher’s Stone,” Jack answered. “We were on our way to find an important ingredient in making it. Inge has the coordinates.”

“The Stone does not exist.”

“What if we could prove it?”

“How?”

Jack looked to Sanwar.

Sanwar sighed.

Begrudgingly, he produced the vial of *Aqua Permanens* from inside his coat pocket, and placed it on the table.

“I need a knife, please,” Jack requested.

Hesitant looks went around the table.

Finally, Hans pulled a trench knife from a sheath around his waist. It was a nasty weapon to behold, a nine-inch steel spike with thick brass knuckles jutting from the grip.

Jack only needed the weapon’s needlepoint for the purpose of this demonstration, however. He winced as he pressed the blade into his thumb, and dragged it along the skin a little. He would have used his sword for the task if it were not so unwieldy, and if Inge had not insisted that he and Sanwar leave their weapons at home.

Crimson blood ran down the finger. Jack twisted his hand so that it spilled into his palm and not on the table. Everyone was thoroughly agog at him, except for Sanwar, who simply

shook his head. With his other hand, Jack put down the knife, popped open the vial's cork, and dripped a single drop onto the wound.

It steamed.

"Rag please," said Jack once, then had to repeat himself as the Germans were frozen in their confusion.

Snapping to attention, Inge grabbed a clean one from the bar, and wiped away the blood from Jack's hand.

He showed them his thumb, unmarred by any cut.

"Gone," he said, and sure enough, it was. He wiggled his fingers anyway for added effect.

"Now you know why such an item cannot fall into the hands of the Thule Society," Sanwar said at length. The table was still recovering from the utter shock of what they had just witnessed, but his words restored their wits a little. "We merely request that you might aid us in our endeavors."

"We must," Inge insisted, but Sie raised a hand to quiet her.

"We will help you," they said. "If you help us first."

Von Dreckland had decided to feast them that evening.

Long trestle tables had been brought into the main hall, each one large enough to seat thirty men. The Baron had his own table for distinguished company placed at the far end of the room near the throne. A brand new crystal chandelier had been installed right above his darkened larch wood table, and fresh candles had been placed in the once lifeless candelabras along the walls. More lighting fixtures were soon to follow at the rate that the von Dreckland was spending.

Of course, the Baron himself sat at the head of the table, with his lady wife seated to his right and Major Berg to his left. His hounds naturally were seated at their master's feet.

Meanwhile, Saxon had been relegated to the other end, accompanied by Taggart and the Major's second, Hauptmann, neither of whom was much company at all. Hauptmann spoke stiff English, and Taggart was already inebriated before the second course. The Scotsman was a solid enough man when it came to the job and deadly in a pinch, but when during social occasions, he was next to useless. He was coarseness personified, and that coarseness could come too frequently to light if not suppressed by alcohol and women. Unfortunately, few of the former were available, as Saxon had explicitly forbidden his Head of Acquisitions from terrorizing any of the help; not that any of them were that pretty anyway, although that mattered little to a man like Taggart.

"I notice that the Doctor has not joined us, Lord Saxon," Berg pointed out as the servants carried away the empty bowls from the soup course. "A pity. I have heard much about him, and would have liked to verify it all."

"The Doctor's not much for food or company," Saxon replied coolly. "He prefers to spend most of his time in the laboratory."

"As he should be," von Dreckland added. "The sooner he achieves results, the better for all of us. I should hope my conservatory suits his purposes. It was his request to stage it there, after all."

"I trust it will suffice," said Saxon. "But tell me, Baron. Most men would turn away someone peddling promises of the Philosopher's Stone. What's got you so interested in it?"

"The Thule Society has always been interested in Atlantean artifacts," answered Berg. "It is the duty of our race to protect such powers, and to harness them for our self-preservation and inevitable flourishing."

“*Genau*,” von Dreckland agreed. “And my House has had a keen interest in Alchemy ever since our founding in fourteen hundred and eighty-eight. We have prided ourselves on our pure breeding and great investment in the Art since that time.”

“Five hundred years.” Berg nodded with approval. “And here’s to five hundred years more!”

He stood and raised his glass in toast, prompting the rest of the VSG to do the same.

“*Eintausend Jahre! Prost!*”

“*Prost!*”

Mugs of beer clanged discordantly together. The whole hall drank.

Saxon sipped his wine.

Moments later, the main course was served. Carried in on silver platters by two men apiece, a red roast boar was placed on every table. Cheers broke out from the men, and more drinks soon followed. Amber brew was flowing between the trestles. Laughter resounded in the hall from them, and even song occasionally, as they wolfishly tore into their meat. The biggest animal was naturally placed in the center of the Baron’s table.

“Shot these in the forest this morning myself,” von Dreckland boasted, although Saxon was doubtful of the claim. He had only been hunting once with von Dreckland so far, shooting air rifles at squirrels and rabbits. Even then, the Baron had asked his man Zimmer to do most of the shooting. His guess was that some of the most skilled VSG scouts had gone out into the woods that afternoon and killed the pigs.

“Major Berg would you do the honors of carving it?” The Baron asked.

“Gladly.”

He eschewed the silver knife offered him by von Dreckland's butler, and chose instead to draw his own blade. The thing was long enough to be a sword, but looked like just a butcher's knife in the Major's hand. The tip curved to a hatchet point like a falchion, and a single fuller ran down just one side of the blade. With a delicate slice, he shaved off a healthy cut and placed it on Lady Zofia's plate. She smiled sweetly as he did. Once he had carved a slice for everyone, Berg resumed his seat and so too did the meal. Even Saxon had to admit that von Dreckland's meat was tender.

"So Saxon," the Baron said between gulps of boar. "Now that we are in business together, I thought it time to discuss your political ambitions."

"I thought you weren't supposed to discuss politics at the table," Saxon deflected. "Or religion."

"Oh, come now," he laughed. "At this point, we are past the formalities, Mister Saxon. That is the nature of our relationship."

"I suppose I stand for King and Country," Saxon answered diplomatically.

"And property?" Inquired Berg.

"Most naturally."

"I see in you a great man, Saxon," von Dreckland said, peering across the table at him with half-blind, watery eyes. "Everybody knows this. And yet, there is even more potential that awaits you."

"Like?"

"The Thule Society supports emerging political movements, to achieve our ends," explained Berg. "Acquiring the Stone is one thing, but what happens after? We could use an influential man like you, Saxon. You could help us galvanize support for the cause abroad."

“I’m sorry,” Saxon coughed. “What exactly are your political ends? The good Doctor only mentioned that you opposed the ills of communism. That much I agree with, but what else is on your platform?”

“A reunified Germany.” The fire was rising in Berg’s voice. “One nation for one people and no others. The German people are tired of parliaments and politicking, Saxon, pandering to those who lack courage and patriotism. The people want better lives for their children and their children’s children. They want action. Healthy land and healthy offspring guaranteed. These are things with which anyone can agree. A German state could give that to them. A state that keeps the old ways; protect our kin, destroy our enemies. This is how it should be for all nations and races. Britain too. One race for each nation. No mixing. It would be better that way.”

“I can get behind that,” Taggart chimed in, and helped himself to another swig of wine.

“And what about private enterprise?” Saxon asked.

“It would be encouraged,” Berg declared. “So long as its ends were to the betterment of the nation.”

Saxon swirled about his glass.

“Interesting...”

“This is precisely why the Society founded its own party,” von Dreckland explained. “The Nazi Party provides a platform for us to make the changes needed in Germany and hopefully Austria soon as well.”

“There will be a rally soon,” said Berg.

“Will there?” Saxon sipped his wine.

“We have much to discuss after dinner,” von Dreckland said with a seedy grin. “For now, let us feast to a new and brighter future.”

The Baron tore off one of the haunches from the boar, and tossed it on the floor. Greedily, his hounds fought over the scraps.

Jack and Sanwar spent the rest of the afternoon waiting in the backroom of *The Black Rose* to avoid any further detection. The space was used for storage mostly, spare glasses, chairs, and tables, but had a lavatory as well, thankfully. They commandeered a table and some chairs as a work station, and used the additional time to continue translating the diary's gematria, at least for the first hour.

Jack had taken with him the map from Inge's flat, and folded it inside the cover. Sanwar read the words aloud along with their corresponding values while he plotted them with a pencil he had found at the countertop.

"*Mabva, Aban, Chadal; Bet, Zob, Abech.* North, forty-nine, fifty-three, forty-two. East, two, eighteen, eight."

"That would be..." Sanwar's finger drifted over to the precise location. "Just outside of Amiens."

"Wee tricky bastard," Jack said with a smile. "Of course, Godfrey would hide one of them near his hometown."

"What of the fourth ingredient?" Asked Sanwar.

Jack glanced at the diary again.

He paused.

"This one goes off our map," he said, skimming over the values a second time. "The coordinates...they aren't even close to the others. They're too far south and east."

"I suppose that we require a world map then," Sanwar remarked with an eyebrow raised. "Ours here is limited to Europe, as are our current means of transportation."

Jack pocketed the pencil. That was the end of their decoding for the moment.

With naught else to do, they satisfied their time playing cards lent to them by Sie instead. Games for two were few enough already, so eventually they ran out of those, and devolved into trading hands of War. After a dozen games and what seemed like an eternity, Inge finally opened the door.

“It is time,” she said, and brought them down into the cellar.

Tuns of ale in oaken casks covered every inch of the room’s walls, each one eight feet around at least. Inge led them over to a barrel in the corner, and rotated a tap on its side-turned lid. The lid then swung suddenly open, revealing that the barrel was in fact a long, cylindrical passageway contained within its bindings and its bottom was simply the doorway to an adjacent room. Lanternlight shone at the end of the portal, and voices echoed down the oaken walls of the passage. Inge showed them inside.

Chairs had been laid out for the thirty or forty people who had gathered in this other room. Many wore berets like Inge, either dyed in red or black. Few were seated, as most chose to stand around and use empty barrels as tables while they smoked and drank. Tobacco scent hung heavy on the air, as there were no other doors or windows in the place.

“Gentlemen, this is *Roter Siegesbewegung*,” Inge announced. “You can call us the ‘RSB’ for short.”

Sanwar coughed.

“Aye, RSB is better,” Jack agreed.

“So, these are the men who I saw you with, Inge,” came a husky voice from the left. It belonged to a small woman with short, dark hair and quick, searching eyes. She stood over one of the barrels smoking with a friend, but placed the butt into the ashtray before offering a hand to Jack and Sanwar. She

addressed them both in English. “Jack MacGregor and Sanwar Dhamija, yes?”

They accepted the hand with caution.

“Precisely so,” Sanwar confirmed. “To whom do we owe the pleasure?”

“My name is Rosa,” the woman replied. “Funny. Neither of you look dead to me.”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow.

“Whatever do you mean by that?” He asked as innocently as possible.

“I mean that official records state that you were killed in action, yet here you are alive in front of me,” she clarified.

“And how would you know a thing like that?” Asked Jack.

“It is my job to know,” Rosa shrugged. “I just want you to know that full transparency is in your best interest. And if you take advantage of Inge in any way, I will hunt you down, and make you suffer.”

“There is no need for theatrics,” Inge interjected, and rolled her eyes. She then directed their attention to Rosa’s companion. Jack recognized him as the man she had met at the soup kitchen. He was a short, pot-bellied fellow with bandy limbs and a pencil mustache that had an unusual twitch about it. “Jack. Sanwar. This is Otto. He is a reliable scrounge. Anything you need, he can get it. Especially explosives.”

“Go boom,” said Otto in a smoke-burnished voice.

They reached out to shake his hand, but Otto did not shake hands so much as lever a person’s arm up and down until it almost fell off.

Jack was nursing his shoulder when a sharp whistle suddenly caught everyone’s attention.

Sie entered from the passage a moment later with Hans shutting the lid-door behind them. They made their way through the aisles while Hans fell in beside Inge. He gave Jack and Sanwar a wink, then turned to face front.

Sie crossed to a blackboard at the far end of the room, and angled it towards everyone. A basic diagram of the downtown area had been chalked on it, with major streets and landmarks labeled.

The meeting then commenced fully in German. Jack did Sanwar the favor of translating as best he could.

“For those of you who don’t know,” Sie began. “On Saturday, about five hundred fascists will be waving their flags through Munich as a show of solidarity for their Italian brethren. They will be gathering at the *Rheingold* Beer Hall and marching to Marienplatz for speeches.” They used a nub of chalk to mark the route of travel before continuing. “Rosa informs me that Heiman Berg will be present, as will a number of leading members from the Nazi Party. Baron von Dreckland is slated to be the key speaker at the rally. Rosa also tells me that Berg has ninety VSG, and likely a large number of SA will be there too. All planned activities regarding our mutual aid networks, workers’ strikes, and theory readings this evening will have to be postponed. This is our priority.”

“Do you think the police will intervene this time?” Someone asked.

“Only if somebody starts shooting,” Rosa answered. “But the VSG might do that anyway if it means a chance to avenge their comrades.”

“Better to rely on non-lethal methods if we can help it,” Sie agreed. “We cannot risk escalation.”

“Do we even have the numbers to face them though?”

Asked someone else. “What about the other affinity groups?”

“Some have contacted me,” said Sie. “But we’re not looking at many. Most folks are reluctant to engage in direct action.”

“Still?!”

“We can’t take them on with these numbers!”

“There’s no other way!”

A commotion broke out among the group. Some condemning the actions of other groups, some defending them. Jack tried not to listen to it all.

Inge, though, seemed to flinch with every word. The longer it persisted, the more that she began to shake. She tried to cover her ears at first, but it offered little relief. Jack reached out a hand to console her, but Hans caught his wrist, and simply shook his head.

Eventually though, the cacophony was too much for her.

“Enough!” She cried out, and made her way to the front. The group went silent as she faced them. “Comrades. The threat is here and now. Numbers or not, we have to answer it.”

“But how?” Asked one of her fellows.

“If we cannot be stronger than them, we must be smarter,” Inge pointed out. “Last time we went toe to toe with Berg, we failed. Horribly. Now, I am no strategist, but those kinds of tactics just won’t work this time.”

“What do you propose instead?” Sie put their hands on their hips.

For a long moment, it seemed that Inge could not say anything. She opened her mouth, but no words escaped her lips. Just when it looked as though the crowd might shout her down however, she spoke.

“Spike the beer at the *Rheingold* with magnesium citrate. Disable them. Make them unable to even fight at all.”

“Magnesium citrate?”

“It is a laxative,” she said in a firmer voice. “I could get plenty from my old contacts in the medical corps. The Nazis will be chugging the stuff before they even hit the streets. It’s a long march from the *Rheingold* to Marienplatz. That should give plenty of time for the medicine to kick in.”

A buzz of cautious approval went out through the seats. Jack thought it was brilliant. Win the fight before it was ever fought. Good strategy and positioning decided more battles than even the best trained soldiers. He could hardly keep himself from grinning at Inge’s hidden talents. Suddenly, he was thinking like a commander again, all thanks to her.

Sie, however, remained stone-faced.

“And what if it doesn’t work? We need a contingency plan.”

“I have an idea!” Jack called out.

The whole room turned to face him.

Sanwar sighed.

“Sie, is this-?” An RSB member began.

“Yes, we’re the men who killed those blackshirts,” Jack proclaimed, as he urged Sanwar to follow him to the front. “It was self-defense and all, but we got you into this bloody mess, and for that I am sorry. However, allow us to apologize by helping you out of it.”

The RSB sat there blinking at him. Sie crossed their arms, and raised an expectant eyebrow.

“Um, er, alright.” Jack faltered a moment at the deafening silence. “Inge’s got the right idea, I think. But, we should also give the fascists a false sense of security. Let them walk fully into the trap. Offer them no resistance.”

“So just let them waltz in and not fight back?” A woman in the front scoffed.

“Hide everyone in the crowd,” Jack said. “Wear plain clothes, and don’t show your berets until the moment the shite starts flowing. Only then, do we rush in and kick the bastards while they’re down.”

“We can block off all the corners of the square,” Inge chimed in, marking every exit on the chalkboard. Her voice was practically giddy. “Hem them in with no escape.”

The concept was dawning on the RSB. Slowly, the hubbub arose again, louder than before. Side conversations sprouted through the ranks until Sie called for quiet once more.

“That’s still going to be dozens against hundreds,” they countered.

“Well, mister Alchemists,” Inge turned to Jack and Sanwar with a grin. “Can you can concoct us a magic potion to make these fascists disappear?”

“You know, that might be an idea,” said Jack, scratching his mustache. He called back to Sanwar in English. “Fancy making a special elixir for our fascist friends?”

“What did you have in mind?”

Jack thought about it for a moment, then told him.

Sanwar sighed.

“Will you require us to be on the field that day?” He asked Sie.

“I think it is only fair.”

“Jack can be with me in the crowd,” said Inge.

“Aye, a good idea,” Jack agreed.

“And what about you, Sanwar?” Sie asked.

Sanwar studied the map. Whether he had caught most of the discussion or not, it did not matter. The man knew how

to read the battlefield. At last, he pointed to a position on it. "I want to be there."

"For what?" Asked Inge.

"Overwatch."

"We're going to need a few things then," said Jack.

"Put a list together," she instructed. "Otto can get everything you need."

"I feel like I am missing something," Sie interjected. "I want to know the details here."

"Right," said Jack. "Full transparency."

"And that's the plan."

Berg slapped the city map conclusively with a massive hand. The gesture had been completely jocular, but it nearly knocked all the ornaments off of the Baron's desk. Von Dreckland had a staggering number of relics displayed throughout his study, many of them Greek, Roman, or Old Norse, and all of them extremely fragile. Yet, the Baron only laughed at Berg's enthusiasm as he chewed on a cigar stump behind his desk.

The Major furled the map, then helped himself to another cigar from the Baron's box. Saxon was thoroughly content to make his current one last as long as possible, however. German tobacco had nowhere near the flavor as his usual Turkish stock, and also left a displeasing aftertaste.

The Baron snuffed out his smoldering butt in the ashtray, and indulged himself with another as well. He and Berg shared a little before he swiveled his girth around to face Saxon.

"Well, what do you think, your lordship? Will you join us this weekend?"

“I’m still uncertain of what use I would be,” Saxon said with a shrug. “I don’t speak any German.”

“Your presence alone would be a great inspiration to the cause,” the Baron pined. “It shows the reach of our support abroad and the strength of our party’s resolve.”

“Do not be afraid, Lord Saxon,” Berg smiled at him. “You will have plenty of men to protect you. These dickless communists won’t even get close to us. You will be quite safe with me.”

“I’m not afraid,” Saxon growled. “My company merely prefers to remain apolitical. Fascism is still a bit...uncertain of a topic in Britain. Business partners might get the wrong impression and all that if I’m public about my stances.”

“So why have you partnered with the Thule Society then?”

“The Stone is a personal matter, not entirely business-related.”

Saxon liked this Berg fellow’s tone less and less the more they spoke. The whole place stunk in fact, and not just of tobacco. He was loathe to involve himself any more than necessary with these strange people. Politics was of little consequence to him as was the Occult for that matter; wars would always need to be fought after all, and people would have their own strange little hobbies. Yet, these Thulians could not discuss anything besides those two subjects. Even the Baron’s study was filled with three walls of books regarding Alchemy, mysticism, and political theory in addition to the library he kept downstairs.

“Everything is business,” Berg said. “Everything is competition. That is the natural state of the human races, not so?”

“Quite.”

“Take some time to consider it,” von Dreckland offered. “But know that your host would greatly appreciate your presence there.”

“Yes, let me sleep on it.” Saxon regained his composure. “Forgive me, it’s been a long and trying journey to this country, and I haven’t fully settled into my surroundings quite yet. Besides, the hour is late, gentlemen. I will give you an answer by Friday.”

“Very good.” The Baron nodded to him. “Regardless of your reply, would you do me the honor of joining us for a hunt on Christmas?”

“I would like that,” Saxon admitted.

He could not fault the Baron there. In addition to his collection of relics, von Dreckland also had an impressive collection of trophies hanging from the walls as well. Even if the man was a bit of a cheat, Saxon could still earn one of those prizes for himself.

“What about you, Berg? Think you’ll join us?” The Baron teased.

“My favorite quarries are Jews and communists,” the Major grinned. “But a white hart would suit me too.”

The Baron laughed at that.

“Think you can hunt down the men that killed Benito’s men?”

“Oh, they should be easy to track. Rumor has it that an Indian and an Englishman were behind the attack.”

Saxon paused.

“Not an Englishman,” he corrected. “A Scot.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” Saxon nodded, then smiled. “Gentlemen, I think I’ll join you on Saturday.”

“You will!?” The Baron clapped his bulbous hands together. “Splendid!”

Yes, it was splendid, thought Saxon, how very splendid indeed.

VII

Beasts Bray Like Wild

The week went by in a flash despite the long days that Inge was pulling. Every morning, she made her first round of deliveries to Otto at the soup kitchen and then a second round when she came home from shifts at *The Black Rose*. Mornings, she dropped off vials of the magnesium; evenings, it was bottles of the stuff that Jack and Sanwar called their “secret sauce”.

Those two fiends spent hours in the kitchen before the *Rose* opened and hours more after it closed. Sie let them in before dawn, and kicked them out at midnight. Inge had come to collect them one late hour, and found them using the distillery to turn Otto’s delivery of Russian *vodka* into pure ethanol, then mixing the fluid with a strange red powder they had ground by hand. They both looked altogether extraterrestrial wearing goggles and bandanas around their mouths as they worked. Inge made sure not to linger in the room too long, and the men made sure to leave the windows slightly open when they left.

One day, a policeman had idly stopped Inge on the street to investigate her bags. Upon discovering the bottles, he opened one and recoiled from the scent. Likely, he thought that it was liquor, but Inge lied and told him it was “sauce” for cooking at the kitchen. He asked no further questions, and let her go. He never noticed the fuses and gunpowder beneath the bottles.

Strangely, Inge found herself not wanting the busy week to end. She was beginning to like having Jack and Sanwar around. Sure, they made a peculiar pair, but they kept clean

and were always mindful about the space. Every night, she cooked for them. It had been ages since she had done that for anyone. The three of them sat around the table and shared stories about the War or home or all of their adventures. She told them about how she had pulled the bullet out of Hans, and how during his recovery had learned that they were both from Munich, and then found each other again once the armistice was signed.

Meanwhile, they told her about monsters, magic, and half a hundred other things no one should believe, and yet she found herself succumbing to it anyway.

Jack was the real storyteller. Every time he recounted tales, he would get this mad gleam in his eye, and would seem to take on a whole new persona. He would not just tell the story, but perform it with wild gestures, as if he were reliving the event all over again. All the while, Sanwar would interrupt him to correct the details. It was very funny. For once, Inge went to bed each night with a smile on her face.

Come Friday, all the work was complete. Sie had given Inge the day off, so that she could prep meals for the evening, go to temple, and come back in time to collect the boys for *Shabbat*.

Tonight was not just any *Shabbat*, however.

At sundown, Inge lit the first candle in the *menorah*.

By its lonesome glow, only Jack and Sanwar's faces and hands were visible around the table. It was as if the world had shrunk to just the three of them sitting round. Anything beyond the light was only void.

"Will you permit me to say a brief prayer before we begin?" She asked. She barely raised her voice above a whisper. Something about the darkness made one want to be hardly heard as well as hardly seen.

“Why of course,” Sanwar replied. “This is your home, is it not?”

So, Inge obliged them:

*“Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu
Melech Haolam,
Asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav v’tsivanu
L’hadik ner shel Hanukkah.”*

Dinner was *latkes* and brisket. Inge had traded a bottle of the magnesium for half a pound of beef, as Simon the butcher was struggling to eat enough fiber in these lean times. It was no banquet, but it was certainly a feast.

Hans knocked on the door partway through the evening, his great big shadow looming in the light of the hall when she answered.

“Sorry, little sis. Had to grab the wine. It’s actually *kosher* this time.”

That must have cost him more than a few cartons of cigarettes.

“Thank you, Hans.”

They hugged.

“My friends!”

No sooner had he left Inge’s arms than he was already fully embracing Jack and Sanwar, and joining them around the table. Inge smiled, and took the *sufganiyot* out from the cupboard. The sugary, jam-filled doughnuts were Hans’ favorite part of the holiday and hers too, she supposed. There was one for each of them.

After the meal, it was then time for *dreidel*. They went round the table giving it a spin. Typically, children played the game with chocolate coins, but Inge had to make do with

pebbles she had painted yellow. Everyone got fiercely competitive about the game regardless, with every twirl bringing different outpours of emotion. They groaned when Hans rolled *Shin*, and tossed a “coin” into the center, booed when Sanwar rolled *Hay* and raked in half the booty, awwed when Jack rolled *Nun* and got nothing, and cheered when Inge landed on *Gimmel* and won it all.

In the end though, Schnitzel proved to be the winner. While they played, the cat jumped onto the table, and made off with Han’s half-eaten *sufganiyot*. Everyone thought it was too funny to care.

Yet Inge did not go to bed with smiles that night.

She lay awake at some late hour staring at the ceiling. In her head, she heard the guns again, the screams, the mortars. She felt the explosions, the shudder of the earth on impact. She remembered the feeling of blood and sweat dripping down her brow and mixing with the dirt.

She remembered yesterday.

She thought about tomorrow.

Tomorrow, Saxon thought.

A strange day that would be.

The hour was late, but something inclined him to pay the Doctor a visit at the conservatory, although conservatory was a slight misnomer since the place was entirely bereft of vegetation. Empty pots filled every shelf and counter when Saxon entered, and any soil in them had long since dried to pale brown dust. He stepped over any sprinklings of it on the floor, so as not to dirty his slippers.

Something reaked of piss in here, and the stronger it smelled the deeper Saxon went into the room. Courtesy of von Dreckland, Rothstein had been provided with a vast

array of vials, beakers, and instruments, the largest of which was a giant mixing flask partially filled with yellow liquid. When Saxon saw it on the shelves among the others, he immediately recoiled.

Across the room, the Doctor was still awake, tinkering with his flasks and vials and grizzly stitchings at his work bench. Saxon would have said he was burning the midnight oil, but neither lamp nor candle was lit.

All illumination came from a scarlet glow within the cylinder Rothstein kept in the far corner. Now uncovered, Saxon could see that it was gigantic steel tube, and through a window in the center of its frame, so too could he see that there was something...*gestating* inside of it.

“Rather late for you to appear, my lord,” Rothstein observed. As always, he never looked away from his work whenever he spoke.

“Can’t sleep. Thought I’d see how you’re getting on. Haven’t had much of a chance to visit yet.”

“Anxious for tomorrow?”

“Some.”

Saxon did not care to admit it, but there was little use in hiding anything from Rothstein. At least the Doctor never judged him, at least as far as he could tell.

“So how is progress?”

Saxon crossed over to a table against the wall. There, the Emerald Tablet gleamed. He drew his hand across its shining, glassy surface. Strange how its weird glyphs meant both nothing to him and everything.

Beside the Tablet lay one of von Dreckland’s dusty medieval manuscripts, opened to a page alive with color. Saxon would have thought the pigments would have faded

after all these centuries, and yet the colors were as rich and vibrant as ever.

“We are near to a breakthrough,” the Doctor promised. “After you return, my lord, I will have something to show you.”

“Finally.” Saxon rubbed his face. “I can’t stand this insufferable place any longer. Or all of these cult-obsessed buffoons.”

“They are buffoons,” Rothstein concurred. He put down his vial, and took Saxon’s side. “That is why I left them. They treat in politics and flattery, not the craft. These symbols are simply icons to them. They lack the courage to fully explore the truth, and push beyond the boundaries to achieve what is necessary in science.”

The Doctor placed a hand on Saxon’s shoulder. Exasperation drove Saxon to brush the limb away, however. Comforting was a hardly a word he would use to describe a man like Rothstein.

“Then why are we here? What’s in this bloody castle that I couldn’t get you anywhere else, Rothstein?”

“Secrets.”

“So you’ve said...but what?”

Rothstein crossed over to the far wall. Instinctively, Saxon followed. The conservatory’s far wall jutted out into the castle’s central courtyard, as did the library beneath them. Here, the walls and part of the ceiling were made of glass to let the sunlight in. During the day, it made for a lovely view of the courtyard below, but not so much on an almost moonless night like this. Yet, Rothstein cast his eyes upwards, not to see the courtyard, but the stars.

“Continue to play the game, my lord,” the Doctor counseled him after a good long pause. “Keep Berg and the

Baron occupied until the time comes. Play along in their little charade tomorrow.”

“Jack’s nearby,” Saxon mentioned. “I’ve got a feeling.”
Rothstein nodded.

“That is good,” he said.

“Maybe I’ll even see him at the rally?”

“Speaking of which, my lord, will Mister Taggart be accompanying you tomorrow?”

“I was planning on it. I could use a bit of protection.”

“Leave him, my lord. I have need of him. The VSG will suffice you.”

“Very well then.”

“Good night, my lord.”

“Good night, Doctor.”

As Saxon exited, Rothstein went back to work.

Saturday, December 16th, 1922

Clouds hung over Munich, their spectral gray obscuring the sun. The day however, was unseasonably warm. Many were about the streets enjoying the weekend weather, and *Marienplatz* teemed with foot traffic, all oblivious of what was to come. Even the café across the way had put their tables out.

To Sanwar, the people looked like ants about the picnic basket through his rifle scope. He had never shot a gun like this before. The curved, bulky stock bent ponderously towards the shoulder. A curled pair of prongs stuck out from the butt, and fit comfortably around the arm, but were unusual nonetheless. The gun also fired with a percussion cap system, rather than an internal hammer. Yet Otto had

assured him that it would fire far and true, so Sanwar would just have to trust his word.

From his vantage, he surveyed the field below. The RSB had sprinkled themselves throughout the crowd, and he spotted some of them here and there. His gaze shifted over to the café straight ahead.

Right on time, Otto came and took a seat. He set his black briefcase down beside the table, then whipped out a shiny metal cigarette case, and angled it in Sanwar's direction. He then proceeded to light himself a fag.

The *glockenspiel* chimed eleven not a second later.

"Alright, Jack MacGregor," Sanwar murmured. "Do your worst."

Jack MacGregor was in the crowd, looking at the *Mariensäule* and praying that lady victory would be with him today.

A different lady certainly was, at least.

Inge walked beside him, her arm wrapped in his. Today, she had ditched her peacoat and beret for a wide brimmed hat and a coat with a long lapel. She was wearing lipstick and rouge as well, and a red dress underneath the coat. She had even swapped her usual purse for a black velvet one clasped with silver.

Jack too, had gotten a significant wardrobe change himself. Otto had somehow found a full three-piece brown tweed suit in his size, and even a hat and wristwatch to match. As he strolled along with Inge at his side, and an umbrella in his hand, he felt almost normal. Together, they were just another handsome couple about the town.

"Enjoying the morning, 'dear'?" Jack teased her.

"Why yes, husband, it's lovely," Inge played along.

All able-bodied members of RSB had assumed roles for the day to mix in with the crowd. A few of them were groups of friends or families, others the casual window shopper, some just sitting by the street corners reading the paper and smoking. Inge had suggested that Jack stay close, and what could be closer than a couple?

“You know, that dress suits you, lass,” Jack told her more soberly.

“Thank you. My parents got it for my birthday one year.”

“A good gift.”

Inge smiled, though it was wane.

Jack searched for something to say and break the silence, until he caught sight of Hans nearby. Dressed in an apron, the big man swept the street corner with a push broom, and dumped the dust and refuse into a wastebin. The big man winked at Jack, then pretended not to notice him.

Finally, Inge spoke again.

“Have you ever been married for real, Jack?”

“Once,” he said. “You?”

Inge shook her head.

“Well, I think we make a dapper couple, don’t you?” He asked, and nodded to their reflection in a store window.

This time her smile brightened just a little.

“Very much.”

She squeezed his arm.

“Are you ready?” She asked him.

“I am now.”

“Ready, *mein Herr?*”

Von Dreckland downed his last *Weissbier*, and turned to face Berg. Face flushed and puffier than usual, the Baron nodded vigorously.

“Ready,” he hiccupped.

Berg slipped a hand around the Baron’s arm to help him from his seat. He had heard that once the Baron had been a slender man, athletic even, but reckoned now that the two of them were equal weight. He wondered how a man could allow himself to ever become so grotesque, to lack the hardness required by someone of their station.

The Baron staggered to his feet, and faced the roaring crowd. Hundreds sat before him in this gorgeous beer hall, whose wooden beams and arches were adorned with leaf and floral patterns. Each man present sang and laughed, and drank thirstily from mugs or glass boots beneath the glowing lamplight. Yet, when the Baron raised his arms to draw their attention, the din slowly subsided. From the dais at its head, he called out to all those seated in *The Rheingold*.

“Thanes! My beautiful thanes!” He cried. “The hour comes! Ride out with me to victory!”

“*Sieg heil!*”

Their arms shot out in proud salute. The Baron waddled down the steps, and walked underneath the roof of hailing soldiers, nodding and saluting to each one as he passed. Berg and Hauptmann walked close behind, then Lord Saxon, followed by the VSG, or the “Housecarls” as von Dreckland was calling them today.

Berg had made certain to keep them near, and keep them sober. No man had been permitted to drink today. Too often, it led to negligence. However, come this evening when the day was won, each man would outdrink any of Hitler’s brownshirts.

The SA men filed out into the street after them, taking their place behind the vanguard of the VSG. A horse was

waiting for the Baron, a colossal sable draft. Berg took care to purchase the biggest he could find.

Two men were required to hoist von Dreckland into the saddle, yet once he was ahorse, he gave a rousing cheer and spurred the column onwards. Berg and Hauptmann marched at the head of their section between the standard-bearers. One man carried the black, white, and red of Germany with a black eagle and golden escutcheon emblazoned in the corner; another carried the Freikorps' banner, the skull and crossbones on a black field. The SA flew their swastikas behind them.

Every man was armed with clubs or rubber truncheons. Firearms were sure to attract police attention, so the commanders had ordered the men to leave them behind. Berg, however, still kept his custom *Reichsrevolver* buried beneath his coat. It was the only pistol he had found large enough to fit his hand, and he was loath to abandon such a weapon in any setting. Just one of its six shots was enough to drop a brown bear, let alone a man.

As the column thundered down the street, inquisitive faces appeared in shop windows. Passersby stopped to stare. All the streets of Munich paused their business to watch the Nazi men come by. They made one impressive sight, Berg knew, and he beamed with pride for his beautiful, glorious countrymen. He wondered what these people might have of them, seeing the column going past, headed by its gigantic, powerful commander.

Berg turned back to Saxon.

“Magnificent, are they not, my Lord?” He asked, nodding to his men.

Lord Saxon puffed on his cigar.

That made the Major grin even wider.

He then leaned over to Hauptmann.

“When we get to *Marienplatz*, guard the Baron closely, Harold.”

“With my life, *Bär*.”

“I know you will.”

The column continued on. It marched towards victory.

Like in battle, Jack heard the enemy long before he saw them. All sound seemed to drain from the world, replaced by the thunder of their advance. The square went silent. Everybody froze in place. From a quarter mile off, a song was heard, timed to the percussive boots of marching men:

Freikorps voran!

Die Grenze brennt!

In München Anarchie!

Freikorps voran!

Die Grenze brennt!

Der Kampf war schwer wie nie!

Again and again, the basso voices chanted verses until the column appeared just minutes later from around the corner. The vanguard was a mass of men, dressed in grey and helmed in steel. They marched in perfect synchronicity, knees pumping all the way to their chest. Behind them was another mass of men in brown who did the same. In the rear were those pedestrians who had fallen into step. At the very front of everything rode a big man on a big black horse, all dressed in white.

Banners flew above the ranks.

Many cheered and waved when they saw them.

The column slackened to a crawl so that it could encircle the *Mariensäule*. They surrounded the Virgin, then threw down wooden boxes at her feet.

A man assumed the makeshift stand. To Jack, he was largely nondescript save for his short, black toothbrush mustache. That was until he spoke. As soon as he opened his mouth, pure vitriol spewed forth. His body contorted to accentuate each line of vicious rhetoric. Acid dripped in every sentence, and yet the audience was captivated, not just the soldiers, but the civilians who had gathered around to hear him. Some of the patrons from the café had abandoned their meals and coffees just to listen. This was no oration, this was high drama, and when he finished, his audience rewarded him with uproarious applause.

If there was one good thing about his speech, it was that it was mercifully brief. Still, Jack checked his watch. He knew that it had been his plan to wait, but even so, that did nothing to assuage his prickling anxiety. He had not felt this way since the trenches, when his company would be waiting in the muck and filth for just the right moment to spring the ambush.

He looked to Inge. Eyes forward, she wore a steely gaze, impassive to every word shouted out around her. However, her arm had tightened around his, and she would not let go.

Soon, Jack thought. Soon, the plan would launch. They just needed to hold on a little longer.

The big fellow was next to speak.

He was helped to the stand by a true giant of a man, who steadied him as well when he wobbled on the box. Yet, it only took a moment for the fellow to find his footing and then his voice.

“My beautiful countrymen!” He cried. “My beautiful thanes! What a rousing introduction I have been given. A tough act to follow, no doubt, but I shall try! For there is so much to be said, as there is so much villainy in the *Reich* these days! Ten of our Italian brethren have been brutally cut down in the streets simply for expressing their beliefs! For their love of country!”

The men in grey and brown booed at this. Their voices were a horrid mournful cry.

“And you will remember when seven of our own were cut down in cold blood,” the man continued as the crowd subsided. “Seven dear members of the Thule Society were executed mercilessly when the communists thought they could take over our beloved Bavaria and indoctrinate us. And if it were not for the bravery of the *Freikorps*, they would have! If you brave men had not swept clean the streets of Marxist violence, then we would not be free to speak so freely as we do now.”

This time, there were cheers of approval from the ranks.

“But my dear thanes, although that war was won, the threat is not yet over! No, far from it! Germany and Austria alike still teeter on the brink of oblivion. Look at the state of us! The glory of our empire and our people reduced to squalor. But was it the British or the French or even the damn Russians alone who ruined us? No, we were betrayed! Betrayed at home. Just as Hagen thrust the spear into Siegfried’s back, so too did the Jews and the communists poison the war effort with labor strikes and revolutions and unrest! And now they try again!”

Now the crowd had turned to rage. Boos had given way to roars and hisses. All around him, Jack felt the air suddenly crackling with their fury.

“Not until this red stain has been wiped clean will the *Reich* be free to flourish once again!” The big bellowed, his voice rising with encouragement from the crowd. “Only then will German lands be free for German people! Blood and soil!”

“Blood and soil! Blood and soil!”

The chant resounded among the crowd.

And then, the clock struck twelve.

The glockenspiel rang out. Its hollow, mournful dings buried the shouts and outcries, leaving only muted, snarled, twisted faces in the square.

They also disguised the sound of a gunshot.

As the bell tolled, the big fellow’s visage of pain and hatred slowly shifted to one of pain and fear instead. He teetered back, clutching at his stomach, blood streaked across his white army jacket.

At first the crowd took no notice, until he leaned back too far and went careening off the box-stand. He would have crashed into the stones had not the giant man been there to catch him. Others swarmed in to ease their leader to ground while the giant barked commands. His orders were lost in the clangor of the bell’s peal however, as was any sense of order.

The crowd rushed in at once.

Jack looked to the café.

While all eyes were on the injured man, Otto was already out of his seat, and reaching into the briefcase. He then pulled out the bomb, and lobbed it at the mass.

Ghost white smoke erupted from it in midair.

The fumes engulfed the throng a second later, and screams soon followed.

Jack and Inge reached into their coat pockets and purse, and produced their hidden goggles and bandanas. They put

them on, tying the bandanas around their noses and mouths like train robbers from a picture show. Inge then unslung a hammer from inside her coat, and Jack hefted his umbrella.

Together, they and the rest of the RSB burst forth from the crowd, and charged into the fray.

This rally had become a brawl.

Whether their weapons were sticks or canes, truncheons or batons, they brandished them like shining swords to smash at anyone in brown or grey. Around them, the civilians went streaming past, coughing and wallowing as tears gushed down their cheeks. Jack ignored them, and searched instead for enemies. He had seen the effects before back in the trenches. Both sides had used irritant gas munitions on the other. He and Sanwar had merely replaced the lethal chlorine with a simple lachrymator, namely powdered cayenne peppers.

Several brownshirts stepped through the smoke. Despite their watery eyes, they reached for the rubber truncheons at their hips, yet Jack and Inge were already armed.

Inge took one man in the jaw with her hammer head, then another with the claw on the backswing.

Jack was right beside her. He slammed the umbrella's crook on one man's fingers before his club was halfway out. The man recoiled, giving Jack the opening to turn the weapon round, and jab him in throat with its ferrule.

All around, the RSB found other scattered bands of Nazis to bludgeon. They would catch just three or four of them together here and there, then overwhelm them with seven, eight, or more. While the Nazis may have had more men in total, the RSB only needed to face a handful in any given fight, and whittle them down a little at a time.

With their current opponents defeated, Jack and Inge continued through the stinging fog to find some others. Every so often, an SA man would pop out from the haze, only to be beaten back into the smoke.

However, their momentum halted when they came to the foot of a tall stone pillar. Jack gazed upwards at the gilded figure of the *Mariensäule*, then glanced around to see that none of the RSB were around him and Inge.

What was around however, were lots of Nazis.

They crept out from the haziness, handkerchiefs or arm bands wrapped around their faces. Red eyes peered out beneath the brims of their brown caps. Cudgels brandished in their hands, a dozen vicious men were closing in around them.

“Aw fuck,” said Jack.

Inge put her back against his.

“Fuck them,” she spat.

“Fuck them,” he agreed.

He would have much preferred to die with *Lann Dhearg* in his grip, but he supposed an umbrella would suffice.

The brownshirts charged them.

Jack and Inge let loose a war cry, anticipating the attack.

Halfway to them though, the twelve men stopped. There, the Nazis froze, and doubled over. Suddenly, all of them were grasping at their sides, clawing at their stomachs as they tumbled to the ground. Any fury they had just moments earlier was gone. Now, they could only writhe in pain upon the ground as liquid seeped out from their undersides.

Jack and Inge clutched their noses. Even through their masks, the smell was putrid. Sour, sordid odors overwhelmed the lachrymator’s stinging fumes and all of *Marienplatz*, for that matter.

Suddenly, the SA's trousers matched their shirts.

Jack and Inge stepped over their convulsing bodies to escape the smell. It was then that the white smoke began to fade away, and they could see that all across the square, the brownshirts were laid out on the stone in puddles of their own refuse. Some had grown so desperate that they had crawled to the nearest sewer grates to discharge their bowels. By now, the glockenspiel had quieted, and the only music was the moans and groans of soiled men.

Yet, victory was not complete.

In the center of the square, the grey shirts of the VSG still stood. Their towering commander had rallied them to order, and turned them to face the enemy now that they had visibility. Jack counted ninety men among the grey-clad, steel-helmed ranks, each one as grim-faced as the next.

"RSB to me!" Inge cried out, and they answered.

Six dozen of their ragged band all formed together into a section of their own. Shoulder to shoulder, they made a motley company. Jack could hardly call them soldiers, and yet he was honored to fight beside them nonetheless. He took his place next to Inge in the front row. They were already bruised and bloodied, but ready for another go.

The VSG advanced. They moved at a steady pace so as not to trip over the wriggling bodies of their fallen brothers.

The RSB strode out to meet them. They did the same, although Jack and a few others did steal a kick or two at the injured men.

The two sides met in the middle, and the fight renewed again. At once, the ranks just fell away, and the whole thing became a barroom bash right there on the streets of Munich.

Truncheons fell. Bodies dropped. Blood spilled. The VSG worked with expert efficiency, targeting individuals and

battering them with clubs one at a time until they dropped. Yet, the RSB were too tenacious to lose so easily. The wild spirit was in them, and although some were cast asunder, the rest fought back all the harder. Their ferocity drove a wedge down the center of the VSG, and split them all apart.

Rosa beat a man away with a pipe wrench. Otto hurled exploding cherry bombs. One VSG man was swinging round a bullwhip, cracking anyone on the chin who got too close to him.

Inge was in the thick of it.

She swung out at a man. Her hammer glanced off his helm. He swung back at her with his club, which she turned against and took across the back instead of across the face. She attacked again as if she had hardly felt the blow, choking her grip to right below the hammer head so that she could punch out with it. When he jammed it forward, the hammer's head struck his, and broke his nose.

Jack had his own hands full.

Several batons swatted him in the arms and shoulders. He used the crook of his umbrella to hook the weapons in retaliation, and disarm his attackers. He would then hook the man as well, catching him by the neck or wrist and yanking him to the ground.

An unarmed VSG man rushed at him, and put his hands around Jack's throat. Jack sputtered, found his wits, and grabbed his umbrella with both hands. From below, he knocked the German's arms aside, which put the umbrella's tip right on line. With a two-handed thrust, Jack stuck the ferrule into his attacker's eye.

He turned away from the bleeding man to find his next attacker, but came face to with Inge instead.

Blood stained her body from head to foot, darker than the dress she wore. Her chestnut curls were all amess, and her brimmed hat had been lost some time ago. She looked more like a Valkyrie from Wagner's operas than a mortal woman, the way she stood unfazed, unflinching amidst the chaos.

There was no time to dwell on her appearance though, as out of the battle came a tall, dark shape.

He was the one that the RSB called "Berg", and he was easily the biggest man that Jack had ever seen. Almost seven feet of German soldier stood before him and Inge. He bore no weaponry save for a pair of leather gloves bossed with iron studs. They were bloody.

Berg grinned at them, his scarred face twisting into a hellish visage, and charged.

It was frightening how fast he cleared the fifteen feet between them. Really, the gap was ten with how long his reach was.

Jack dodged the first punch thrown at him, but not the second, which crossed from Berg's rear hand. His fist collided with Jack's chest, and sent him skidding across the square.

Berg stayed on him, but Inge interceded with a hammer swing. He caught the haft, then wrenched the weapon from her grip, and tossed the thing away. Inge went for a right hook to his face, but he was just too tall to reach. He voided the punch by simply leaning back, and countered with an upper cut into her stomach.

Inge fell back, gasping for air.

Jack was on his feet again though, and thrust the umbrella's ferrule into Berg's midsection, which did nothing. Jack opted to flick the canopy open instead, which did.

Berg had grabbed the weapon to disarm him, but now it awkwardly ballooned right in his hand. He stepped back, and

suddenly his opponent was gone...until Jack came out from the left side with a hammer fist. His punch connected with Berg's chest, and managed to knock the huge man back a couple of steps.

He recovered quickly though, and assumed a boxer's stance.

Jack did the same.

The two men squared off, Berg still grinning as he waited for an opening.

He probably thought he could wait all day, until Jack suddenly stepped aside to let Hans leap out from behind him, swinging an unscrewed push broom pole like a quarterstaff.

The long stick smashed against Berg's collar, and shattered. Hans threw the broken end at him, but he ducked, and let the piece bounce uselessly off his helmet.

Jack and Hans then rushed at Berg together. They tried to each attack a flank. Berg just caught them by the shirt, and threw them to the ground.

Dazed, he and Hans lay prone.

Berg unholstered the pistol from his hip.

He leveled the weapon down at Jack, an enormous army revolver thirteen inches long.

Jack felt the air whizz by.

A gunshot rang out.

The revolver swung down as Berg lowered the weapon, and groped his chin instead. Blood dripped out between his fingers.

Thank God for Sanwar.

Jack and Hans took the chance to jump back to their feet, and shove their boots into his chest. Berg timbered. Without his helm, he might have cracked his skull against the stone. A pity, really.

Jack would have stomped his face right then and there, but a pack of VSG sprang forward around their commander. The clubs had disappeared. These men held knives instead.

“Aw fuck,” Jack groaned again.

The men growled, and made to lunge, then skidded to a halt.

Inge stepped between them, purse around her wrist, pistol in her hand.

“Back.”

The VSG shrunk away. Together, they hauled their leader to his feet, and scampered off.

“Berg! Berg!”

Across the way, a car had parked. A man had stepped out from the back seat and was shouting to him.

Jack knew that man.

Dressed in his pristine white suit, John Henry Saxon stood right across from him.

Their eyes met.

Jack scowled.

Saxon grinned.

Somewhere, a fleet of whistles blew.

“Come on! Jack come on!” Inge had grabbed him by the arm, and was pulling him away.

Police were coming out of everywhere, every street and every alley.

They ran.

Jack could not say how far or how fast or which way they had run, only that he collapsed against an alley wall some distance away. He and Inge leaned against it, heaving breath.

They stood there for a while, waiting to see if anyone was chasing after them, yet all was clear.

“Bloody well done back there,” Jack panted. “Inge lass, you were bloody brilliant-”

She kissed him.

Inge fell into his arms, held him there, and kissed him. And although he could hardly breathe, Jack kissed back.

Then suddenly, she pulled away.

Jack reached for her again, but she refused him.

“Inge...?”

“Come on.”

She wiped the tear from her eye, grabbed his hand, and pulled him along.

Then, they just kept running.

VIII

In Fear of Retribution

“Pull it out of me, God damn you. Do it!”

Except that every time that Rothstein attempted to insert his forceps into the wound, von Dreckland would wriggle away from the anticipation. In the end, Saxon, Berg and Taggart were required to hold the man down while Rothstein dug his forceps into the Baron’s abdomen.

Von Dreckland moaned at the sight. He certainly did not moan at the pain of it, because Rothstein had thoroughly dosed him with morphine beforehand. The metal prongs went in, explored around a bit, then found their quarry. Sliding free from the abdomen deflated flaps of skin, they emerged with the foreign body.

Rothstein held it to the light for all to see. The bullet was a tiny, round-tipped projectile, shaped more like a mushroom than a bullet and smaller than a twenty-two calibre. Penetration had been less than an inch.

“Shot from a Schuetzen air rifle,” Rothstein stated, twirling the little bullet around for his audience. The weapon was a popular choice among small game hunters and sportsmen alike, a reliable, vintage model from the previous century.

Rothstein dropped the puny round into a basin. Almost in tandem, the Baron dropped back on the cot, soaked in sweat.

“Where are my hounds?” He asked. “Has anybody seen my boys? I need them with me. My hounds...”

His words trailed off as he passed out on the bed.

“Well, that describes the shot from the tower,” Berg said after a moment. “But that gas was military grade. I have not seen since the front.”

“A chemical lachrymator,” Rothstein told him. “Easy enough to synthesize in the right hands, and easier still reduce to a non-lethal potency. I could produce some for your own usage if you wish.”

Berg let out a mirthless laugh despite the bandage around his face.

“I would never use that coward’s weapon on my enemies. Just get this bullet out of my jaw.”

He was next in line anyway, though his bullet proved much more difficult to remove. The Major had also insisted on waiting until all of his men were treated before going under the knife himself, including von Dreckland.

The bullet had lodged itself into the Major’s cheek, and cracked a couple of teeth as well. Rothstein offered to replace them with steel fillings after he had removed the shot, grafted the bone, and sewn his face back together.

Berg refused.

“I will replace them once I have killed the men who did this to me,” he vowed. “And all of the RSB for that matter.”

“I would advise against delaying the procedure-” Rothstein began.

“I thought you were a chemist not a doctor,” the tall man growled as he inspected Rothstein’s work in a hand mirror. Doubtless, he had been hurt by a deeper wound than just the physical.

“My work requires surgical procedures as well as chemical ones,” the Doctor informed him, to which Berg only snarled.

However, Rothstein was hardly used to live subjects. So, when such a volume of injured men had arrived that evening,

he had found himself very nearly overwhelmed. The casualties had numbered around two dozen. Some wounds had been more minor, bruises, superficial lacerations, a few cracked ribs. Others had suffered more severely from broken bones, ruptured organs, and permanent brain damage. They were more than the castle's infirmary could accommodate, but none of the more critical cases could risk hospitalization for fear of immediate arrest. So, Rothstein had attended to them, treating the worst patients first. A few of the VSG were beyond saving or would live with permanent dysfunction, to which Berg ordered Rothstein to administer lethal injections.

With all of his work completed for the day, the Doctor finally put down his scalpel, and washed his hands. By now, most of the castle slept, either in a bedroom or a cot.

It was then that Saxon approached him, away from the others.

"A fine mess you have left me, my lord," Rothstein said as he drew near.

"Jack was there," Saxon whispered.

"Was he? Then I know to where he goes next."

"Where then?"

"A village near here, my lord. 'Verloren', it is called."

"And how do you do a thing like that?"

"I discovered it in my reading while you were away. I have something else to show you as well. It is waiting in my office."

"Finally, some good news," Saxon said, and rolled his eyes towards von Dreckland and the Major. The two men sat on their infirmary beds in total silence, seething. "Shall we retire to your laboratory perhaps?"

"Let us."

The two men quietly made their exit, and went upstairs.

Much to Rothstein's amusement, Saxon took a full step backwards when he opened the conservatory door.

Leaf and vine bloomed from every pot to cover every wall in greenery, including the glass. Tendrils twisted around the wrought iron beams. Steam escaped the open doorway, and seared away the castle's draft. A labyrinth of vegetation awaited him within, and the Doctor beckoned for Saxon to follow him inside the maze.

"Someone's been busy..." His lordship muttered as they maneuvered the creep of foliage. "Is this what you wanted to show me, Rothstein?"

"No."

They at last arrived at the far end of the room. Rothstein approached the incubation chamber, and turned a dial on its cylindrical face. A gasp of dense white oxygen sighed out from the open seal. As the door swung out, both he and Saxon were bathed in crimson light.

Rebis emerged.

The creature's body was completely nude, save for the eyebrows and long thin strands of wet black hair that draped down over its narrow shoulders. It stepped out onto the stone, and displayed itself for them to see.

Ectomorphic, it measured exactly one-hundred seventy-one centimeters and weighed sixty kilograms by Rothstein's count. Smooth, pale skin devoid of bump or blemish covered its slender frame, as Rothstein had ensured that all its features were to the height of physical perfection.

As it stood before them, its reddish eyes darted back and forth between him and Saxon, but his lordship was more fixated on what was betwixt the creature's legs.

“A hermaphrodite,” the Doctor explained. “Rebis possesses both sets of sexual organs.”

“A freak...” Saxon uttered in amazement.

Rebis cocked its head.

“It’s all very...impressive,” Saxon then said with a step back, giving off the tone that he was not impressed at all. Rothstein knew better though. “But what has this got to do with the Philosopher’s Stone?”

“What does this-? Why, my lord this proves that we are progressing in the right direction! This is inexorable progress! Now we know more about the Stone’s full capabilities. Even from a prototype, this...this is impressive.”

The Doctor stood beside his creation.

“Rebis, there,” He commanded in German, and pointed. On the workbench lay a rifle that Mister Taggart had kindly deconstructed for him earlier that day.

Rebis approached the weapon.

In seconds, it was reassembled, and a round was chambered.

Saxon grinned.

They celebrated in the cellar of *The Black Rose*, if it could be called a celebration. Anyone who did show was half-dead, except for Sie, who had known to pour the beer ahead of time. The RSB sipped them slowly, and lay out or slouched on the chairs.

Only Hans seemed to any ounce of energy as he regaled for the third time about how Sanwar had sniped Berg from across the field and saved his life. All the while, he pounded poor Sanwar’s back with a congratulatory slap. Rosa though, was sure to inject some commentary, and remind Hans how she had broken both Sanwar into town hall, and herself into

the *Rheingold* the night before. Sanwar was more than happy to share accreditation and steer the limelight away from himself, which Hans continued to shine profusely in his direction.

“I have to admit,” Sie said, handing Jack a cool glass. “You boys did well out there. It was a good fight.”

Jack accepted the drink, and tipped it to them.

“*Prost.*”

“*Prost.*”

The two clinked glasses together, and shared a toast.

“We promised that if you helped us, we would help you in return,” Sie said once they had wiped their mouth clear of foam. Jack did likewise with his mustache.

“Equivalent exchange, we’d call that,” he remarked.

“Mutual Aid, I would say,” they countered.

“Fair enough. And again, thank you for all your generosity. Sanwar and I could use your help.”

Sanwar carried his glass over at the mention of his name. Naturally, his beverage was a non-alcoholic lemonade. He assumed his place beside Jack.

“Your assistance would be most appreciated,” he said. “We next journey to the township known as ‘Verloren?’”

He raised an eyebrow, silently asking if he had gotten his pronunciation of the word right.

“You look for your magic stone then? You know that nothing is there?”

“We do indeed.”

“If you could provide us with just some guns and ammunition, we’ll be on our merry way,” said Jack.

“I suggest that you wait awhile,” warned Sie. “Berg will be out looking for you both.”

“Time is of the essence,” Sanwar expressed.

Sie leaned against their cane to lower themselves into a chair. With a sigh, they sat heavily across from them. They removed their beret, and ran their fingers through their graying hair before lighting themselves a cigarette.

“You shouldn’t go alone,” they admitted. A stream of smoke spilled out their mouth as they marinated on the thought begrudgingly. At last, they groaned, and finished it. “I will bring the motion to the group tomorrow. Anyone who wishes to join you may do so.”

“That’s all we can ask for,” Jack shrugged.

“Otto can get you guns,” Sie continued. “And I’m sure he would not mind at least driving you there.”

“Thank you,” he and Sanwar said together.

Sie nodded, then shook their head and took another lengthy drag.

“Can this rock really do what the Thule Society thinks it can do?” They finally asked.

“More,” said Jack. “What you saw from us was just a fraction.”

Sie nodded again as if in approval, although their face was stone.

“I’ll bring it to the group tomorrow,” they repeated.

Jack and Sanwar bowed in thanks, and left them to their thoughts.

“The hour grows late,” Sanwar noticed as they found some empty space across the room. “Should we encourage our hostess to return home?”

Jack looked to Inge, who still sat alone in the corner. She made some initial pleasantries, but had not engaged in any conversation beyond that, much to Jack’s chagrin. He had wanted very much to talk to her.

“Let me ask,” he said.

Sanwar nodded.

She did not react until Jack sat down beside her.

“You alright there, lass?”

She turned to face him.

“Yes. I am just too tired to speak, that is all,” she said.

“Can we talk about what happened earlier, though?”

Inge instantly recoiled.

“I’m sorry. I should never have done that.”

“No, lass,” Jack assured her. “I wanted you to. I’d been waiting for that moment for a while. I just wasn’t expecting it at that particular moment. At first, I might have thought you just were just deeply devoted to your cover of being my wife.”

He chuckled. Inge’s shoulders eased back. She smiled a little.

“Shall we find our way home, ‘dear?’” He asked. “I’m sure our ‘child’ is starving.”

“Who? Schnitzel?” She laughed. “I fed him extra this morning, but he probably found something out of the garbage again.”

“A man out of my own heart.”

“Exactly.”

Instinctively, she ruffled his hair a little, and Jack went a bit flush. Inge withdrew her hand, more than a little flush herself. Still, there was some mischief left in those luminous green eyes of hers.

“Yes,” she said at last. “Let us go home.”

Sanwar was waiting for them with an amused eyebrow raised.

The next morning, Major Berg paraded his men in the castle’s inner court per Saxon’s request. They were all

standing in the snow when Saxon finally stepped out of the front door.

Berg stood glowering at their head with that lackey Hauptmann to one side. The latest grizzly scar across his cheek had the uncanny effect of magnifying his displeasure.

“We have been waiting for you, Saxon,” he growled. “I trust that there is a good reason for calling out my men.”

“There is, Major. Here it comes right now.”

Also per Saxon’s request, the castle gates had been left open, and as if by clockwork, the Baron’s chauffeur came driving through them just then, tailed along by a heavy truck. The vehicles parked parallel to the lines of VSG.

Taggart exited the rear seat of the Opel, allowing the chauffeur to take the car away, and moved over to the truck. A pair of men climbed out the back of it to help him unload a series of wooden crates onto the ground.

Saxon sauntered over, and a man cracked open one of the lids for him.

“My dutiful Head of Acquisitions here has been traveling all night to one of my warehouses in Switzerland,” Saxon explained. “At my request, some of our stock was transported back here for you. Come and have a look then.”

Berg and Hauptmann hesitated, but Saxon kept ushering them over. At last, they relented, and approached the box.

Hauptmann whistled.

“Go on,” Saxon urged him. “Take it.”

The Captain reached inside, and withdrew the lacquered cherry stock of a Saxon Mark III submachine gun. Instinctively, he looked down the sights of its perforated, air-cooled barrel.

“Load it and give it a go,” Saxon insisted. Knowing Hauptmann’s lack of English, he mimed the actions of

loading in a magazine and squeezing the trigger. The Captain obliged him by slapping in a magazine from the crate, and snapping back the bolt.

At Saxon's command, one of the crates was emptied and placed at a safe distance away. Then, he signaled for Hauptmann to fire.

A rapid burst from him reduced the wood to splinters. The men cheered as Hauptmann safetied the smoking weapon. Even the stiff-natured Captain could not hold back a sheepish smile.

Even with the casualties assumed the day before, the VSG could still muster almost fifty men. Armed with Saxon's submachine guns though, that fifty would feel closer to a hundred.

A red-eyed Taggart began passing out the rest of the stock to them. Each man smiled as they received their new toys.

"The Mark III fits a thirty round box a magazine or a fifty-round drum," Saxon explained to Berg. "Your men probably shot the MP-18 at the end of the war? The sideways facing snail mag? Awkward and inefficient. Besides, I much prefer shooting with forty-five than nine millimeter."

"A generous gift," Berg noted. "But I wonder what the occasion is."

"Consider it an early Christmas present," Saxon grinned. "A new model."

"You think that our rifles are inadequate?"

"I think they're too long. Submachine guns were designed for the close quarters of the trenches. A fitting weapon for former Stormtroopers."

Berg's eyes narrowed. They were small and flinty to begin with, but now they were little more than slits peering down at him.

“You expect combat in confined spaces soon then, *Herr* Saxon?”

“I do, given that the men who did this to you will be within our reach shortly.” He pointed to his own cheek to indicate Berg’s gruesome scar. “The good Doctor has determined their next location. *Verloren*.”

Berg clenched his teeth at the name.

“So one of the Doctor’s magic ingredients is down there in the mines then, not so?”

Saxon had to admit that the man had some amount of brains in addition to his overwhelming brawn.

“It is. A lump of ore. Immensely hard. Luminous in luster. We will need it be brought back...along with something else.”

“Why not fetch it yourself?”

“This is our arrangement, Berg. I gave you the information to hunt your enemies. You deliver me what I ask.”

“Everything is just business with you.”

“Not at all. Everything is just business. Now are we agreed?”

Berg growled.

“Tell me what else you need me to fetch for you then.”

“No, no, not what,” Saxon corrected. “Who.”

Monday, December 18th, 1922

Verloren, Weimar Republic

Jack lurched forward, and was caught yet again by Hans. The big fellow just smiled as always, and eased him back onto his seat. Where a coupe or sedan might have traveled smoothly, the long bed of a heavy truck swung wide on Bavaria’s hilly, serpentine roads. That was not to mention that a fair amount of snow that still clung there.

Otto had commandeered the vehicle from the soup kitchen. After the War and Germany had been mandated to demilitarize, he had supposedly repurposed it as a mobile kitchen for the organization. Jack and Sanwar had lived off of jaunts like these while they had traveled the country, and so had thousands of others, veterans or not.

Only today, the truck transported people instead of stew pots. They were eight in total, the ones who could get work off on a Monday and actually believed Jack and Sanwar's story. Sie of course, had given Hans and Inge the day off from bartending. Otto and Rosa rode in the cab as well; Jack was uncertain of the exact parameters surrounding their "employment". The number was rounded out by two others; Werner and Luzia, who had the day off anyway, and had been inspired by Jack and Sanwar's fighting prowess on Saturday. Jack had tried making conversation with them, but they were far too shy to speak to him beyond a few polite remarks.

Inside the canvas-covered bed, it was impossible to see the world go by, but Jack knew that at least a couple of hours had passed already. The drive had felt all the longer as the canvas did much to obscure their vision, but little to keep out the cold.

Eventually though, the truck veered downhill, straightened out, then finally came to a full stop.

Rosa threw open the canvas a moment later, causing everyone to shield their eyes. Even the overcast skies were radiance compared to the dimness of inside the truck. They stumbled out of the bed, grimacing.

When Jack's eyes adjusted, he took stock of their surroundings. They had parked in the center of a snowy hamlet, tucked between some foothills and a lazy stream. The ice-tipped spires of the Alps peaked just beyond the

hills, sticking out from the lowly earth like a set of snarling fangs.

The only noise was the whisper of the wind and the muffled rumble of the running engine. Such silence was a stark contrast from the activity of Munich's streets. This far from the city's bustle, the cold seemed stronger too. No tall buildings stood guard against the chill, and there was no indoor warmth to where they could escape.

Nothing lay for miles, in fact, save the rolling, snow-capped hills.

Sanwar spied a farmhouse on the edge of town. With the help of him and Jack to slide open the doors, Otto hid the truck inside its barn. He emerged a moment later, carrying out his rifle and a messenger bag.

"What's in there?" Jack panted, once he and Sanwar had shut the doors.

"Go boom," Otto replied with an impish grin, then said no more. He simply slung his bag and gun, and fell in with the rest of them.

They ventured through the town center with Sanwar on point. Every one of them had their rifles drawn and ready as they went, and a pistol handy on their belts. Otto had proven his scrounging capabilities yet again. Somehow in peacetime, he found them each a military grade rifle and thirty rounds of ammunition apiece. The pistols were more motley. Some were police issue, others military, and some civilian. He had given one especially to Jack, an American model known as the Browning 1911. Jack generally preferred the power and simple reliability of a revolver, but the semi-automatic Browning felt good in his hand. Moreover, the gun had seven rounds a magazine not six, and at forty-five caliber, more than enough heft for his taste. What was less to his taste was

that the weapon had probably been looted from a corpse originally, and he was not about to ask further details about how Otto had “acquired” it. Regardless, it felt safe and familiar to have a pistol on his hip opposite of *Lann Dbearg*.

Even so armed however, Jack could not help but feel naked walking through the town. The cold seeped right through his coat and gloves as if he were wearing none at all, and there was little cover all around. What paltry buildings did remain within Verloren rotted where they stood. Winter had staved off their inevitable decay for the season, but come springtime, these medieval half-timbered cottages would resume decrepitude. That was not to say that winter had spared them from further destruction. Snowfall had caved in several weakened roofs. Frost had warped the wood of beams and window sills, and when melted, would seep into the cracks to further rot them. Palisades of icicles dangled from the houses’ overhangs, slowly sagging them as they lengthened and grew heavier. Jack thought their eerie façades resembled twisted, tortured faces, with the warped, curving window frames as eyes and the icicles above the doorframes as horrid, screaming toothy maws.

The only building still somewhat intact was the church. Unlike the rest, the church was made of stone in true Bavarian Catholic fashion. Ironically, a clapboard Lutheran meeting house would have suffered the same fate as the cottages, yet this lone building here withstood.

“What happened to this place?” Jack whispered to Inge. He dared not speak any louder in the stillness. “Why did everybody leave?”

“This once used to be a mining town, ever since the Middle Ages,” she whispered back. “They were digging for tin and copper, until maybe thirty or forty years ago when

somebody suddenly struck gold. But not long after, the miners started to say the mine was haunted. One night, everybody left. Rumors said that they had awakened 'ghosts' down there, and that they had come down from the hills one night to scare the folk away."

The wind made Inge shiver.

"Ghosts." Jack breathed the word aloud.

"Where are we going again?" Asked Hans.

"Into the mines."

Hans paused.

"Yeah. Sure."

"Well, we must be in the right place then," Jack said.

"Why is that?" Asked Inge.

He jerked a thumb over to the church. They halted a moment to see that he had pointed to the Hospitaller Cross hanging above the doorway.

"Someone should be stationed in the steeple," Sanwar instructed. "And a second when we reach the mine shaft. The picquets can then signal to each other with mirrors in case of an emergency."

The others agreed once the message had been translated, and so Werner was to be left behind. However, the church doors had been barred with a rusty padlock. The man was about to shoot them open, until Rosa chastised him, and picked the lock instead.

"Save your ammunition," she admonished him. "And save us from alerting the entire valley."

Werner blushed, and hurried on inside.

The others continued through the village and then on to the foothills. Otto knew instinctually where to lead them. The man had been a sapper on the Italian Front during the War, and had dug mines deep into the heart of the Alps. Jack

thought it fitting work for a small, bandy-limbed man like him, as he could probably fit most places larger men could not. Jack hoped that they would not have to do any tunneling of their own for that reason, and for the sheer fact that he had once been buried alive inside his dug out. Perhaps Otto's explosives would nullify any need for such labor, he hoped.

Woods lay ahead.

Where the valley below was only dotted with the leafless skeletons of trees, a dark cluster of pines forested the slopes. The snow was thinner here in the gloom beneath their boughs. Jack recalled fables of witches and wild things that he heard as a child as he walked among them, and feared that he may have wandered into one.

What he had certainly wandered into was a clearing, though. At last, the woods gave way to open ground again, which flattened somewhat as it led into a rocky hollow.

Waiting for them at the end of it, sat the gaping mouth of a forlorn cave. Rotted boards barred the entrance with the word "*Verboten*" splattered onto their lumber in dried red smears of paint.

The group stopped just before, and gazed long into the void beyond.

"Well," said Jack at length. "Who wants to go in first?"

IX

From Gold and Blood

Hans drove a boot into the boards. Rather than snapping and splintering, the wood squished back until it crumbled apart. Awkwardly, he drew his leg back, and laughed as he stumbled. The others came forward instead to clear away the rest of the wood by hand, or in Inge's case, by hammer. Otto gave himself a splinter in the process, so she had to stop hammering, and pull a pair of tweezers and a bandage from her med-kit to help him. This hardly made for a dramatic entrance, but after a minute, the way was finally clear.

Someone flicked on a torch, and shined the light inside.

The shaft drove deep into the earth at an oblique angle, with toothy stalagmites hanging from its ceiling all the way down. The decline was gentle enough to walk, but it would be tricky footing for a while, as the tunnel's end lay nowhere in sight.

They left Luzia at the hollow's mouth to guard their rear, while Jack led them on inside.

The only sound in the empty darkness was the crunch of gravel beneath their feet as they journeyed down. As they descended, the noises magnified down the tunnels, and seemingly went on forever. Eventually, another sound did join their chorus. Somewhere down the shaft, water dripped on stone. Jack shined his torch onto the ceiling to illuminate the cones of icicles that had ensconced the cave's stalactites. In between the ice and stone, a stream of water flowed down from the roof and trickled onto the cave floor below through a hole at the icicles' tips. The group gazed at them a while,

their phantom breath hanging so heavily in the light that it looked near solid.

Jack urged them to continue, however. If Saxon or the VSG were nearby, then it would only be a matter of time before they discovered this place...if they had not already. Silently though, Jack feared leaving the mine empty-handed more than he did Saxon. Inge would probably think him a liar or a fool if they came out of this with nothing. After all, her reputation was at risk as much as his.

No one knew how long they had traveled in the endless gloom when they happened upon a fork in the path. Three prongs split off down left, right, and center with a set of tracks down each. This vestibular area contained several mine carts and barrels of tools caked in dust. Otto checked the locomotives for the carts, but all the machinery was long rusted over and would not run. They would have to continue on foot, it seemed.

“Let’s split into pairs,” Jack decided after some deliberation. He did not relish dividing their forces, but there appeared to be no other way around it. “Everyone takes a torch, and heads down a different path.”

“Perhaps we should regroup back here after an hour?” Inge suggested.

“Aye,” said Jack. “Keep an eye on your watches.”

“Who are the pairs?” Asked Rosa.

“I want Sanwar!” Said Hans, and patted his new friend on the back.

Sanwar sighed.

“I can go with Otto,” Rosa offered with a knowing glance towards Inge.

“Sounds good to me,” said Jack. “One hour, then back here.”

“One more thing,” Rosa interjected. “How will we know when we’ve found it? You haven’t described it much beyond that it looks like ore.”

Jack hesitated.

“You’ll know,” he said, and given his experience, it had proven right so far.

There were footprints in the snow.

Several sets of them were quite large, so Rebis put their feet inside them, and followed the trail until it reached the center of town. They only veered off track when they came within sight of the square, where they took cover behind the nearest building.

The open square was too exposed. Enemies could be anywhere, although if Rebis had assessed the terrain correctly, then the church steeple would have the best vantage point.

They snuck around to the building’s rear, leapt over a short stone wall, crossed the graveyard within, and reached the backdoors. Rather than opening them however, Rebis dug their fingers between the stones along the church’s walls, and climbed.

Reaching the rooftop, they slid flat on their stomach along its slate tiles all the way to the steeple at the front. Once at the spire’s base, Rebis rose to their full height, and climbed the final distance to the belfry. Through an arched window at the top, they looked inside and surveyed the position.

A single sentry sat at the window opposite with a rifle trained on the square below. Rebis climbed into the tower, drew their knife, and planted it in the base of the sentry’s neck. Severing the spinal column in such a way killed instantly. The body dropped without a sound.

The threat now neutralized, Rebis scanned the area to locate any further enemies before they went down the spiral staircase into the church proper. Seeing none, they went downstairs, and were about to open the front doors and exit, when they paused a moment.

The interior of this place was a curious thing. Father had spoken the word “church” before, but had never explained its purpose. He had talked about them as places of importance, places that held important things, yet all that Rebis could see were empty seats in an empty space.

The windows though, were mesmerizing. Rainbows of color shined down from them, and transformed an empty place into a kaleidoscope. Rebis loved the stained-glass windows, but found it peculiar that someone would build an entire structure solely for them.

As they walked the nave in wonder, a figure appeared inside an alcove.

Rebis drew their pistol.

The figure offered them no challenge though, so Rebis deemed it safe enough to approach. This figure was a person, a quite tall one in fact. Rebis saw that they were dead already, having been nailed to beams of wood and left to hang. They must have been an enemy to these people once. Why else would the body be so mutilated?

Not alive, Rebis decided of the figure, and made to exit.

They were almost to the door when something caught their eye. It was just a dusty thing sitting in a niche at first, until Rebis blew away its coating. Underneath was a triple-folded picture. Though the colors of the paints had dulled, Rebis reckoned that the creator had drawn some kind of laboratory. It looked much like Father’s, though there were two people in the middle beneath a large tree, with a serpent

hanging from its branches. A light was in the clouds above them all. It was a strange, unrealistic thing, this picture, and yet Rebis could not look away.

They looked at it awhile.

Outside, the snowy footprints continued to a wooded hillside, which was good, as it provided concealment during the ascent. Rebis sniffed the air as they weaved between the trees. A sticky, bitter fragrance hung about here.

The woods gave way to a clearing, then a hollow.

Beyond that, was the entrance to the mine.

Another sentry stood guard there, watching the valley below while using the slopes of the hollow to protect their flanks.

Rebis went wide through the woods to get around them. They climbed the slopes a distance, before coming back down again behind the enemy. They now stood on the hill overlooking the hollow, with the sentry right beneath them.

Rebis threw their knife. The sentry only turned at the last moment to see the weapon coming before it planted in their trachea. They gasped for a second before falling over and letting their blood flow out onto the snow.

Rebis climbed down, and retrieved the knife. They cleaned the blade with the sentry's coat and a bit of snow, then sheathed it. They then drew the flare gun from their belt, and fired it into the air.

They stood entranced as its fuzzy yellow blaze arced high overhead.

A second later, a red blaze flew out from behind a distant hill, and brought them back to attention.

Rebis grabbed the dead guard's rifle, and assumed a defensive position on the hill to oversee the advance.

Carefully they watched as down in the valley below, the trucks rolled in.

Jack had to keep on checking his watch. Without the light of day or any change of scenery, there was no way to tell how much time had passed or even how far they had gone. Maybe it was also that Otto had been generous enough to let him keep the timepiece after the rally, and he enjoyed the feeling of having one on his wrist again.

“It has only been a few minutes,” Inge said again with a smile.

Jack covered the watch over with his sleeve.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Unless you are so bored of my company...”

“You, lass? Never.”

Somehow, he enjoyed the silence with her as much as the conversation. Sanwar was the only other he had experienced that with before.

One question was on his mind, however.

“You really believe in all this shite I’ve told you about the Philosopher’s Stone, do you?”

Inge shrugged.

“Why not? I have seen what that vial did.”

“Aye, but you’ve not seen everything I’ve told you.”

Again, she shrugged.

“Is seeing always believing? Am I not down here with you?”

“I suppose you are...but I suppose what I want to know is...why?”

She paused a moment, and so did he.

Without their footfalls, the tunnel fell silent again.

“Because I want to,” she said at last. “Because I need to.”

He nodded.

“And why do you, Jack? Why do you believe in this?”

Now he paused.

“The same, I suppose,” he said.

She smiled at him.

“You are a good man, I think.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I think you’re pretty great yourself, Inge.”

“Come on,” she said, blushing a little. “We had better keep moving.”

“Hey, wait a moment.”

He stopped her before she could get too far.

Crouching down, he retrieved an object from the floor, and motioned for her to extend her hand.

She did so, then froze when she saw what he had given her.

She looked at him, then back down at the gold nugget in her hand.

“Jack-”

“Happy Hanukkah,” he told her. “Consider it gift for the holiday and all you’ve given me and Sanwar.”

“No, this is too much- I don’t deserve- Let’s share it at least-”

He pushed her hand away.

“Come on,” he said. “Take it.”

Inge glared at him.

Then, she furiously kissed him on the cheek.

“Consider us even,” she said.

Jack grinned, and rubbed his face.

“I’ll take it.”

The trucks parked down in the town square. The men jumped out of the beds to establish a perimeter around it.

As they did, Berg exited his truck's cab, and surveyed the ground.

The town was empty. He noticed footprints leading off into the hills, but also towards some of the houses, along with some tire treads. Hauptmann and two others appeared from over by the houses a moment later.

"We found a truck stashed in a barn," his second reported. "It is military grade. Should we disable it?"

"No," said Berg. "When the fight is over, we will take it back with us. For now, you two stay behind to guard it."

The men went running off.

"Should we leave any others in the town?"

Berg said "no" again. He wanted as many men with him to storm the mine and trap the communists. If there were only one truck, then there were only a few of them around. Still, a confined position like the mines could prove easily defensible, and numbers alone could be the deciding factor.

He would have preferred to set an ambush in the town itself, but their tracks in the snow would have given them away. According to Saxon, the Indian in the enemy ranks had been a sniper, and his eyes were keen for details like footprints and concealed positions. If he had hit Berg in the jaw from across the field of battle, then he would know to keep his eyes peeled here. So, Berg had kept his men hidden deep within the hills since the night before, just waiting. Now, the time had come to strike.

Berg marched his company up the hillside towards the mine shaft.

The creature was waiting for them there, crouched beside the body of a dead woman. "Rebis", Rothstein had called it or something like that. Berg liked it none at all. It watched him with reddish, unblinking eyes as it rose to its feet, and

stood on long, skinny legs. It wore only a VSG uniform, but not their long, woolen overcoat. It did not speak to Berg or even salute him.

So this was the Doctor's handiwork? Was this what the Stone was meant to do? This hardly seemed like the implement for creating the Master Race. However, Berg could not deny its frightening ability.

He turned away from Rebis, and back to Hauptmann.

"I will take four squads down," he ordered. "Stay behind with one to cover the entrance."

"You are going in there?" His captain's intonation held more incredulity than curiosity.

Berg could only shrug.

"Saxon wants MacGregor alive," he explained. "Along with the Adamant and whatever else he and the Indian have got."

"Was he *adamant* about it?"

Hauptmann had made the pun with a sense of vitriol more than humor, and Berg knew there was none to be found in this scenario. This would be trench warfare again, and the men were plenty weary of that by now. Yet, Hauptmann's remark was clever enough to give him the faintest smile.

"He was," Berg said. "So we have to flush the deer to net him. If you catch him in the open with all the others, you risk shooting him or letting him get away. And, we do not know if there are other ways in or out of the mountain. We cannot let them escape without pursuit."

"You know this mission is impossible," Hauptmann told him.

"I know, Harold."

"Be careful."

"And you."

Berg barked out the orders, and his men fell into ranks.

Then, they made their descent.

By the light of Hans' torch, they crept along the abandoned tracks, never uttering a word to one another. Sanwar walked alongside the big man, rifle at the ready. Other tunnels branched off from their own, but he thought it best to maintain the simplest course possible, lest they became lost in the darkness. Worse still, enemies could swarm from out of them, and catch him and Hans in a close quarters deathtrap. He had seen it happen enough times in the trenches, and doubtless Hans had too. Long rifles would prove poor weapons in that case, as the ceiling here was no more than a foot above their heads.

Close ahead, the tunnel narrowed and a shelf of rock reduced that headroom to less than six feet. The cart tracks stopped dead at this defile, which meant that he and Hans had to duck and travel single file just to step inside it.

On the other side, the ceiling rose again to a more comfortable eight feet, however, the tunnel only continued a short while before a mass of rubble blocked the way. A wheelless mine cart lay overturned on one side, while a smattering of tools was strewn about in the dust.

"*Seben Sie da an,*" Hans whispered, and shined his light above them.

Moisture glistened on the cave roof, but there was another gleam as well. A vein of gold ore flowed between the rock from the entrance all the way to the collapse and perhaps beyond. What abandoned ore was visible though, would have made a kingly ransom.

Hans grinned, and Sanwar thought he might have half a mind to grab a fallen pick and strike for gold himself.

Sanwar thought it best to stop him, and return to the others first. They had encountered a dead end besides, and it would be good to reconnoiter with the others before deciding their next course of action.

“*Wir werden wiederkehren,*” Sanwar told Hans before he got any ideas. The sentence was simple enough, although Sanwar was still acquainting himself with the language. Being solely around Germans for the past week or so was certainly beginning to rub off on him.

Hans diminished somewhat, but conceded.

He and Sanwar turned back to exit the defile, until the noises stopped them in their tracks.

The sounds were faint at first. Then, there were voices echoing down the corridor, followed by the pattering of footfalls. This was not the staccato rhythm of civilian shoes, but the heavy clap of hobnailed jackboots.

Hans and Sanwar ducked behind the walls of the defile, and killed the light.

The tunnel was illuminated seconds later.

Torchlights flicked this way and that, and peered down into the narrow gap ahead.

Hans and Sanwar stood still as statues on either side of its entrance, their backs pressed hard into the stone so that their broad shoulders would not betray them, and their breath held leaden in their chests.

The boots’ tempo slowed from a staccato to an adagio. The patter now became a gentle crunch.

Judging from their volume, Sanwar guessed they numbered perhaps a squad’s worth, between ten men and a dozen. He imagined their advance, knees bent, weapons ready.

Sanwar put his finger on the trigger. Hans drew out his trench spike.

Suddenly, the movement stopped. The tunnel went silent. He could hear their breathing now. He smelt the tobacco in it. He smelt their sweat upon the air, a sour stench mixed with polished leather.

There came a hushed command.

Two sets of feet stepped forward.

Moments later, a grey-clad VSG man ducked inside the defile, shining his light into the space.

Hans wrenched him by the collar so that he pitched forward, and nearly slammed against the floor. As he doubled over, Hans brought the trench spike point down onto his helmet. It punched through steel and into brain. His torch hit the ground, shattered, and went dark.

Sanwar slid out from cover, his rifle pressed point blank at the second man following behind.

He fired.

The man went falling back in a crimson mist while his fellow went sagging to the floor, gray matter leaking from his skull.

Sanwar strafed back into cover as a hail of bullets burst forth in response.

And so the fight began.

The end of the tunnel finally opened into a cavern so massive that Jack and Inge's torchlight seemed to shrink upon entry. Jack scanned the dimensions of the room, his torch beam a sliver against the walls.

On the far side of the cave, a series of scaffolds ascended several stories high. Sheaths of ice had frozen over their wooden beams and all the tools that had been abandoned on them.

All three tunnels collected along the near wall, with the cart tracks for two of them stopping just beyond their mouths. However, there were none from the rightmost tunnel, which had been blocked off by a collapse. The whole chamber must have measured several hundred yards in diameter.

“Somebody was productive,” Jack muttered. “This place is huge.”

“I think they started mining back in the Middle Ages,” Inge recalled. “They slowly expanded the operation over the centuries.”

Now it was nothing more than an oversized pit full of discarded picks and mine carts.

Some noise echoed off the centermost tunnel, prompting Jack and Inge to instinctively reach for their weapons.

However, they relaxed when they heard the voices, and saw a torchlight shine from around the bend.

Otto and Rosa emerged a moment later. Rosa blinked at her compatriots, while Otto simply walked right past them and began marveling at all the feats of engineering happening about the place.

“Good to see you too,” Rosa remarked. “Are Hans and Sanwar with you?”

Jack shook his head.

“They must have hit the dead end,” he said, shining his light over to the collapsed tunnel.

Otto wandered over to the cave-in, and inspected it.

“Any sign of anything?” Inge asked Rosa. When the dark-haired woman shook her head, Inge sighed. “We should go back and regroup. Figure out a new plan.”

“Aye,” agreed Jack.

“I want to leave this place,” Rosa said. “You can dig around as much as you want, but I want to go back to the truck-”

Muffled gunfire sounded from the caved-in tunnel. At first they had paused to confirm the sound, but then it came again, heavier than before.

Jack’s heart sank.

“Sanwar.”

He ran to the collapse.

“Otto! You got dynamite in that bag? Let’s blow them out of there!”

Otto shook his head.

“Go boom. Fall down.”

He wiggled his fingers to pantomime the falling rocks.

“Jack!”

Inge had her weapon out already. She jerked her head towards the two open tunnels.

A rush of boots and voices sounded down each one. Torchlights shone around the tunnels’ bends, and with them came the looming shadows of armed men in *stahlhelms*.

Jack and the others dove for the safety of any boulder or rocky outcropping large enough to shield them. Inge fired off a shot, which was immediately answered with a cacophony of fire. She ducked behind her boulder as chips of it flew away like hailstones.

Jack knew to cover the other passage.

He shouldered his rifle, fired off a shot, and met the same reply.

His five-round bolt-action rifle was a pitiful defense against the automatic spray, and as he sheltered from the storm of gunfire, he feared what would soon come next.

These were Stormtroopers. A few men would pin the RSB down behind cover while the rest came rushing in. Given

their rate of fire, it would only take a couple men to suppress the four of them, leaving more to assault the breach.

Sure enough, when Jack braved a glance around the corner, several VSG had spilled into the cavern, firing as they ran.

Rosa plugged one with a solid torso shot, but the rest got through and drove her back with heavy fire.

There was only the briefest moment where those men were out in open ground, running for cover, and Jack knew that such moments needed to be seized.

Rather than shooting at the men themselves, he leapt from cover and angled his rifle high.

He emptied the clip straight into the ceiling, and ducked back behind the rocks before he had even seen if his aim was true.

Jagged shards of icicle and stalactite hurtled towards the earth, shot loose from his successful volley.

Once piece lodged itself into a VSG man's clavicle. A chunk of icy rock struck another's helmet, and sent him reeling to the floor. He groaned and crawled away to escape the chaos. The others retreated for the safety of the tunnel, loose stone raining on their heads.

Jack flashed a smile as he jammed in another clip.

The shots had served the dual purpose of killing and wounding men, but had also partially obstructed the tunnel's entryway. That would slow the VSG down at least for a moment longer.

He used the lull to look back at Inge.

She alone was holding back the center tunnel. As if with no regard for them, she remained in shooting position as the bullets whizzed around her. She had steeled herself, and refused to retreat for cover or even to reload. Her shots

repelled any advance into the cavern, so the VSG hung back hugging the cover of the tunnel's bend.

Their fire had slackened, and Jack realized their change in strategy. They only needed to keep her occupied until she ran out of ammo. The VSG simply had more men and more rounds to fire, and some of the squad could easily run back down the tunnel to resupply. There was no sense risking an assault against this stiff of resistance, when an attrition was an even better strategy.

Jack thought he might add his fire to help Inge, but he paused a moment to take stock of the field.

The left flank of his position was blocked, Inge held the center, and he had temporarily neutralized the right. Rosa was crouched behind a boulder between him and Inge, panting heavily from the shock, while Otto was-

Well, Otto was gone.

Jack had no time to search for him however, because the second wave had just begun.

Attrition apparently was only for the weak.

Echoes of gunfire crackled down all three tunnels.

Berg stood at the fork and listened to the rhythm of it, deciphering how each skirmish might be going. Battle had a certain call and response from each side's attacks, defenses, and counters; crescendos when the fight was thickest, and caesuras when it lulled and the troops regathered. Yet the echo of the tunnels had made this all impossible, for he heard the sounds too late, and then again, and again, and again.

He growled, and paced in front of the reserve squad. The men watched him back and forth, hands white-knuckled on their Saxon Mark IIIs. They liked this even less than he did;

marching into a cold, dark mine, unknowing of where the enemy might be, and furthermore, dividing their forces.

If he could have his way, they would have simply blown the entire place to Hell with nitroglycerin, but Saxon wanted the Adamant and this MacGregor fellow alive, and von Dreckland needed Saxon apparently.

Well really, he needed Rothstein, who was Saxon's creature in the same way that Rebis was the Doctor's.

But did Saxon need Berg?

Perhaps he had sent the VSG down into these tunnels to get rid of them. Thankfully, Berg had left a few squads at home to defend the castle, but perhaps Saxon only cared about getting rid of Berg.

Perhaps Berg should get rid of Saxon when he had the chance.

The man had no allegiance to the cause, it seemed, only to himself.

The squad came suddenly to attention. Grüning, one of his sergeants, appeared from down the rightmost tunnel. He ran to Berg, then stopped, panting with his hands resting heavy on his knees.

Berg gave him a moment to catch his breath.

"Heavy resistance down the right tunnel," Grüning rasped. "Two men dead already. Bottleneck."

"Is this MacGregor there?"

"Don't know."

Berg nodded. He clapped Grüning on the back, and ordered him to sit. The man had done enough, and could use the rest.

He was just about to give his orders when two more runners came from down the other passageways.

"We found them," one panted.

“They won’t retreat,” panted the other.

So, the RSB had hit a dead end. That was something at least. However, Berg knew that a cornered enemy would fight all the harder than one who could escape. He also knew that he had to press the attack no matter what.

If this were a battle on the Eastern Front, he would have held back and worn the enemy down until they had exhausted all supplies. However, down here in the gloom, his men’s torch batteries would not last that long, and his trucks had only brought enough food for the day, most of it left with them back in the village. Then, there was the matter of reinforcements. The other RSB would eventually come looking for their fellows. This was meant to be a *blitzkrieg* after all, not a prolonged siege.

“These two tunnels connect eventually,” one of the runners told Berg once he had somewhat recovered. “That’s where we’ve got them. They fight hard, but they aren’t many.”

Berg nodded. If the tunnels connected, that meant twenty men could fight and not just ten. That would be sufficient.

It was the right path that concerned him, though.

“You two,” he addressed the runners. “Stay back with Grüning and guard the main passage.” He then turned to his reserve. “I want two men down each tunnel.” One man would replace each runner, the other would add an extra gun to each squad’s ranks. He pointed to a fifth man. “You. Go back and tell Captain Hauptmann what is happening. Tell him that I am going in. The rest of you, with me. Double time.”

The men all carried out their orders.

Berg’s five reinforcements fell in behind him, and quick marched down the righthand tunnel. At this pace, they would be on the position in about ten minutes, and Hell would follow with them.

Sanwar aimed for the torchlights. Even if he missed the torch itself, he would still hit the man who held it. He had darkened the tunnel considerably this way, and now the VSG knew well to keep their lights off.

Only one torch lay on the ground, its lonely beam face down in the rock, glowing red. A hand reached out for it until Sanwar shot the thing apart, and drove the hand away.

Then, everything went completely black and quiet, save for Hans' ragged breath across from him, and the familiar click of a clip going into his rifle's receiver. Sanwar reloaded his gun as well.

For a long, long while, nobody moved. Minutes could have passed or hours. In the darkness, time was immaterial.

The air was thick with sulfur. In the confines of the tunnel, it lingered longer, and made each successive breath all the more nauseating. In the heat of battle, Sanwar had not processed the smell, but now in the silence, its acrid stench stung his eyes and nostrils. His stomach was in his mouth. He was bound to die here. He wanted nothing more than to retch his fear onto the floor, and yet, his muscle memory told him to reload.

He felt about his person, and realized that the clip had just loaded was his last. Silently, he cursed, then slowly eased his foot out from out of cover.

He slid it along the ground until at last, it tapped against the body of the man Hans knifed. Sanwar leaned forward, knowing that his head was now exposed with only thin, blank darkness to conceal him, and reached to find the man's forsaken weapon.

As he did, a metallic clink dashed against the stone beneath him.

Sanwar's heart dropped.

He abandoned the gun, and scrambled for the grenade, feeling, groping, searching in the amorphous darkness for the ticking bomb.

His fingers jammed against its stick.

He grabbed it at once, and chucked it out the gap where it burst apart a moment later in a flash of white hot air. A scream followed.

There was another clink, however.

This time, Sanwar searched in vain again.

Hans had more wits about him though, and tackled Sanwar to the floor. He landed hard against the stone, with his head cradled between the Hans' elbows.

The explosion came a second later.

Sanwar's ears were ringing. He gasped as the weight of Hans stopped crushing him. He rolled over so that he could breathe again, but inhaled smoke and dust instead.

Suddenly, a light flicked on, and blinded him.

The shadow of a gun barrel briefly passed the beam, then Hans grabbed it and yanked its wielder into the defile.

Sanwar crawled back as the big man wrestled the attacker, and threw him to the ground.

A second man was through the gap, but Sanwar rushed him.

He unsheathed *Cadarama*, and in a single motion, slashed him across the guts. The VSG man fell, trying to keep his entrails inside him.

Hans had found a discarded pickax, and brought it down onto his man. Ribs crunched beneath the blow, and blood spurted like a fountain when he dislodged it.

Sanwar noticed Hans was bleeding too. Shrapnel had torn his trench coat and his back alike, but the man still stood

huffing in the fallen light, hefting the pick as if he felt nothing at all.

More men were through the gap.

Hans roared, and drove the pick into the first man's midriff. The next man shoved the first aside, where he slumped back against the rock wall. Then, that man rushed at Hans with a naked blade. The two entwined into a grapple, struggling for control.

Another came for Sanwar.

He cut that man down, when yet another appeared.

The man butted Sanwar's cheek with his submachine gun, and knocked him down. He turned the gun around, and stood over Sanwar to shoot him, but Sanwar had held firm on *Cadarama* and swiped at his attacker's leg.

The limb severed at the knee, and the man lost balance. His shots went into the ceiling as he fell back, sending down an avalanche of chips and dust.

Sanwar coughed, and flopped onto his stomach.

A single torch lay beside him, shining on the opposite wall. Within its spotlight, a shadowplay of Hans and his opponent took place. The men danced back and forth, stepping in and out the beam as they wrestled for the knife. In the struggle, Hans' foot kicked the fallen torch accidentally, and sent it spinning. When it finally came back around, Sanwar saw that the other man lay dead on the stone, and Hans above him with bloodstains bright on the brass knuckles of his trench spike. A dark red gash seeped out his side.

"Hans..." Sanwar wheezed his name.

The big man was not listening.

He had turned to face the defile instead.

Berg and several others had stepped through the gap, and looked about the carnage. From a distance, the man was

obviously taller than everyone around him, but Sanwar did not appreciate his sheer immensity until now.

His steel-helmed pate hovered close beneath ceiling, and his shoulders spanned as wide as the tunnel itself. He seemed all the taller from Sanwar's position flat upon the ground. Even Hans was overtopped by several inches.

The Major peered down at Sanwar with tiny, flinty eyes.

A scar was cut across his cheek.

Sanwar smiled at that.

Then, Hans screamed. Spike in hand, he charged at Berg with all the abandon of a man who knew that he was trapped.

Berg's right hand caught him in the face. His massive palm jammed into Hans' nose and eyes, and his iron fingers wrapped around Hans' cheek, and squeezed.

Berg's left hand drew out a massive knife simultaneously, and drove it through Hans' heart.

Bone snapped and blood squelched as the blade came out the other side. Hans roared and cried, and screamed in pain until at last, he died.

Berg shoved his body off the blade, and let it slide onto the floor.

Sanwar screamed, and charged himself.

The other VSG ran forth, and caught his arms, but five men could not restrain him. A hundred could not.

Sanwar had almost shaken free, when Berg came over, and rammed the pommel of the knife onto his head.

Then, Sanwar's world went black.

Bullets ripped from all around. Shards of stone spit wildly about from the ricochet. A storm had been unleashed, and Jack cradled himself behind his shrinking cover.

Regrouped, the VSG had made their second attack an onslaught. They were more familiar with the ground now, and more audacious with their approach. Every man in the squad was firing, not just a few covering the others, and Jack was helpless against the arrant volume of lead. He could only cower as the VSG pinned them down.

Then, the firing stopped, and Jack sensed that they were coming.

He popped out of cover as the Stormtroopers charged, and squeezed off a single round into one of them.

A short burst from another drove him back.

He glanced at Inge, and saw them swarm her too. In seconds, they would all be flanked and overwhelmed.

Yet, several shots rang out just then, not the puffing burst of submachine guns, but the deliberate crack of rifle fire.

Jack looked rearwards.

Otto was running towards them, screaming as he fired from the hip.

“Down! Down! Down! Go boom!”

He threw himself onto the ground, and Jack knew at once that he should do the same.

He flattened on the stone, and jammed boths hands over his ears.

The explosion came just a moment after.

The shockwave hit him before the sound did, followed by the dust cloud. A surge of heat broiled the frozen cavern for but an instant, then all went chill again. A sudden gust of wind buffeted Jack’s face. The phosphor burns of daylight abounded him, even with his eyes shut.

Coughing out dust, he dared to open them.

Soot clouded his vision, save for the back wall, where clear white sunlight flooded the cavern. An enormous gash had

been blown clean through the stone, and now opened out into the hillside.

Ears deafened, Jack staggered to his feet. He looked back to the tunnels. The VSG, unready for the explosion, had taken it full force, and were now struggling to rise and recover. A few of them lay moaning on the ground, blood and debris caked all over their greatcoats and polished leather boots, with bits of rocks sticking in their legs and torsos.

Jack searched for the others.

Otto was already on his feet, lifting Rosa and shouting at her to run. Inge emerged from the dust a moment later. Her rosy cheeks and chestnut curls were gray with dust, yet her emerald eyes shone through, fiercer than he had ever seen them. She stepped forward, unfazed for several steps before she stumbled. Jack caught her, and hand in hand, they ran.

The four of them half-sprinted, half-staggered over the broken ground for the gap. The distance was far, but the explosion had at least bought them some time, and the indelible instinct of survival was with them, spurring them on.

They were so close, so near to their escape, when the bullets snapped once more.

Rosa buckled, her arm bleeding.

Jack wheeled round to face the VSG. With faces ashen white like wraiths, they apparated from the dust, their thirst for battle yet unquenched.

He let go of Inge's hand.

"Run," he heard himself say to her.

He reached for Otto's bag. The little man had Rosa on his shoulder, so he could not resist as Jack removed his matchbox and a stick of dynamite, lit the fuse, and hurled it at the VSG.

“Run!” He shouted the command this time.

They turned and ran, this time no longer a stagger, but a full on dash for the safety of outside.

Rosa let go of Otto, blood leaking down her arm, and raced to the front. He was just behind her, and Inge not far after. Jack stayed at the rear, urging them on as the shouts of frightened VSG men sounded off behind him.

The second blast erupted instants later, and this time it was different.

With the rush of heat and air, came also the crumbling, scraping sound of stone, and a tremor beneath their feet.

Jack glimpsed over his shoulder to see the floor give way, a gaping black pit yawning outwards from the cavern’s center. The VSG ran back for the shelter of the tunnels. Most of them made it, but the wounded and the stragglers were sucked into a vortex along with the falling stones and tools.

The earth shuddered beneath Jack’s feet. Suddenly, his strides slackened as the ground wobbled out from under him.

Inge stumbled a few steps ahead.

They were mere inches from the entrance, inches. Otto and Rosa were there egging them on to reach the end. The winter air caressed them with its chill.

Yet, Inge stumbled.

With a final desperate breath, Jack pushed her forward.

The last thing he saw was Rosa and Otto catching her by the arms as he plunged straight into the darkness.

Inge stumbled, fell, and rolled out onto the snow. Her world spun round for several minutes before the dizziness wore off, and she could stand again.

Rosa and Otto had collapsed onto their knees nearby. Smoke billowed out from the gap. Rather it was no longer a

gap at all, merely a depression, since a wall of wreckage had now sealed it off forever.

Jack was gone.

Inge straightened.

She checked Rosa's arm, which was thankfully just a graze, then checked Otto. She got them to their feet. She led them down the hill.

They had appeared south east from their original position, and so had to wind back along the hillside to go towards Verloren.

They went carefully at Inge's behest. If there had been men in the tunnels, then there would be others in the village for a certainty.

They passed near the hollow on the descent. Inge knew that Luzia was dead if the VSG had gotten into the mine, so she did not look for her. She suspected Werner was too.

Escape was now the only option.

They were just about to the tree line, when she glanced back, just to make sure they were not being followed.

She saw the muzzle flash before she heard the shot.

It came from somewhere far above the hollow, high in the hills.

Rosa gasped, and fell from Inge's arms. She had been walking just beside her, but now lay face down in the snow. Blood was gushing from her shoulder, turning the ground from white to red.

Inge and Otto grabbed her immediately, and ran for the trees. They each carried one arm around their shoulder, with Rosa's legs dragging in the snow. Inge had the wounded arm. Gore spattered her with every step.

Shouts rang out behind them.

They ran straight for the barn.

As they neared, two men ran out from around the front. Their eyes widened, not expecting to see their enemy so close.

They raised their rifles, but Inge was faster.

She had dropped Rosa's arm and drawn her pistol before either man had leveled his rifle. She had lost her own rifle in the cavern, but the shortness of the pistol helped quicken its draw.

She emptied all six rounds into both men, then grabbed Rosa's arm again as they fell dead.

She and Otto ran inside the open barn.

The truck was still there.

"Drive," Inge ordered, and carried Rosa into the bed alone.

Otto hopped into the driver's seat, and slammed the gas.

They went screeching down the snowy roads, through the village, past the lines of VSG trucks, and out into the hills.

Rosa lay bleeding and unconscious on the bed. Inge pulled the scissors from her kit to cut away the bloody sleeve, wrapped a tourniquet around the arm to stop the bleeding, then dumped a load of hemostatic on the wound, and wrapped the holes in gauze. Finally, she turned the little woman on her side, bent her leg in the recovery position, and held her there through all three hours back to Munich.

Snow was falling when they pulled alongside the hospital. They left Rosa against a streetlamp just outside from the doors, her name, address, date of birth, and blood type written on the back of her good hand. Inge fired a shot into the air from the cab's open window, before Otto gunned it once again, and the truck went speeding off into the night.

X

Sorrows Grow Once More

Outside, snow began to fall. Saxon watched as it floated down in little pristine flakes, and landed upon the window panes. The trio of tall palladian windows overlooked the inner ward from the second floor, although Saxon suspected that by nightfall, the glass would be enshrined in frost and nothing would be seen through them but white. After all, it had been overcast since dawn.

He hated waiting. Yet, all he could seem to do these days was wait. The Doctor toiled. Taggart drank. Von Dreckland hatched his little schemes. There was nothing for Saxon to contribute to any of it. The company ran itself without him, save for the big deals and the big decisions, but there were none of those to be made as of now, not even over a phone call. Likely, there would be none until after the holidays.

However, he did not hate waiting if he knew that something was coming at the end of it, and something was coming now.

He had watched the trucks drive out this morning, and had not left his station since.

The three trucks trundled through the gateway and into the inner ward below, just as the waning light of dusk was setting in.

The VSG unloaded from the vehicles, and Saxon eyed each man. Their ranks had thinned since morning. Scarcely ten men emerged from each truck bed, many of whom wore badges of bandages and blood.

He leaned forward, scanning every one of them.

He grimaced when Berg and Hauptmann appeared, and held his breath when the Indian was taken out in handcuffs from the back.

But there was no Jack.

The breath escaped his lips in a snarl of rage.

His hand clenched into an iron fist.

He met everyone in the infirmary. Von Dreckland watched on from his cot as Rothstein attended to the newcomers. Berg and Hauptmann stood near them, glaring. Taggart had wisely made himself scarce. Rothstein's red-eyed creature lingered in the shadows.

"Where's MacGregor?"

Berg tossed a curious blue vial onto a tray.

"Here is what you wanted."

Rothstein turned away from his current patient, and inspected the items.

"I see no Adamant," he said.

"And I see no MacGregor," Saxon growled.

"Berg! That element was vital to our success!" Von Dreckland blathered.

Berg looked at each of them in turn.

"Fuck your Adamant. Fuck MacGregor. And fuck all of you. I lost nearly a third of my men today for the cause, nine of them thanks to that damned Indian you wanted. You told me that he and this MacGregor had important items, and to bring them back alive. How exactly am I supposed to do this when MacGregor blows himself to Hell and half the mountain with him? And when I return, there are no thanks from any of you. Well, when you cowards finally get some blood on your face down in the trenches with the rest of us, then you can criticize my conduct. Until then, lick my ass."

He marched towards the door and Hauptmann with him.

Saxon stepped in their way.

“Nobody speaks to me that way, you bloody git-”

Berg simply roared, grabbed him by the collar, and flung him aside. Then, he and Hauptmann vanished through the door.

Saxon smoothed over his suit, and glowered.

Everyone else turned back to what they were doing.

“Was the mountain really blow to Hell?” Von Dreckland looked as though he might start weeping “Does that mean the Adamant is lost...?”

“We can sift through the rubble when the snow clears,” Saxon heard the Doctor reassure him as he walked out of the infirmary. “We will find it.”

He did not bother listening to rest of their drivel. He simply ambled down the hall, and locked himself inside his chamber.

He sat on the bed, shoulders slumped, and lit himself a Turkish cigar, the last of his private stash that he had been saving for Christmas. The more he dragged on it, the more his shaking hands subsided.

Eventually, the fury left his mind, and he found himself thinking of Jack again, back when they had been cadets together at the Darby Academy. Father had insisted that young Henry be sent there and “straightened out”, as it were. A fat lot that had done for him, though he had made a good many friends.

Plenty of the other boys were equally resentful being sent there by their fathers, and were happy to commiserate. He had naturally become the leader, and had proven himself decent in all the physical activities, though he could not have cared less for the academic portions of the curriculum.

Jack however, was something else. He was brilliant at all of it; swordplay, horse riding, history, science. He made top marks in everything...and yet he did not seem to care for any of it. He seemed nothing short of miserable the entire time, and yet refused to join in any of the bellyaching with the rest of them. Rather than joining Henry and the lads in a bit of fun, he would spend his time reading the same strange book or drawing or doing something odd.

Henry had approached him a month into the semester, asking if he would sit at the table with him and his friends, but Jack declined. At first Henry wrote him off as some middle class yeoman afraid to act above his station, until he learned that his father was Brigadier MacGregor, the hero of the Sudan.

Then, Henry was furious.

From then on, he took every chance to get back at the boy who had denied him. It began with little things at first. Henry would have someone steal his papers to make it look like he had forgotten them in front of the professor, or replace his rounds with blanks on the practice field to make him think that all his shots had missed. Jack got wise to them pretty quickly, and eventually the school got wise itself, so those little pranks never went very far after that, which meant more creative tactics were required.

Henry would find different ways to frame him. Maybe he would throw an elbow at him during a rugby game, or rig the practice duels so that Jack had to face off against the most difficult opponent. Most times though, Henry just had the lads haze him during the nights by pissing in his boots or taking a squat inside his kit, or something of that nature.

Yet, MacGregor came back hard every time. As a first-year, he became the academy's finest swordsman. In rugby,

he took the hits, and just kept coming. He bought a second set of everything, and hid them where they couldn't find it. At a certain point, he had stopped going to the school for help. There was never any proof, and Henry made sure to have someone else take care of the business. He cared little for expulsion, but it saved him the irritation and inconvenience of being brought before the Headmaster and a lecture from his father. He always paid handsomely for it, so there was no shortage of volunteers, especially since ragging on MacGregor was half of the reward. He had no friends. He was an easy target.

Still, it was not enough to drive Jack away, and Henry despised him for it. Finally, things came to a head in their last semester. If there was one thing Jack guarded with his life, it was that silly little book of his. Henry always wondered what this amazing tome could be that had Jack poring through it every hour of every day. Eventually, he could stand it no longer. He found the arrogant little prick alone in the library as usual, and snatched the thing away from him while the lads had held him back.

“What the Hell is this? What the bloody Hell have you been reading about all this whole time?”

He had opened the book, and seen all these funny little pictures in and words written in languages that he could not understand.

Yet, the pages had fallen open to the image of a red stone, brighter and more brilliant than any ruby or even diamond that Henry had ever seen. It was strangely enrapturing. He had almost not expected such a self-righteous arsewipe incapable of appreciating that kind of elegance. He had found himself scanning the page, despite his better judgement.

Lead into gold? It seemed such a silly, childish idea, and yet how exciting would the world be if it were true?

It had to be a lie.

Then, Jack broke free, and punched him.

From that day on, Saxon had realized his mistake.

He had hated Jack MacGregor for thinking himself Saxon's better, when this whole time, he should have been laughing. The old boy had been living in his famous father's shadow his entire life, and this romantic Alchemical fantasy was his way of imagining a greater legacy for himself. No wonder that Jack would be jealous of someone like Saxon, someone who could make that dream into reality.

Jack MacGregor was never going to be anyone, and Saxon would always have that over him, no matter what Jack did or how hard he fought. He was going to be sent off to the trenches and die a nameless fool in a pointless battle, and Saxon never would be.

So, when Saxon had learned that the Stone was real and that MacGregor was still alive, he realized how he now had this one chance to make those romantic Alchemical fantasies a reality right in front of Jack MacGregor's face.

And that was truly, absurdly funny.

"But you won't ever get to see that old boy, will you?" Saxon muttered to himself, and puffed on the nub of his cigar. "And you never got exactly what you deserved."

While the others worried about the wounded, Rebis wandered the castle halls. Nobody had noticed them leave the room, not even Father. Everyone just seemed so concerned, but Rebis did not know why. Some of the gray ones were dead or dying. Was that why? Blood was supposed to be a good thing, was it not?

They walked past the conservatory. That was Father's room, and where they had been born. Rebis remembered. They had opened their eyes, and there was Father with the white one, Saxon.

"Freak."

Rebis had remembered that word. That was what they were, yes? A freak.

They did not want to go back there just yet. There was so much else to see before Father noticed they were gone. The castle was a big place, and they wanted to see it all.

Castle.

Father had taught them that word and many others. Rebis had read even more as well. A castle was a fortified residence for a nobleman or sovereign dating back to the Medieval period. This one, Bodenbug, was late fifteenth century in its design, and was erected by Baron Wilhelm von Dreckland I, the ancestor of their current host, to commemorate the founding of his house. The Baron had a fervent love of Alchemy, which was how Father said Rebis had been born.

This castle's keep had two towers, one at either end of the hall. Rebis ascended the north tower all the way to the top. They liked to climb. From high places, they could see everything. The whole world was laid out before them, filled with so many places to explore. At first, Rebis had thought that only Bodenbug had been the world, until they had gone to Verloren and seen from the hilltop just how far the world went. It went not just back and forward or side to side, but above and below as well. There was a lot of world out there to see. Rebis wondered how much more they would, or even how much they could. It seemed like the world went on forever.

The tower was even higher than the hill, which meant that Rebis liked it better. Through a crenel on the top floor, Rebis peered out across the land. Below them spanned the valley, lush with forest. Far off in the distance should have been the mountains, but a thick, gray fog had overtaken them, and small white sprinkles were falling from it.

Rebis knew this thing.

This was snow.

Rebis had seen it all over the ground, of course, but they did not know it came from the sky! They had assumed it grew out of the earth. Yet, here it was drifting down from the gray clouds above.

Maybe they should go outside. Maybe they could catch some of this snow, and keep it for themselves.

They eased themselves through the crenel, and clambered out onto the stonework. Fierce winds blew at this height, but even in the open air, Rebis paid them no heed.

They pressed their heels into the stonework, and propelled themselves onto the rim on the tower's conical spire. Their grip found purchase on the snowy tile, and pulled their body into a prone position. As the wind beat against them, it proved easier to crawl across the rooftop than to run. Their torso dampened as they slunk along the spire, but Rebis stayed low until they rounded the bend, and were gazing down into the courtyard.

Yes, the courtyard!

That would be the perfect place to see the snow.

Rebis swung down once again onto the rim, and rocked back to give themselves some momentum. They sailed forward, caught the stone of the tower once more, then made their descent, passing every story and the parapet on the way

down. Once they were close enough to the ground, they dropped down softly into the snowy yard beneath.

Rebis liked this place.

It was the dead center of the castle, and could be seen from the window of the conservatory, although it was nicer to be seeing in it from the inside rather than the outside. Trees grew here, and there was an icy pond on the east wall. There were also more of those dead people like the one in the church, except these were made of stone, not wood. Rebis wondered how they had died if they were stone, but did not have an answer. They just knew that the stone people could not be alive, because they never moved, not even while the snow was stacking right on top of them.

There was one alive person here, however.

Someone sat in the very center of the courtyard, on a stone bench underneath a small pavilion. As Rebis approached, they saw that this person was reading a big, thick book. This was not the dictionary, Rebis thought. Not every book was the dictionary, they had learned, even though Rebis really liked the dictionary.

The person was blue with orange head hair. They were small and slender, no more than one hundred sixty centimeters by Rebis' estimate, which was much smaller than most of the other people that Rebis had seen, especially Berg the grey one and Saxon the white one. They were small like Father.

Rebis stepped forward, and peered over the blue person to read the book as well. They had only glimpsed at it for a few minutes when the person turned around and saw them, then made a strange noise.

The blue person jumped to their feet, and scurried back.

The book fell in the snow.

Rebis smiled at them, and waved.

“Freak,” they said to their new friend.

The blue person said nothing, but there was water in their eyes.

Rebis frowned, not knowing why this had happened.

Now alone, they picked the book off the ground, brushed the cover clean, and opened it. The words inside were not written in Latin characters, so this could not be Latin, English, or German. No, this had to be a different language.

They read:

“You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings.”

Rebis skimmed through another few hundred pages, then noticed that their audience was staring at them.

Ah, thought Rebis, they misunderstand me. They think that I am stealing this from them.

They closed the book, and offered it back.

Strangely, the person did not move at first to accept it, so Rebis kept the book out until finally, they did. With fluttering hands, they took it back, and ran inside through a doorway near the pond.

Rebis watched the blue person go.

Why did people always look at them that way?

Their head was feeling heavier. They gazed towards the sky.

The snow was falling harder. They laughed, brushed off their hair, and reached out to catch one of the small white sprinkles.

The snowflake landed on their fingertip. Its crystal points were so perfect and pure, so beautiful to behold, and wholly unique.

Rebis smiled.

Then, the snowflake disappeared.

Rebis looked about for a long, long while, yet there was nothing on their pale, wet fingers. The snowflake was gone.

Rebis frowned, and realized that water was in their eyes as well.

They did not like snow anymore, they thought.

Sanwar sat alone in an empty room on a sheetless bed across from a warmthless hearth. Taggart had stripped him of all his weaponry, even his *kirpan*, and thrown him into these unused servants' quarters as if it had been a cell. Through the chamber's solitary window, he watched the snow drift down, and heavy clumps begin to form beneath the sill. Tendrils of frost sprouted on the glass in spiny fractals as the hours wore on and twilight faded into night.

Were it not for the changing light, he would have lost all sense of time passing, for he had lost all sensation otherwise. Darkness, cold, and the humiliation of his capture were not enough to stir him. He felt nothing.

Jack was dead, and so were the others. Berg had told him such. The two explosions that had sounded in the deep had killed Jack, the RSB, and six VSG men, he had said. His words had dripped with ichor when he had spouted them in Sanwar's face, as if somehow they would hurt him, but Sanwar felt nothing.

He could not feel, because Jack's absence was beyond any hurt or pain or any emotion that existed in this meager physical reality.

Sanwar had failed him.

He had failed the RSB.

He had failed himself.

He had failed the quest.

The ride back to Castle Bodenburg had been a silent, shameful one, not just for him, but for the VSG as well. Sanwar had ridden with the wounded and Berg's own deputy as his guard, likely because Berg knew his men would disregard discipline in this one instance if it meant avenging the brothers that he and Hans had killed. So Sanwar sat with his fellow beaten, bloodied men, all of whom stared him with hateful, angry, unsympathetic eyes.

He envied them.

They at least could comfort one another, while he had only himself. Such was the torment of a sole survivor. No one would ever understand what evils had been endured and what had irrevocably been lost.

A part of him had wished that he were back in Punjab among the green and warmth, with his lover, his brother, and his sisters all about him, but he knew that day would never come and so, he had stopped trying altogether.

The chamber door swung open without a knock just then.

A familiar face entered the room. A little spectacled man stood there, his once white frock stained brown with blood.

Sensation suddenly returned to Sanwar all at once, though that sensation was pure confusion.

"Rothstein?"

"Hello again, Mister Dhamija." The Doctor smiled, closed the door, and crossed over to him. "It has been quite time since last we met."

That was biggest understatement of the century. Four years had passed from when he and Jack had traveled to see Rothstein. Rumor had reached their ears of a mysterious Bavarian doctor, legendary in his knowledge of the Art and notorious for his reputation. They had said that he was a recluse living in some abandoned manor on the edges of the

Austrian border, where he conducted all of his bizarre research. His library allegedly contained the only copies of certain texts in existence. Some warned that he was a quack, others that he performed human experimentation, yet no one could deny his talent. Jack and Sanwar had traveled to Bavaria despite the Revolution and the violence to determine for themselves. Back in those days, they had not known even where to begin their search, and would desperately pursue any lead, no matter how false or flimsy it had seemed.

Perhaps, that had been a mistake.

“I am glad to see that you are unharmed,” the Doctor continued. “A shame about MacGregor.”

“Yes, a shame,” Sanwar echoed bitterly.

“It pleases me how far you have come. I remember how you had both come to me like two lost dogs. Dirty. Disheveled. Eager for answers. At once, I knew your talent, but was skeptical of your approach. Gallivanting off into the wilderness does not match my conception of ‘field research’. Laboratory work is far superior, although I must credit you for actually discovering the Emerald Tablet. Until that time, I had believed the Philosopher’s Stone to be a myth. I deal in facts, not superstitions as so many Thulians do. I thought that perhaps this Stone was merely a symbol for an existing compound, but now I can see that there is so much more knowledge to be had. And that is all thanks to you. I had merely decoded some of my texts for you to give you direction, but you? You made the true discovery.”

“You are not welcome,” Sanwar replied. “You disbelieved us about the Stone, and yet, you now benefit from all the hardships that we endured.”

“Such is progress.”

“Saxon snatched the Tablet from us outside of Alexandria on your behalf.”

“Unfortunate, yes,” Rothstein confessed. “Unlike yourself, his lordship is talentless in the methods of science, but a generous patron. Without him, this invaluable research could not advance, and humanity will never achieve its true perfection.”

“At least you admit that you are his creature.”

“I am no one’s creature. Not even God’s.” Rothstein glared at him from behind his blood-flecked spectacles. “Yes, Saxon stole your achievement, but I? I am furthering your work. Is that not what we as men of science seek to accomplish? Does it matter who advances mankind, as long as we are yet advanced?”

Sanwar met his gaze.

“Never before have I seen a man with such intelligence who has learned so little.”

The Doctor only sighed, and removed his glasses.

“You think that I have stolen your work,” he said, wiping the lenses clean on the edges of his apron. “But I am giving you this chance to aid me.”

“What?”

“Assist me in my research,” the Doctor stated again. “And let us create the Philosopher’s Stone together.”

“I would rather die than aid you.”

Rothstein clicked his tongue, and shook his head.

“No, I think that is not true,” he said. “Because, I would not kill you if you refused. For my research, I have adopted a method to keep my subjects alive indefinitely while I dissect them. I have developed a powerful enough anesthetic that can both paralyze a patient and keep them fully conscious, specifically for this purpose. I will do this to you every day,

then replace your organs every night. Or if you desire, I will give you over to Berg's men, and they can decide your fate. And I do not think they will kill you either. At least not quickly. So. What will be your answer? Will you help me?"

Sanwar hung his head.

"Yes."

Inge did not sleep that night, nor did she eat the next day. Gnarled knots had twisted in her stomach. Anything but water rebelled her. She had lied in bed for hours, staring at the darkness of her ceiling until the sun rose. She had lied in bed for hours, waiting for the doors to be bashed in and for the policemen coming streaming to arrest or for Berg himself to come and kill her.

Yet, no one came.

Maybe then, they would come tomorrow. Should she go to work? Maybe they were out there waiting for her if she did, or maybe if she did not go, it would look suspicious. Someone had to know it was she who had been there in that village. Somebody had to know.

She rose from bed to use the bathroom, and peed for the seventh time that morning. Then, she lied back down, knowing that she still had a few more hours to decide. *The Black Rose* would not be open until noon.

What would she tell Sie and the others?

The plan had been to report back to the RSB that night at the garage where Otto stored the truck, but he had dropped Inge off at home instead, so as not to risk her being seen out in public all covered in blood. He had definitely told the other members what had happened in Verloren, but what else had been said between them? She could not let Otto

take any of the blame, not when he had been the one to save them from her mistakes.

Yet, she had gone home anyway, and sat down in the shower. She sat there until the water ran cold, thinking of the others again and again, of how she had left them all to die; Rosa, Luzia, Werner, Sanwar, Jack, Hans, Gebhard, Fredreich, Eva, Eugen, Max, all the faces came back to visit her in gory detail, along with all the names that she had never known. She knew their faces though, or what was left of some of them, as they stared unblinking at her through the bandages, wondering why she had let them perish.

Jack was there among them.

He looked at her with those glowing amber eyes. The glint in them was too kind, too gentle. She knew that he did not blame her when he should have. He should be furious, should be angry, but he was not, and that made it all the worse to bear.

Hans was worse still. He smiled at her as if her were about to call her “little sis” like he always did. He had put so much faith in her. When she helped pull those bullet fragments out of him, he had joked, and said that he believed she had the angel’s touch. He had grinned throughout the whole damn operation, and marveled about how they were both from Munich. When it was over, he had vowed to come and find her after the War. He had kept his promise, but he should have stayed away. She should have accepted his thanks, and kept things at a distant friendship, but she had been selfish, just as she had been selfish with wanting Jack.

Schnitzel pounced onto the bed, and came to comfort her with his caress. Inge turned away from him, however. Failure deserved no comfort, and a good cat deserved better than what she could give him. Yet, he kept butting his head

against her back and purring, so she had to grab him and put him on the floor.

She lied a while more.

Then, a knock came at the door; not the hollow ringing knocking of a knucklebone, but a harder wooden rap.

Sie let themselves in a moment later, pocketed their key, and sat down at the table. Inge promptly rose in bed, her back against the wall and sheets covering her breasts. Her clothes lay soaking in a pot of vinegar solution on the kitchen counter, and she simply gone to bed wearing nothing.

Sie glanced at the pot, but otherwise seemed unfazed by her nakedness. They simply removed their beret, laid it on the table, then scratched their grey-bronze hair. They leaned heavily upon their cane, their hands and chin resting on its crook.

Inge's friend looked older than their forty years. Dark circles hung under their eyes, making their face look gaunt and worn. Their wrinkles seemed deeper than before. Shadows of stubble were sprouting around their chin.

"Rosa's alive," they said at length. "I went by the hospital this morning. She's in a bad way, but there is a chance that she might live. They think that she was shot by robbers, wrote that information herself, and then walked herself to the hospital. It's the best explanation they have given the lack of substantial evidence."

"What word of the others?"

Sie shook their head.

"Then what will their families be told?" Asked Inge.

"Nothing."

"Nothing...?"

"If anyone asks," Sie told her. "You and Hans had the day off because you were sick and you've been sick all week. Jack

and Sanwar were two strangers you helped for a few days. You learned very little about them, and then sent them on their way to Austria yesterday morning. Say it back for me, please.”

Inge recited the story.

Sie nodded.

“The police will hopefully find the bodies after the snow melts,” they went on. “Hopefully that means no traces of you will be left there either. But they won’t start investigating for a few days more, at least not until I report Hans missing later in the week. By then, they’ll be delayed a while longer by the holidays. Crime is always higher around this time.”

Inge’s stomach sank at the thought. Hans and the others would be sitting out there in the snow and ice for God knew how long before their families could lay them to rest. She wondered if Jack and Sanwar’s families would ever hear of what had happened. She wondered if they even had a family outside of each other.

“In the meantime,” Sie instructed. “You need to spend the next few days inside. You’re sick, remember? Then, after I report Hans missing, I’m going to close the *Rose* down.”

“What?”

“Business is poor, my good friend and bartender is dead, you will be out for a while, it is almost Christmas, and I’m just too damn tired, Inge.”

“But I can’t be without work that long...”

“I told the theater that you are sick,” Sie said. “So you won’t lose that job. And I will come by each day with some food. Then, after Christmas, I will help you find something else. I promise.”

Inge nodded vacantly.

Sie pressed down on the cane, and rose to their feet.

“Get some rest, Inge.”

“I won’t.”

Sie sighed.

They headed for the door, then stopped.

“The Revolution’s over, Inge.”

“Then why are we still fighting? Still organizing?”

“To keep what we’ve got left, I guess.”

“And what if we have nothing left?”

Sie said nothing for a time. Only after a long pause, did they speak again.

“You’ve given enough, Inge.”

“Not as much as some.”

“Then you would be buried with Eugen and the rest of them.”

“I got two years on a weapons and sedition charge. Reduced for ‘good behavior’.”

She shuddered at the mention of it.

“I should be there with them,” she said, once she had composed herself.

Sie lingered by the door awhile.

“Like I said, Inge. You’ve given enough. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Then, they walked out.

Alone again, Inge sunk back down beneath the covers.

Schnitzel came back to butt his head against her.

XI

The Gray Sky Lingers

Jack had been sitting in his dugout, reading and rereading the same lines in his book over and over again. With every passing year, the War was dragging on and on, and he hoped and prayed that the answers to how he could end it were written somewhere on the page. With every passing year, more men died, would continue to do so whether by his sword or his command. Tormy had already spilled his brains on him, and Danny had lost half his face to a German rifle. Jack MacGregor would kill others just as yet.

So, he read.

He read even as the artillery shell had struck the dugout. The dust and dirt had shoved him to the floor like a hundred sacks of flour had been tossed onto his back. The suffocating, grainy dryness of it filled his mouth, and choked him. Debris scratched his eyes, and cold detritus ground against his skin. Darkness overtook him.

For what could have been hours, he was trapped in there.

Yet, there was light buried underneath the wreckage.

A scarlet beam radiated in the distance, wane at first, but brighter as Jack's wits returned about him. He clawed at it, thrusting his body towards it through the refuse, but always it seemed just beyond his reach.

Finally, he summoned all his fury, and cried out despite the gagging dirt with one final grasp.

His hand had emerged and felt the cold and wintry Flemish air. The men had dragged him by the arm out into the light.

When Jack could see again, the dugout lay in ruins. Sandbags and timbers were spilt out upon the trench in sorry, mournful heaps.

Eventually, the men rebuilt it, but the book was never found.

Jack awoke in darkness.

The pureness of it was so immense that at first, he thought that he was dead. Yet, as soon as he believed this, he heard the clink of knocking stones together, then their clatter on the floor. A weight was pressing on his chest.

He groaned, and dragged himself backwards. As he did, the soreness hit his ribs and abdomen. The loose stones tumbled down and plopped onto his guts and groin when he finally got free, and made him groan again.

Jack rolled over, and lay flat upon floor. He pressed his nose and brow into its smooth, cool surface, and sobbed as he kissed it, at once hateful and grateful that he were still alive.

A moment passed before he realized that he was not in the War, but in the present. He remembered the explosion, less so the sight of it, but the sound and the feeling. If he shut his eyes, the tremors pounded into his body once again, and the thunder of it made him shudder. He could see Inge running, felt his hand press against her coat, and shove her forward.

He thought of Sanwar, who was probably dead, and curled himself into a ball and wept. He wept and wept, and spat out mucus thick with dust.

Perhaps he was in Hell, actually.

Nothing would be more fitting. After all, he deserved to be for leading even more souls to their deaths. The doomsayers

all were wrong. Hell was not a pit of pain and fire, but an empty blackness filled with nothing at all.

For a time, his only company was the echoes of his weeping.

Eventually, he had no tears left within him, and so he simply lay alone in the dark and silence, listening to his own heavy, labored breaths.

Then, he remembered Otto's matches.

Thank God the man was a chain smoker, and always carried several of them around.

Jack fumbled about his person, and found the box in one of his pockets. He struck one, and suddenly gave life and shape to the once formless cave.

Orange light ensconced the collapse to reveal a wall of shattered stones heaped impossibly high before him. He was fortunate to only have been partially buried at the edges of it, where the stones were fewest. Several of the VSG had been less so, and lay entombed somewhere in the immensity. The entire floor must have collapsed from the explosion, given how vast the rubble was, so Jack posited that there had been another hollow cavern undiscovered just below the mine. If there were other natural caves down here, then that might mean there was a way out too.

Sure enough, when he turned around, there was a tunnel leading off down into the darkness. Who knew if it would lead to an exit, but it was the only way to go from here.

Jack drew his 1911, and proceeded down the path. He had lost his rifle in the confusion, but had thankfully retained his other weapons. *Lann Dbearg's* scabbard may have been a little dinged and dented, yet the sword still hung trustily at his side. Somehow, having a sword and pistol gave him some

comfort despite knowing that no enemy could possibly be down here, or so he hoped.

He continued down the winding passage for quite some while, the only sound being his footsteps on the cold, dank stone. Stale, stagnant air had measured every step of it until the path sloped downwards, and a strange, musty odor replaced it. Jack recoiled at first, unable to hold his nose against the stench with each hand occupied. Not even a burning match was enough to mask the scent.

The source of the smell came from the cave walls. Glistening fungus ran along the tunnel from floor to ceiling. Fronds and fruiting bodies sprouted from nearly every inch of stone with their mycelium branching in between the cracks and deep into the earth.

Jack paused, wondering if he should continue, when something moved amidst the fungal garden. His breath caught in his mouth, and he aimed the gun in its direction, but suddenly, there was more movement from every direction, and he could not keep his aim focused on any one spot. He dropped back against the wall, knowing that he was soon to be surrounded.

They were all around him; eyeless, hairless things, smooth and pallid as a bone. Each stood no taller than a child. Soft breath whispered from their nose and mouth slits. Their long, conical heads cocked this way and that as they “stared” at him. Webs of branching, crimson veins and blood vessels were visible throughout their papery skin.

One of them stepped forward. A low, deep thrum vibrated in its throat.

Jack felt a quiver through the stones. His hands and feet went fuzzy from its sonor. A breathed deeply, the sound of it echoing in the deep as his muscles relaxed. He put away the

gun and dropped the match once it had burned down to a cinder, now relying upon the soft glow of the fungus for visibility.

The lead creature extended a tiny, four-clawed hand, and Jack accepted. Its palm had a strange bristliness that clung to his, and created a firm grip between them. It then led him down the tunnel with the others following.

Jack saw the cavern's glow before they even entered. Countless stones like larimar were encrusted in its walls, illuminating the chamber with their tranquil luster.

In the center of the far wall glowed a different sheen, however. Green light shined along the symbol of a triangle stemmed with a cross.

"Sulfur," Jack murmured.

He had no sulfur, though.

He had nothing-

Jack reached into his pockets, and produced the matchbox and a spare pistol cartridge. Wedging the round beneath two rocks, Jack struck it with a third. He then sprinkled a trail of gunpowder from the wall, and lit it with the match.

The flame raced over to the wall, and fizzled.

A moment later, the wall split open. A chamber lay within.

Wreathed in halos of golden-green, shined the Adamant. The metal sprang forth in fractaled faces from a natural plinth of stone. Not polished gold nor silver could compare to even the raw, unvarnished ore.

Jack froze before it, and could advance no further, so the creature left his hand, and ventured forth to grasp it. They gently plucked it from the stone, releasing whatever magnetic tension held it there, and offered it to him.

He cradled it in both hands and trembled from the weight of it; not from the mass of it, for it was weightless in his

palms, but at the enormity of what he held. It was strange how so small a thing held so much power.

The leader tugged at his sleeve, and pointed down a nearby tunnel. Jack nodded, and started down it, but gave one last look behind.

The creatures had flocked together and turned blankly towards him as if to watch him go. A curious sorrow came over him then, either in knowing that he would never see their like again or that perhaps these creatures never wanted to be found. Either way, he was remiss that he could not thank them for their kindness.

With that, he simply turned, and carried on his way.

At last, he was blinded by the pale light of dawn. For hours, he had stumbled through the darkness following the tunnel. Now, a narrow crack lay just ahead, and through it shined daylight, blessed and pure.

Jack held his breath, and shuffled his way between the narrow defile that led out into the valley. His broad frame made the passing difficult. At times, his chest pressed right into the other wall, and it seemed like he might be trapped there, stuck fast between the stone and left to die out in the cold. Yet, Jack always found a way to wedge himself through, and eventually spilled out onto the other side.

When his eyes readjusted to the light, he found that he was on the base of the hill, east of Verloren.

Snow was falling.

Jack trudged through its knee high drifts back towards the village. He passed beneath the woods to get there, where the snow was not as deep. He crossed the shallower places of where the group had trod the day before, the vague outline of their footprints not yet disappeared. He crossed the imprints

of jackboots as well, traveling parallel in loose skirmish order. He saw coagulated blood upon the snow.

He made it down to the barn. The doors had been left open, and tire treads led off towards the road. Jack breathed a sigh of relief. Someone had at least gotten away. He hoped that all of them had made it, but Inge most of all.

He then searched the barn for anything of use. His stomach ached with hunger, and the cold was stabbing at his fingers even through his gloves. His legs were soaked down to the bone. Warmth and food were his priorities.

An old rusty hatchet had been left hanging on the wall, which Jack took and used to break down the locked door of the farm house. He scoured the house for any food, starting in the kitchen and working his way down to the cellar. There was nothing in the cabinets upstairs, not even rats, but the cellar yielded some oats and beans in heavy sacks.

Jack brought them to the kitchen, where he began making camp. He used the broken pieces of the door as fuel for the woodstove and some old sticks by the barn as kindling. He got a fire going with the matches, then filled some pots he found with snow and set them on the stove.

Next, he went to one of the bedrooms. He had to beat the dust out of the old mattresses, pillows, and blankets, but they would otherwise make good bedding. He laid them on the ground beside the fire.

By then, the water in his pots was boiling, so he poured in the oats and beans. While they simmered, he went out to collect some rotted firewood from out by the barn to keep as a stockpile by the stove.

When the food was finally cooked, Jack ladled it all together in a bowl. Most of the house's kitchenware had

luckily been left behind, so he had no trouble finding the proper utensils.

What he did have trouble finding was salt. His porridge was a sad, bland slurry, which turned cold far too quickly. The beans were still somewhat hard and the oats were lumpy, but it was food, and after not having eaten in a full day, Jack was willing to stomach it.

Nature called soon after. The bathroom had no paper in it, nor did it have working plumbing, so Jack rummaged around until he happened on some dishrags. He shit out in the snow, and used the rag to wipe himself. It was hardly a dignified existence, but necessary given the circumstances. He washed his hands in the freezing snow before returning inside, and crawling under the covers by the fireside.

In the morning, the snow had stopped, and a clear blue sky shone above. Jack crawled achingly out from underneath the covers, fed the fire, and went outside to meet the day.

The snow lay in heaps around him, almost to waist height by his estimate. If this was the case, then the road back to Munich would be blocked off for God knew how long. Verloren was an isolated village, far from the highways. Jack had planned to walk there and hitch a ride to the city if possible, but now those plans were dashed. He would just have to survive here until the snow melted, however long that would take.

Jack trudged his way back to the barn to search for more supplies. A pair of fishing waders were hanging in the corner, which meant that a pond was somewhere nearby. They would also prove useful for getting through this accursed snow, so Jack strapped them on, grateful that their former owner had been near enough in size to him.

He then collected all the man's fishing gear and stored it in the house. Tomorrow, he would go looking for that pond. Today though, he had to find whatever supplies were nearest to him.

The scant daylight hours were spent searching the closest houses. Food was scarce. Plenty of canned goods had been left behind, but after decades of abandonment, Jack was wary of them. All he could produce in the end were a few bags of barley, lentils, and beans, some salt, and a jar of honey. That hardly amounted to a feast, but it was better than nothing at all, so at least Jack was able to add some flavor to his gruel that evening.

For non-edible items, he found some extra matches, candlesticks, and a large stash of grain alcohol tucked away in one cellar. The latter tasted worse than piss, so Jack confined its use for those bitter nights when the fire needed extra fueling.

Lean days followed after.

From then on, Jack's entire life revolved around food. For the first few days, he had braved the bitter cold to search each house for any scraps the residents had since left behind. Verloren was a small town however, and he quickly exhausted every building.

He had climbed the church steeple to locate the mystery pond, upon which, he discovered Werner's frozen corpse lying beneath the bell. The man's face had gone blue, and crystalline blood ran down his back.

Jack took his rifle, and promised to bury him soon if he could.

He then scanned the distance, and saw the pond perhaps a mile to the west. Perhaps it would be wiser to try hunting in the woods now that he had a suitable firearm.

The high caliber rifle seemed like overkill for small game, so he aimed for the head where the meat was thinnest. Even still, Jack left smoking craters in the rabbits and squirrel that he shot. They made more fitting meals than gruel, and drizzled in honey, their fat and meat tasted like a kingly banquet.

Gradually, the snow shrunk down somewhat, becoming hard and crunchy, and slightly more maneuverable. That was when Jack made his pilgrimage to the pond early in the morning. He brought the hatchet with him to hack a hole in the ice so that he could fish it. His ammunition was limited after all, and this seemed a more sustainable food source, and more plentiful as well. By day's end, Jack had accrued a string of half a dozen small catches for that evening's dining.

He kept on like this for quite some while, with days spent foraging, and nights spent fueling the stove. After dinner, he would stare at Godfrey's diary by the firelight, wondering if he would ever continue on this mission, or if it was even worth it.

Sanwar had to be dead. It seemed impossible that he and Hans could have done escaped when the VSG likely had blocked off the only exit to the mine. That meant that the VSG would have also found the *Aqua Permanens* on his body, and taken it back to Saxon. Jack may have had the Adamant, and he could maybe find the other two components, but they would be useless without the fourth.

And everything was useless without Sanwar anyway.

They were meant to finish this together. What would any of it matter without him?

Nights were always the hardest, because of this. In the daytime, Jack could busy himself with labor, but at night, there was no defense against the onslaught of his thoughts.

He kept on wondering where he had gone wrong in life, of what had he done to deserve this punishment. His entire being had ever been a string of failure and disaster. He had always been a reject and an outcast, even among his kin. He had killed men, and watched them die. He now had nothing to his name save a family heirloom that technically was stolen. He hardly even had a life of his own; no wife, no family, no children anymore. He was a homeless, friendless, hopeless wretch of a man, and had lost the only person who had ever made him feel otherwise.

Perhaps his father had been right all along.

He should have steeled himself to the world a long, long time ago.

Jack fell asleep in tears every night.

One morning, he decided to return to the mine.

He trudged the snowbound slope with a rope around his arm, the hatchet at his belt, and rusted pulley hook, all of which he had found in the barn.

He stopped outside the entrance, prodding the snow with Werner's rifle until he found Luzia. If Werner had been killed where they had left him, then Jack reckoned that Luzia might have been too. A stiff spot in the snow proved him right. He uncovered her blackened body, and promised that he would come back for her.

By candlelight, Jack ventured into the mine once more. The journey felt longer alone. Eventually though, he found his way back to the intersection, where he took the rightmost path, and followed it until he came upon the remnants of the struggle.

Gashes ran deep into the stone from bullet holes and fragmentation. Spent casings lay in heaps of brass upon the

floor beside mud dark stains of blood. No VSG bodies remained, but Jack found the ruin that was Hans behind a narrow defile.

The big man had been hewn down by many a blow; several stab wounds and shrapnel in the back. His body had gone pale and stiff. His eyes stared at the ceiling in an expression of pained surprise. He had deserved better than this. They all had.

Jack then paused.

No sign of Sanwar was to be found.

Jack then turned back to Hans, heaved his massive body into a mine cart, and pushed it along the tracks all the way back to the entrance. When finally he emerged into the outside world again, he wiped his sweat-stained brow, and hacked off the cartwheels with his hatchet. Next, he carried Luzia, who was significantly lighter, and loaded her into the cart as well.

Then, came the arduous task of getting them down the hillside. Even with hook and rope fastened to the cart's handle, every step of Jack's haul was marked with struggle. Each step of ground drew ragged breath as he slung the line over his shoulder and dragged.

Dusk had fallen by the time he reached the village. By then, he simply carried the bodies by hand into the barn's loft, Werner included. He had looted everything of use from the building, so he had no qualms piling the horrid bottles of grain alcohol into the lower level, and setting them ablaze. He saved one bottle to pour a fuse trail, and watched as the flame snaked towards the payload.

In seconds, the barn became a pyre.

Jack went over the church steeple to better see it burn. The raging scarlet pillar split the night. Its veil of sable

smoke blotted out the moon and stars. He uttered there a silent prayer for them to their God and all of his, and in the morning, he laid three stones for them beside the ash.

There came a day soon after that was warmer than usual. Jack awoke to the sound of icicles dripping against the window sill and brilliant golden sunlight streaming through. The snow was soft and only calf-deep when he stepped outside to test it, so he threw on his waders, and ran full speed towards the road.

Getting to the highway was a six mile slog that took him until just past noon to complete. Even though mushy snow labored every step, Jack pressed on, knowing that this might be his only chance to escape Verloren before spring.

Soaked in sweat, he stumbled out onto the highway, which had since been cleared, removed his coat, tied it around his waist, and used his watch to orient himself. Then, he started walking north.

Somewhere down the road, a kindly stranger saw him sticking out his thumb and stopped their car. By evening, he was back in Munich in the hustle and bustle of the city, as if he had never even left.

He arrived in town, looking, smelling, and feeling like shit. His first order of business was to get himself to *The Black Rose Tavern*, but quickly learned that people were quite repelled by an odorous vagrant interrogating them about the nearest pub. So, he changed his strategy to simply asking the quickest way to Marienplatz, to which he received a few more answers.

From there, he navigated his way back to the nearby *biergarten*, only to appear outside of a set of padlocked doors.

Jack paused before them, crestfallen.

“We are not serving, sorry,” said a familiar voice. “But I know where you can get a hot meal if you are after supper.”

Sie walked past him right then without notice, and began fiddling with a key in the lock.

“Sorry, sir, but we are closed-” they began to repeat.

However, when they turned to face him, they nearly dropped their cane.

“Jack...?”

“Back from the dead as usual.”

“But Inge said-”

“So Inge made it back!?”

“She and Otto, yes. Rosa is in the hospital-”

“Jesus.”

“Jack,” Sie said, straightening themselves a bit. “I think you should leave.”

“What?”

“Thank you for what you have done for us,” they said. “But three of our own are also dead because of your actions, almost four. It is better if the group no longer has any association with you. The others agree.”

“But...”

“Please go. Inge will be here soon to bring me her key. I do not think that you should speak to her.”

Silence hung between Sie and Jack for a good long while, before finally, he managed to speak.

“Very well then.”

He turned away, and just kept walking back the way he came. There had to be a sleazy pawnshop around here where he could sell the 1911 still at his hip. That might be cash enough to get him to Paris tonight, or at the very least, somewhere else.

He wanted nothing more to do with Munich.

As he went about his way, he noticed a tall, beautiful woman dressed in black coming towards. What otherwise might have been a dream turned nightmarish when he saw that it of course was Inge.

Jack ducked his head, hoping that she would pass. He breathed a sigh of relief when she did, until he heard her call his name.

“Jack?”

If he kept walking, he could continue and she might think that she had just mistaken some stranger for him, but would that not be crueler than speaking to her?

He turned.

“Inge?”

At once, her face was a contorted mix of sadness and joy, sorrow and confusion, and somehow still the loveliest thing that he had seen in weeks.

She ran to him, and they embraced.

Her body was so warm, her curls so soft, and her cheek was heaven pressed against his own.

“I thought that you were dead,” she said, wiping the tears away.

“I did too,” he said, wiping away his own.

“What happened?”

“There’s too much to explain,” he told her. “Inge, I have to go. I’m sorry, but I can’t stay here-”

“Where do you need to go?”

“Paris, but-”

“I will buy your ticket.”

“Inge-”

“I still have some money left from the gold you gave me.”

“Inge-”

“Wait here. I need to go give Sie the bar key back, but then we will go to the station. Please. Wait.”

“Alright.”

So, Inge ran off down the road, and Jack just waited for her.

He thought a few times about running off, but he waited.

She came back a minute later, and hurried him off to the station. The next train was coming in just three minutes, so she fumbled through her purse for the appropriate amount of cigarettes, traded them for the ticket, and thrust it into Jack’s hand.

They were at the platform right as it pulled down the tracks.

“Good luck, Jack,” she told him.

“Aye, thanks,” he mumbled.

She squeezed him tight, and ushered him aboard without another word.

He had wanted to desperately to kiss her then, but it felt wrong, so he had stopped himself. He simply watched through the window as she threw one last glance over her shoulder at him, before she turned and walked away.

Then, he sunk into his seat.

Within half an hour, the sky had gone completely dark, so all that Jack could see outside the window was the lonesome reflection of the train’s own lights. Hardly a scenic view, he abandoned his seat to find the bar cart.

Like the rest of the train, the place was largely deserted when he got there. An old man slept in the corner, half-blanketed by his newspaper. The barman yawned and asked Jack if he wanted anything, to which Jack almost replied before he realized that he had no money. The barman must

have taken pity on him, because he poured Jack a cup of tea for free. Jack tipped his glass to him in thanks, then retreated to some solitary corner.

The tea's warmth was welcome to his fingers. He had pocketed his gloves, but still had on his battered coat, since every car aboard the train somehow contained a wearisome draft.

Morag's grandmother used to make tea for him whenever there were cold nights like this back at Cairndow. A nice big cup would warm the soul, she said. He wondered if she were still alive, old Annie Laurie Holm. In his mind, she had always been an old woman, and he had not seen Scotland in eight long years.

Morag had been the one to warm his soul in those days, though. He had seen her playing sometimes in the village as a boy, or accompanied places by Annie Laurie. He had thought her to be the prettiest girl he had ever seen as a boy, but when the family returned to Cairndow from Smyrna, Jack then gazed upon a woman of eighteen, fully bloomed and lovely as a wildflower, now in the service of his father's house.

He was smitten with her and she with him, and from then on, he would sneak out of the estate any chance he could get and steal away to the village to find her.

For many seasons, their love had sprung eternal. They laughed and loved, walked hand in hand and spoke the Old Tongue together, and kept their secrets. They were each other's first true knowings of a man and a woman, and he would have had it with no other.

Their first autumn, he was sent away to the Darby Academy and became a cadet, but every summer he returned to her faithful, open arms. Their last summer, she told him she was carrying his child.

Then, the War had come.

The night before the call, his father had announced his pride in Jack, for his son was finally marching off on the grand adventure. Jack had cursed at him in Gaelic, to which his father had exploded in rage and shouted for him to never use that tongue within their house.

Jack had not spoken anything to him since.

The night before the call, Jack had asked Morag to marry him. Beneath a rowan tree, they swore their vows and gave their rings.

He promised to write her every chance he could. He promised to return.

He had kept the first until one rainy November evening, when he finally received her neat reply:

Jack,

I have received your many letters, but am only now choosing to answer them with this: Do not write to me again. Through you, I have borne the responsibility of a daughter, but she will never know the truth about her father. It is better this way. Our marriage was a foolish notion wrought from youth, not sensibility. Your parents have assured my employment elsewhere. Please do not seek me out, should you return.

Good-bye, Jack.

-Morag

He had put the gun against his head then, all the while laughing and singing a half-forgotten song...

*Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag,
And smile, smile, smile!
While you've a lucifer to light your fag,
Smile boys, that's the style!
What's the use of worrying?
It never was worthwhile!
Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag,
And smile, smile, smile...*

He then had pulled the trigger of an empty gun.

So, to do the job right proper, he had leapt straight over the top into No Man's Land, and had the greatest friend he had ever known crash right into him and save his wretched life.

For days on end, they had lived out in a miserable crater together, and learned of each other's affinity for the Stone. The quest had truly then begun. Soon enough, it would be over. Funny, Jack had never expected it to end like this.

He strangely found himself remembering the time that he and Saxon had nearly been expelled from Darby for fighting.

Really, Saxon and about six toadies had surrounded him in the library to get at his book. Jack had received a good many punches that day, but had given a good many more to each and every one of them.

The Headmaster had cared little for the arguments of self-defense, and offered his own lecture to Jack instead.

"You've got top marks in every discipline, MacGregor," he had labored on at him. "Especially history and chemistry. And yet here you are, throwing it all away. You don't seem to understand the social element of your education. To be frank, you're a pisspoor leader, pardon my French, and nobody likes you. You're exactly like your father at this age

in every way, except that the other cadets followed him. They followed him because he acted with purpose. But you? I can't tell why you're even here. To tarnish your family name? I ought to expel you for this altercation, but maybe that's giving you exactly what you want. No, I think the more fitting punishment would be to keep you, MacGregor. Maybe then you'll learn that you can't just shirk your duties because you're feeling lousy. Soldiering is meant to be lousy. That's what makes you into men. Now. They say there'll be a war soon. Good luck trying to get yourself out of that one. Right. Dismissed. Get out of my sight."

So he did, and met Saxon waiting by the door with that typical shiteating grin upon his face.

"So did they expel you, old boy?"

"No, but I hope they did you."

Saxon kept on grinning. Jack wanted to punch him all over again.

"My father wouldn't allow it," the young lord said. "But it wouldn't matter if they did. I won't be an officer in Britannia's Army anyway, I'll be too busy running the company and selling you lot weapons. I'll really be the one who wins our wars then, won't I?"

"Aye. You wouldn't last a second on the field anyway."

"Will you?"

"I'll die when I damn well feel like it, not when someone else decides."

Saxon clicked his tongue, and frowned.

"Why this animosity between us, MacGregor? I only ever wanted for us to be mates. What is it you want, eh? You want more books? You want me to buy you a girl? Just tell me, Jack, and let's puts this silly business behind us. How about it?"

He offered his hand.

“No.”

“No?”

“Aye. ‘No’.”

“You really are mad then, aren’t you? A man offers you anything you could ever ask for, and you’d turn him down?”

“No. I’d just turn you down.”

Jack had not looked back, but he imagined that Saxon had been seething as he walked away.

In the end though, it was Saxon who had gotten the final word however, for within the year, Saxon’s father had died of cancer, and he assumed all his wealth and titles, while Jack was sitting in a trench in Flanders killing men with Saxon rifles and Saxon bullets as Saxon planes and Saxon tanks killed many more. In the place of great green Highland mountains and meadows of blooming purple heather, Jack had dwelt in mud and blood and craters and ash, wondering if he would ever see his home again, or if he ever had one.

Jack awoke to the sight of the ticket collector looking down at him. The train was empty, save for them.

“Excuse me, sir?” The man asked him.

“Yes?”

“We have arrived.”

“We have? When?”

The train was still. Out the window, lay the station.

“Five minutes ago. Welcome to Paris.”

XII

When Year End Comes

“Place it here amongst the others,” the Baron bade him, and Berg obeyed.

Reaching forth, he set the long, curved sword upon the stand, and the matching dagger right beside it. Both weapons were things of beauty, sheathed in scabbards of silver and blackwood. Their blades were wrought of rippled steel. When he had stroked the sword clean of blood, Berg could feel its magic pulsing through his arm. He could sense that this great blade had drunk the lives of countless men across the centuries, and as he placed it on the ebon stand and laid the glass encasing over top it, he knew its true power to be Atlantean.

The von Dreckland menagerie had now added its latest trophy thanks to him. The Indian sword and dagger fit handsomely amidst the other ancient artifacts, though its beauty was lost among their magnitude. Thousands of like displays amounted to what must have been an entire wing of the Castle, albeit one hidden deep beneath its walls.

The Baron had led him here through a hidden passage beneath the Baron’s own bedchamber. The room had once been the castle’s chapel, and had a secret doorway in its apse. A long spiral staircase had led them down here to this great chamber filled with treasures. In centuries past, this place had been a catacomb with a sally port to escape the mountain in case of a successful siege. However, Berg imagined that an invading army had not threatened Bodenburg directly for several hundred years.

A visit to the menagerie had been the Baron's second order of business once he was well enough to leave the infirmary. The first had been to mount a search for his missing hounds, which had seemingly vanished one night without a trace. The servants had searched the entire castle, top to bottom, while the VSG had searched the forest. Neither had yielded any results. Berg had no answers for where the dogs had gone, though he certainly had his suspicions as to who had been responsible, even if he could not prove it.

Naturally, the Baron's mood had been low as Berg had helped him down the many flights of stairs, but had lifted slightly now that they were here.

"Only blood and the honored few have seen this place," Von Dreckland told him. "But the honor is all mine, Heiman. You have brought another to my family collection by strength of arms and spirit. This shall be your legacy in our restoration of the civilizations of Thule."

Berg had to admit, the menagerie was something to behold. The riches of Greece and Rome, Britannia and Medieval Germany, the Occident and the East, were all enshrined in glass along with gems and jewels of every shape and luster. Jars of twisted creatures, half-beast half-man, were there too, and strange vials of liquids that Berg could not discern. Nearly half a millennia's worth of knowledge was housed here, and it did him proud to think that he had added to it in some way. Perhaps one day, when the glorious *Reich* began and the *Lebensraum* belonged to its true people once again, this chamber could become a museum and these great artifacts could be shown for all pure Aryans to see and know their heritage. What he would give to see a day when a pure and unpolluted land was filled with a pure and unpolluted people!

That at least would have made his men's sacrifices worthwhile.

Berg bowed low, or rather, as low as a man of his stature could. Clearly, the Baron had bestowed this honor as an apology after Berg's outburst the day before. The man might not have been a fighter, but at least he respected Berg's abilities. To Saxon and Rothstein, the Major was just another grunt, but not so with von Dreckland.

"The Indian was a fearsome foe," Berg managed to say after some thought. As much von Dreckland liked him, the two were not well suited for conversations alone. Berg would much prefer to be with Hauptmann, but the formalities of the occasion were not lost on him. "The sword was hard won. It does me great honor to present it now to you."

"Do you think that he is Aryan?" The Baron asked. "He has such strong Nordic features. His blood line is Indic after all. His Root Race coincides with ours."

"Perhaps he might be."

All Berg knew was that his men were wroth to kill the Indian. No one slew nine VSG, and lived to tell the tale. Berg could order them all he wanted to wait until after the Indian had served his and Von Dreckland's purposes, but knew their thirst for blood was stronger.

Tonight would stoke that thirst even greater. The ritual would awaken their darkest depths, and arouse an inner vengeance yet unknown to them. Such was his intent. Saxon and the Baron may have thought this battle over, but it was nowhere near completion. So long as Jews and Communists still ran the Empire, then there would always be enemies to vanquish. Yet now, Berg had fewer men with which to fight. He could perhaps find more, but those who had marched

with him into the Russian Steppe and back again could never be replaced.

“The hour grows late,” Von Dreckland said after too long a pause. “It is almost time. Shall we away?”

“Yes.”

Dark was fast approaching when they exited the menagerie. Streaks of waning bluish light shined through the Baron’s bedroom window, the harbingers of the short and dismal winter days. The south tower was just outside the door, so Berg swiftly returned to his quarters to prepare, while von Dreckland gathered the entire household and brought them outside.

Two dozen birchwood pyres had been arrayed around Bodenburg’s inner ward in the zigzag pattern of the Sowilo Rune. One of the dead was laid on each of them, fully clad in helm and uniform, a sword and rifle resting on his breast. Golden coins were placed upon their eyes and runes upon their bodies, drawn in goat’s blood. These inscriptions would tell their stories to those forefathers whom awaited them in Valhöll.

The Baron and Baroness stood to one side with Saxon, the servants, and all the others as Berg and the VSG stepped out the main door into the cold.

Snow fell and a raw wind howled, yet their sole raiment was wolfshead cloaks and runic tattoos inked in the same blood as their brethren. Each man bore torches as he stepped barefoot out onto the snow, save for the three drummers leading their procession. Berg helmed the line however, an albino pelt running down his enormous back. The ice stung at his skin, but he ignored it, and took his place at the head of the rune. When the others had assumed theirs as well, he raised his flaming brand, then brought it down upon the pyre.

The others did the same.

Wreaths of flame split the night as the rune-shape became ablaze. Billows of smoke blotted out the sky. Embers and ash rose to join the swirl of falling snow. The cold vanished in a sudden blaze of heat.

Berg and the others tossed their brands into the pyres. Smoke choked at them and stung their eyes, but the fire warmed their hides, and with its life force searing through their veins, they came together. The drummers beat their rabble as all of them formed a ring. The rhythm started soft and slow, then grew louder, stronger, faster with every beat. As it did, the pack swayed their bodies, shook their heads, and howled at the flames, and when the moment struck them, danced. Each wolf among them leapt from foot to foot, arms writhing, heads knocked back in rage, manhoods flopping in the freezing wind. They were of one body. They were of one blood. They were of one mind, one soul. They were heavensent and purified by fire.

The rhythm was driving, frantic now. Berg let it consume him. The thrum of it became his heartbeat. His brothers, both alive and dead were part of him. He felt the strength and power of his ancestors coursing in his blood. Their spirits reaching up from the very earth to him, twining through both frost and flesh to fill his body with mighty vengeance. He tossed his head from to and fro, the drumbeats pounding inside his very soul.

He let forth a primal, wrenching howl. Into it, he emptied all his malice and his anguish; a wordless vow that he would extinguish those who had killed these parts of him.

The others joined him. The drumming stopped, and so did the dancing. The entire pack tossed back their heads to howl at the moonless sky.

One note rang out through the snowy winter's night, a single voice of howling, raging, hungry wolves.

Sunday, December 31st, 1922
Paris, France

“No trains until Tuesday, *monsieur*. Many apologies.”

“Bloody New Year's,” Jack quietly grumbled to himself in English before he turned back to thank the information clerk.

With no means of getting to Amiens for two whole days, he might as well start scrounging, so he walked out of Gare du Nord and into the bitter cold. He checked his timepiece. It was eight in the morning and still dark out. He asked the nearest person which way it was to the Seine, and headed off that way, down the hedge of glowing streetlamps that lined the snowy city rues. Light shined in the windows of the *cafés* and *boulangeries*, but Jack had no money for the enticements of bread or coffee.

He had a half a mind to sell the watch before his gun. His desperate thoughts toyed with the idea of robbing someone, before he brushed them aside as foolish notions. The gun would certainly yield him greater profits, and yet he was loathe to part with it. Everyone he knew now thought him dead, but still he could not shake the fear that someone was searching for him. So, he kept the pistol close, hidden underneath his coat.

Unfortunately, no pawnshops were open with the holiday. Nothing was open, save for the eateries, which Jack could not afford. He wandered about looking for something open until around noon, then staggered down to the river with a growling stomach, found a bridge, and leaned upon the rails.

Below him flowed the icy Seine. He contemplated hurtling himself over the edge into those frigid waters, although the thought of its cold was more repellent than that of suicide. It would be a painful, lonely way to die, but then again, his life had been that too.

He could just shoot himself, and let his body fall into the river as if he had never been. The streets were empty after all. Nobody would stop him. Nobody was out. They were all at home with family and friends, sitting beside warm fires, sharing laughter, and good cheer while he was all alone. It struck him then that he had missed Christmas as well, and that only made him feel all the worse.

Usually on holidays, he and Sanwar would find the nicest meal in town somewhere and celebrate together. They rarely gave each other gifts. They could only carry so much, after all. The gift was peace and friendship. Living with nothing, that had felt like enough.

Jack let out a bitter laugh.

Nothing. That was to what all that this, all that he, had amounted.

So why was he still hanging on?

His stomach rumbled again. He kept walking.

He stumbled on for a time following the river, until he came upon a curious sight. Across the street, a line had formed outside the open doors of some fancy restaurant, and ran all the way down to the corner. Men stood there in groups or with their wives and families as a doorman checked them in under the red velvet awning, and ushered them inside.

Jack crossed the street, and approached a board outside, which read in English and French:

Lucille's New Year's Party- Free for all veterans and their families.

Naturally, Jack fell in.

As he traveled down the line, he caught men speaking English as much as French, and even some German too. There were British voices, Americans, Canadians, and the odd Australian. He waited in line with them, never speaking, only listening as they laughed amongst themselves and swapped old stories. He wanted to join in with them, but could not think of what he would say. He simply wondered if he even belonged here.

The sky was darkening again by the time he made it to the front. The burly doorman gave him an incredulous glance, and Jack remembered how shabby he must look and smell, not having changed his clothes in weeks.

“I need to see your dog tags.”

The doorman's accent was French, and yet he addressed him in English.

“Dog tags?” Jack replied in indignant French.

“That or a service record,” the doorman carried on in French. “I need some proof of service.”

“You didn't ask anyone else.”

“I can ask whomever I want.”

“Well, you're asking Captain Jack MacGregor, Fourth Company, First Battalion of the Blackwatch. How's that then?”

“A captain, is it? What's your real name?”

“Charles Edward Stewart. Now if you please...”

“Not so fast, *Monsieur* Stewart. Either provide some proof of your commission or clear off-”

“Is this proof enough for you?”

Jack pulled back his coat to reveal the handle of his sword, and instantly realized his mistake.

Instead of seeing a badge of rank, the doorman bristled instantly at the sight of a deadly weapon.

“Back off. I’m calling the police.”

“No! I-”

Yet, as Jack advanced, the man only assumed a more threatening posture.

“I said stay back!” He shouted, raising his fists.

“What seems to be the problem here, Marcel?”

A calm, familiar voice interjected. Jack almost did not recognize it at first, as it was filtered through the French cadence. However, the speaker’s native Scottish accent could still be made out underneath.

A man had stepped out of the restaurant. Only his profile was visible at first, until he turned to Jack, and showed that a prosthetic covered half his face. One eye scanned him while the other remained frozen in place.

Jack stood in shock, not from the mask, but from recognition.

“This one was causing some trouble, monsieur,” the doorman said, but the other man ignored him, for he too was shocked.

Finally, he spoke.

“Sir?”

“Danny?”

“You know this man, *Monsieur McCrae*?” The doorman asked.

“Marcel, this man used to be my commanding officer. We must find a seat for him once.”

“Really?”

“Yes. This is Captain Jack MacGregor. We owe him every honor.”

Marcel composed himself, and offered Jack his hand.

“A thousand apologies, *monsieur*,” he said. “We’ve had some trouble with stolen valor in the past.”

Jack shook absently. His eyes had not left Danny the whole time.

“Come inside, sir,” said Danny, gesturing towards a set of stairs beyond the doors. “There’s hot food and good company waiting for you.”

Jack could not help but smile.

“How many times have I told, Danny, not to call me ‘sir’?”

The charcoal ground into a dull gray powder as Sanwar twisted the pestle. He kept his eyes down at the task, painfully self-conscious of the bright red eyes upon him all the while. Rothstein’s guardian never blinked nor moved; they only watched.

The Doctor himself was across the conservatory, framed by the creeping vines that dangled from the ceiling. The small, spectacled man tinkered with an alembic on his desk there. Inside its retort, the azure tint of the *Aqua Permanens* simmered over an open flame. Steam collected on the roof of the glass and dripped down the long neck into a beaker, though the liquid never boiled nor simmered. Several potions were boiling on various flames throughout the laboratory, one of them congealing into a radiant white substance in a large mixing flask near the open window, but the *Aqua Permanens* had by far been calcinating there the longest.

The Doctor frowned and scribbled something in his notes, then turned off the flame, and returned all the *Aqua Permanens* back to its original vial.

For weeks, they had been at it like this. Sanwar watched and provided samples while the doctor toiled away with the solution in vain attempts to deduce its composition. While Saxon, the Baron, and the others had spent the days before and after Christmas hunting and feasting, the Doctor had locked himself and Sanwar into the greenhouse to toil away at solving this supposed mystery.

“No result again,” he announced to nobody really but himself. “If it were aqueous, the water should have distilled out. Yet, no matter how high I raise the temperature...nothing! It steams at forty Celsius, but reacts no further. By God, it won’t even boil over propane.”

“By God,” Rebis parroted no louder than a whisper.

Sanwar cocked his head. They rarely spoke, so it was always an occasion when they did. Sanwar was about to remark on it when Rothstein marched over with his small, watery eyes peering at him in disdain.

“Make yourself useful,” he demanded. “Offer me a hypothesis. The *Aqua Permanens* will not distill into separate compounds even under intense heat. It must then contain strong bonds. How do you propose we dissociate them? Show me that you understand the Art. Posit your idea.”

The Doctor leaned in closer, eyes narrowing.

“Perhaps the substance is elemental and not a compound,” Sanwar replied hastily. He was certain that the answer was incorrect, but he still needed to say something. Who knew what Rothstein would do if he had not?

At the very least, Sanwar had extricated the man’s fiendish aura from his personal space.

“That does make sense,” the Doctor mused, and pulled away. “Paracelsus did describe the substances as ‘elemental’, but I did not suspect him of being so literal.”

“Paracelsus?”

“Oh yes,” the Doctor grinned most unpleasantly. “Come with me. And bring that charcoal with you.”

Sanwar followed him over to the desk, mortar still in hand. An old leather tome lay on a stand there, its fringes placed against the windows so that it could soak in every ounce of sunlight. He thought this a foolhardy practice as it would damage the pages, but he realized the intention upon closer inspection.

Sections of the illuminated manuscript were swathed in red pigments, made from ground realgar, which would yellow in the dayglow. Conversely, the reds had also been inked in cinnabar, which would darken under like conditions. Normally, the paint would appear as a uniform color, but now a hidden text emerged within the images of roses and noblemen that adorned the page.

There were Hebrew letters.

“*Codex Rosae Occultae*,” Rothstein said, still grinning. “The summation of all Paracelsus’ work. All the knowledge that he had acquired on his worldly travels. It was rumored that he left secrets in the roses.”

“You appear to have confirmed as much,” Sanwar replied. “Although I confess, I never have heard of such a tome in spite of Paracelsus’ fame.”

“Of course not. There was a reason that it was his last.”

Sanwar regarded the Doctor and his book more warily.

The little man laid a hand upon the pages.

“Finally, the next set is ready,” he said, and mumbled as he scribbled in his notes. “Forty-nine, fifty-three, forty-two; two, eighteen, eight. Rebis!”

The red-eyed being appeared at once.

The Doctor showed the numbers he had written.

“Go. Find it. Take a motorcycle from the garage.”

Rebis nodded, and turned to leave.

They would have left the room immediately, had they not stopped to offer Sanwar one last curious, lingering glance. Then, they shut the door.

Sanwar could only watch them go. He had seen their like before, but there was a queer intelligence to this Rebis that the other animates lacked. Something quickened behind those scarlet orbs every time they looked at him. He could not tell only what Rebis was thinking, only that they were, and deeply.

“Give me the charcoal,” Rothstein ordered.

Sanwar’s attention returned to the Doctor. He placed the mortar on the desk, which Rothstein then poured into a small pouch and weighed on a scale. He emptied portions from the pouch until it measured one hundred grams, then poured that amount into a mixing flask. Finally, he took the *Aqua Permanens* again, and held its vial over the open flask.

“Let us test one element with another, if this liquid is indeed an element,” the Doctor said before he did the honors.

He poured a single drop into the flask.

Had Sanwar been holding the glassware, he would have dropped and shattered it just then.

Blue diamond shone where powdered charcoal had laid before. The Doctor raised the vessel to the light, and peered at it with childlike wonder. Sanwar could hardly stop himself from doing the same. Carefully, the doctor placed the flask down onto a stand.

“Now that is interesting,” he said. “No new substance was synthesized. I suspect you may be correct in your assertions that this indeed elemental, Mister Dhamija. Perhaps even an

undiscovered element. Of course, your dolichocephalic skull surely explains your higher degree of intellect. I suspect that there is Caucasoid expression in your genetics.”

“Mutual, I am sure,” Sanwar remarked.

Rothstein ignored the comment, and continued.

“A number of my prototypes have lacked this level of chemical cohesion. This may be the component necessary for stability. I have previously been able to transmute elements, but never permanently.”

“Transmute?”

“Oh yes,” the Doctor grinned. “Lead into gold was my first experiment.”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

“You mean to say that you have achieved nuclear fission?”

“And fusion. But as I said, to temporary results.”

“What of Rebis then?” Asked Sanwar. “How have you created life?”

“A facsimile of it,” Rothstein corrected. “Nothing more. Living tissue must first exist for me to transmute it. Still, I can synthesize something that resembles life. That proves...more favorably.”

A wave of dread nauseated Sanwar.

“Transmuting...living tissue?”

Rothstein shrugged.

“The cost of progress,” he said.

“That is not for you to decide.”

“Who then? A man in the sky?” Rothstein laughed. “Your race still holds onto superstitious views, which is why you have not fully attained a modern level of progress. You hold dear to archaic models of morality. Only strength furthers humanity. Strong men with the courage to perform the necessary actions for our advancement.”

“Why even study the Art then, if you denigrate mysticism?”

“Because Sikhs, Alchemists, Christians, all of them had ideas that may lead me to the truth. Corrupted as those ideas may be, they originated from past ideas, back when civilization was pure. When knowledge was vaster, and greater than even now. We have lost our way as a people and a species, and so we must find it again.”

He lifted the *Aqua Permanens* before Sanwar.

“The ancients had achieved technological perfection,” he said finally. “The Philosopher’s Stone was the zenith of the Hyperboreans. We live ever in their shadow until we can rekindle that lost flame. Until we can reclaim the truth that Bolshevism would obscure.”

“You are positively mad, Rothstein.”

“A common criticism of genius by the envious.”

“I envy nothing of yours.”

“Careful, Dhamija.”

A heavy hand rapped on the door.

Taggart did not even wait to see himself in. The man was swaying slightly in his customary tan suit, and had a customary glass in hand.

“Aye, you lot,” he slurred. “It’s time to get ready for this party, so go on then, get on with it.”

He saw himself out just as quickly.

Rothstein turned to Sanwar.

“Go on, then. The Baron requires your appearance this evening.”

“I have nothing presentable to wear,” said Sanwar.

“Not to worry. I have a suit picked out with your precise measurements.”

Jazz was playing. Jack had never heard the music except on the odd record, and that was no comparison. A quintet hummed out merry notes on their instruments as Danny led him up the stairs and into the lounge room. Each bandmate wore white shirts, red dinner jackets with gold chevrons on the sleeves, and black lapels. Jack noticed poppies pinned on them and on every man seated at the lamplit tables around the room. A bewitching energy was on the air as the bandmen cast their musical incantations from the stage, for Jack had never seen a livelier crowd before. If the band had the melody, then laughter was the chorus. Hundreds of smiling faces shared jokes or stories or joyous drinks. Whatever their nation or language, it did not matter. Every man among them knew the treasures that he held here in present company.

“How about a drink, sir?” Danny offered.

“Only if you’ll share one with me.”

“Gladly. And you can come and meet the Misses!”

“The Misses?”

He was hoping for an explanation, but Danny was already walking over to the bar. Jack followed him over, and took a seat while Danny swung around behind, and pulled a bottle from underneath the counter.

“How’s about a wee dram of Glenmorangie?”

“Nothing would suit me better.”

Already, the cold was melting off of Jack, and a soothing glass of Scotch would see him the rest of the way.

Danny poured three glasses, then put away the bottle, and pulled a nearby barmaid close. The little lady squealed with joy as Danny planted a kiss right on her.

“Sir, this lovely little she-devil is my wife, Lucille,” he said. “Luce, allow me to introduce my old commanding officer, Captain MacGregor.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Lucille said in unsure English, taking Jack’s hand. She was quite a sweet-faced woman, kind-eyed, and of a gentle way, just like Danny.

“*Enchanté madame*,” Jack returned in French. “And will everyone please stop calling me ‘sir’ around here? It’s Jack.”

“Jack,” Lucille corrected with a smile, and switched immediately back to French. “I am honored to meet the man who saved my husband’s life.”

“Me!?”

“Of course!”

“You don’t remember, Jack?” Asked Danny quizzically.

Jack shook his head.

“I would have died out there in No Man’s Land if not for you,” he said. “Bloody bullet tore half my face off, but you wouldn’t leave me behind. He carried me all the way back to the trenches while the company retreated, Luce. All the while, bullets flying. Smoke all over. Loads of screaming. Most men would have left me, but we didn’t call him ‘Mad Jack MacGregor’ for nothing. Nobody in our battalion had more respect than him.”

“But I thought the men didn’t like me.”

“No, sir. Everybody loved you. But they were also scared to bloody death of you. We all thought you were out of your God damned mind, but nobody could say you didn’t have the biggest pair of bollocks in the bloody army.”

“But Danny...my attack failed. I almost got you killed. Your face-”

Danny shrugged.

“I can live without a face, but not without Lucille.”

Lucille blushed at that.

“I’ve got a second chance at life, sir, thanks to you,” he said. “Besides, I met this bonnie little nurse while I was convalescing. Turns out her folks owned this place right here in Paris. And six years later? Look what I’ve got! A home. A job. A beautiful wife. And the rest of my life to share with her. What else could a man ask for?”

“Maybe a drink with an old friend.”

“Aye, I can do that. Shall we?”

“A toast,” Lucille said. “To old friends and new ones.

Salut!”

“*Slàinte mhabh!*” Jack cheered.

They clinked glasses together, and drank.

“So what brings you to town, Jack?” Lucille asked once they were emptied. “We’ve held this event every year for the past three years. Men travel from all over, but we’ve never seen you here before.”

Jack thought he might tell all right then and there about how miserable his life had been, about how miserable it was at present, about everything; but Danny and Lucille had been too kind, and so he could not bring himself to do it. So, he fibbed instead.

“I’ve been traveling,” he said. “A bit roughly, but I’ve been going back to visit the old battle sites. Lay some memories to rest, you know? I was on my way to Amiens actually when I ran into your sign.”

“A happy coincidence then,” said Danny.

“But the trains are closed for a few days,” Lucille said.

“Where are you staying in town?”

“Uh...I hadn’t found a place as of yet...” Jack fumbled for an answer. “I’ve only just arrived you see. Plans changed. I was on my way to find somewhere...”

“Well, you can stay with us.”

“Wait? Really? No, I couldn’t. I don’t want to be an imposition-”

“No imposition. Danny and I would love to have you.”

Danny nodded in agreement.

“Then, it’s decided,” said Lucille, and that was that.

Von Dreckland tugged the white jacket over his protruding gut. Finally, he breathed a sigh of relief, which then turned to one of exasperation when he looked in the mirror.

He was grotesquely fat, and this uniform only made him appear more so. The scarlet sash was strained across his chest, the golden piping highlighted his width, and the brass buttons looked like they were about to pop right off the fabric. It was a handsome coat, and a shame that he was far too ugly to wear it. He would have torn it off right then, if it were not so beautiful a thing, and the if the guests were not already waiting for him downstairs.

“You look good, Willi,” Zofia assured him.

His valet agreed, and recommended him a pair of gilt and ivory cufflinks to complete the outfit. Begrudgingly, von Dreckland accepted them, and escorted Zofia to the Great Hall.

She was absolutely ravishing in her cyan silk dress fringed with white mink’s fur. The light blues really were her color. They complimented her blushed cheeks and red-hair quite wonderfully. She was too beautiful for a man like him, and he felt a fraud upon entering the Hall. Thankfully, he had already downed a couple of sherries to help himself along.

“May I present, *Baron Wilhelm Arnolf Helmuth von Dreckland III* and *Frau Zofia Antonia Vasilova*,” Zimmer

announced as they stepped out onto the dais. Uproarious applause then followed from the crowd.

He waved to them. They were in a proper hall now, with proper lights from chandeliers, proper tables covered in cloths, and proper food to go atop them. Hundreds were in attendance, as was a full orchestra, though he found Berg easily enough. Von Dreckland planned on making his retreat to him after the speech, as the other Thulians would likely be around him.

But first of course, came the speech.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party and the most esteemed Thule Society,” he began after clearing his throat. “Thank you for joining me this evening to celebrate the New Year! And what an auspicious year it shall be! I foresee great changes in Germany and Austria. A revolution is at hand! A National Socialist Revolution. But as we approach next year, let us not forget the events of this year past, and the years before. Let us not forget our fallen Society members, executed by communist cowards for speaking the truth. Let us not forget the grievous insult done to us in the streets Munich just two weeks past. We have avenged those wounds with deaths. But we must also do more than avenge. Let us make good the future, so that the sacrifices of the past were not in vain. Let us cultivate a community of righteous Aryans who respect the land, and wish to preserve its natural beauty. For it is that beauty that has borne us this feast tonight. So, drink. Enjoy yourselves. But remember why we are here. To give our gold as well as our blood to those rare brave men who are saving our countries every day. Collections will be coming around throughout the evening. Every *krone* goes towards funding

the efforts of those who will defend our values. I trust you'll make generous donations to their campaigns. Thank you!"

He was met with further thunderous applause.

As he descended the dais with his wife in hand, von Dreckland nodded to his butler, who returned the gesture. Seeing him gave the Baron a bit of confidence. Zimmer had been in his family's service since his grandfather, and certainly knew how to ease the tension of a room by now.

The Baron made his way through the crowd, shaking hands briskly, and only saying the bare minimum to each clamoring supporter in order to escape their onslaught. He found Dietrich Eckhardt waiting at the end of the line with an outstretched hand, and a broad smile on his round face.

"Excellent speech, Willi. Not quite Hitler's bombast, but memorable."

"Will *Herr* Hiter be joining us this evening?" Von Dreckland inquired.

"I am afraid that he grows far too busy these days, my lord," Eckart told him. "Which is a good thing! It means that we are progressing. There are grand designs are at work. He has big plans for next year."

"You have his ear, Dietrich. You must convince him to attend a Society meeting. He owes it to his most ardent supporters."

"I will try again, my lord."

They headed immediately to the buffet table where Berg was waiting for them. Von Dreckland was particularly proud of this evening's spread. He had shot a white hart on Christmas, and now its roast red meat lay in thick, beautiful slices on silver platters ringed with black caviar. The centerpiece was by far more beautiful however; a stuffed

peacock mounted on a bed of laurels, garnished with lemons carved into the shape of roses.

Von Dreckland would have been overcome with pride at the sight of it, were the worries of his missing hounds not at the back of his mind. Garmr, Geri, and Freki should have been with him on that hunt and here with him tonight in this proud moment. He could not imagine what had happened to them, why they had fled, or why someone had taken them. In any case, he had no evidence of anything. His boys had simply vanished.

The Baron pushed those thoughts out of mind however, remembering that he had guests to receive.

Berg was helping himself to a heaping portion of everything.

“Good speech,” he said as they approached him. “Short.”

“Amusing that the tallest man should like the shortest speeches,” Eckart laughed. “Not in Hitler’s typical style. He has much to say, so I’ve worked with him on how to keep them riveted every second of it.”

“Action speaks louder than words,” Berg put flatly. “I much rather like Hitler’s approach in that regards. His SA do good work in the streets.”

“The Stone will do all the talking soon enough,” von Dreckland said. He took some a glass of wine off a passing waiter for both Zofia and himself. “With that power in the right man’s hand, anything is possible.”

“And Hitler is the perfect man,” Eckart said, finding a glass of his own to clink against the Baron’s. “The Society has found its promised messiah. But tell me...has Rothstein returned? I mean, the man was robbing graves for God’s sake...among other ‘activities’...”

“We need him for now,” von Dreckland said. “He is close to finishing his work. Then, we can deal with him as necessary. And, unlike some other members, the Doctor actually believes in the Occult. If there is one thing I cannot stand, it is a bandwagoner.”

“They have other necessary attributes,” Eckart deflected. “Like money. Connections. I’m just unsure if bringing Rothstein back into the fold will cause any of those things to disappear-”

“Baron von Dreckland, what an excellent speech,” Doctor Rothstein said, appearing from the crowd.

Saxon and Taggart were with him.

Von Dreckland finished his glass, then found another.

“Kind of you to say, *Herr Doktor*,” he replied, then switched to English. “My Lord Saxon. Your presence here is well appreciated by German High Society. The Party is glad to see some international support.”

“The pleasure is entirely mine,” was Saxon’s curt response.

“And allow me to introduce Dietrich Eckart. Founding member of the Nazi. Party and editor-in-chief of the *Völkischer Beobachter*.”

Eckart and Saxon shook hands.

That was the first of many introductions. Lehmann, Rosenberg, Feder, Frank, Harrer, and Hess were each shown to Lord Saxon in turn. Many commented on Saxon’s prominent Aryan features, which did von Dreckland proud, for he glad to even have associated with such a man of stature.

As the men stood round, another waiter came to offer them all samplings from the buffet; poached quail eggs, caviar, Danube sturgeon, shrimp cocktails, and a selection of cheeses.

“Tell me, have you studied in the Occult, Lord Saxon?” Eckart asked.

“I leave such matters to the good Doctor’s expertise,” he replied.

“I would think that you would know more of Ariosophy,” said another. “Of the origins of your craft.”

“Alchemy derives from Atlantean science after all,” the Baron explained, and finished his glass. “Much of the knowledge was lost with the Island, but has been rediscovered those places where it resurfaced in the Orient. With the Art, we can reconstruct that glory as it was for our ancestors.”

“*Ultima Thulia*,” the Society said together.

“Of course, the Atlanteans derived themselves from the Hyperboreans, as you may know,” Berg added. “A race of giants from the frozen northlands. Their magic has been lost to us, but can be restored through the proper breeding of their Aryan descendants. We owe our namesake, ‘Thule’, to our ancient homeland. The lost continent of Thule.”

“Exactly,” von Dreckland found it increasingly difficult to speak in English, but had to try in order for Saxon to understand. “And these secrets of magic were obscured from us by the lowest of all root races. The Semitic race. Something you need to know, my dear Saxon, is that if you allow the Jews to propagate, then ultimately society will be poisoned from within by the filth of Socialism, Communism, miscegenation, homosexuality—”

“Lord Saxon cares little for ideology, I am sure,” Berg interjected.

“The White race deserves its position in the world,” Saxon answered. He sipped his whiskey slowly. “Though I’m a little

less keen on the... 'particulars' as it were. Some may call it 'Social Darwinism', I simply call it, 'business'."

"All the same," Von Dreckland carried on. "It would be well within your business interests to support the Society. A new future for the Nordic race is upon us, and that includes the English. Through strength of arms, it will return to its Aryan roots once again."

"Won't the monarchy be abolished under a Fascist state?"

"Reimagined," Von Dreckland corrected. "The State needs a Kaiser no longer. But it will always need strong men to lead."

"Like you?"

"Like us. Like you and me and Berg."

"How does a thousand pounds sound as a donation, then?"

The Baron nearly fell over. The Society members nearly sang.

"That sounds...generous."

"A thousand pounds," Saxon reiterated. "But you must grant me the pleasure of dancing with your wife this evening."

He looked to Zofia. She was smiling a little. However faintly, she was smiling.

"Yes. Yes, it would be my pleasure."

"Thank you, my lord."

He reached for her hand, but instinctively von Dreckland stopped him. He froze, realizing that he had drawn strange looks from everyone around.

"Say, where is that Indian of yours?" The Baron asked as innocently as he could. "I am certain that my colleagues will want to take a look at him. Quite a specimen."

The recovery worked well enough. The room brightened, and there were nods of agreement from everyone around.

“Is this the one that you said killed nine VSG men?” Asked Eckart.

A buzz of questions followed from the others.

“He is,” Berg confirmed.

“Taggart, fetch him over,” Saxon commanded, then took Zofia by the hand, and escorted her to the dance floor.

A waltz was playing.

Von Dreckland watched them dance. He watched his own wife smiling with another man while the Thule Society was enchanted with examining the Indian and gawking all about him.

Von Dreckland watched.

Von Dreckland drank.

Music and laughter echoed overhead.

Garmr raised his head to bark and snarl at the noise, but it would not subside, and neither would the agony. Down here in the empty tunnel, the sound reflected endlessly, though it never escaped into the floors above. The cacophony got under his skin and fur right where he could not bite or scratch at it, just the pain did constantly. Every day, his bones contorted. Every night, he felt his muscles slithering into different shapes. He had thoughts that were not his own, smelled scents from somewhere else, and saw sights through another’s eyes.

The Master only fed them sometimes, raw flesh of some unidentifiable animal. He had to fight his brothers for a single scrap of it, and yet it never sated him.

Somehow Geri was asleep. Freki was awake, but kept his head down. They were weak. They had accepted fate.

Freki only watched.

There’s no sense in fighting, Garmr, he heard him thinking.

Save your strength, came Geri's. Wait until we need it.

Garmr diminished, although the pain did not. His insides were turning. His guts were wriggling like a serpent did when caught between his jaws.

No, not his guts; *their* guts.

He had to remember that the more he struggled, the more he dragged his brothers along with him, and the more they would bite his neck and make him bleed, and the more pain they would all be in.

He was tired, so very tired, and yet the hunger and the torment would not allow him any sleep.

The Master.

He hated the Master, and that enraged him enough to leap forward, forgetting that the chain would yank him back when he ran far enough down the hall. He yanked his brothers with him, and they snarled and bit at him for doing so.

You're the middle, fool! Geri growled, and bit him in the neck. *And we can't escape!*

Freki took off part of his ear.

Maybe we ought to bite your head off, Garmr, he snapped. *Then we could have some peace and a thing to eat.*

Garmr shrank down to the floor, beaten and bloody, which ceased his brothers' retribution.

Better, Geri and Freki thought.

Garmr only whimpered. The fight in him was gone. He only hoped that the pain would be so great that he would go unconscious from the shock. Maybe, if he were lucky, it would kill him.

The music upstairs had loudened. He focused on another sound to drown it out. He heard their bones contorting, their muscles twisting, and their insides slithering about. He felt

his brothers' heartbeats pulsing where he would have only felt his own; three hearts inside one body.

Finally, they lay all three of their heads back down together. All three shut their eyes, and mercifully at last, Garmr fell asleep.

Danny's generosity knew no bounds, nor did his culinary perfection. As Jack cut into his steak, and took the first bite, he nearly wept. He could not recall the last time he had eaten, and to taste something so heavenly was a reminder of what joy could be. Jack would never be able to repay Danny for his hospitality, nor his chef.

Dinner for the whole house was a steak cooked in garlic butter, potatoes softened to a bliss and sprinkled in dill, grilled asparagus in mustard sauce, a side of fresh baguette, and roasted pears in a red wine glaze.

Drinks were aplenty. Anything a man could ask for, he was served, but a simple glass of wine was enough for Jack.

He sat alone at the bar, because all the seats were filled, but did not feel apart. Even being in the company of his brethren reminded him of days gone by. Those had been hard days, but ones that they had lived together.

Dessert was Norman apple tart with a side of vanilla cream. Jack had never tasted anything so sweet. One bite of the warm, flaky, buttered crust and the lush golden filling inside could turn a bitter soul to gladness.

He finished every bite.

After the meal, the lights dimmed down a little, and the music faded to a stop. The band cleared away so that Danny could take the stage, leaving only the piano behind. He stood there a moment until the room quieted.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, raising his voice so that all could hear. “I want to thank you all for coming this evening. Some of you have made quite a journey to be here, and that means all the world to me. This New Year’s celebration began just as a small gathering between family and friends, but the next year, Lucille insisted on extending the invitation to other veterans that we knew. And every year, it just kept growing until we decided to open it everyone who served. This is our third year hosting this event, and every year, I’m happy to see new faces. Tonight, there’s one face I am most happy to see. Not a new one mind you, just one I haven’t seen in quite some time. That’s of my Captain and my friend, Jack MacGregor.”

All eyes turned back to the bar at Danny’s gesture, and greeted Jack with generous applause. He only waved absently, for his focus was still on Danny, who continued speaking.

“Jack’s always been a brave man. He saved my life, after all. So, I trust he’s not put off by this attention. He got plenty of it from Germany, so he did.”

There were some laughs in the crowd. To the matter though, Jack did not feel on the spot at this mention. He only felt bewilderment that Danny was honoring him so.

“Jack’s a brave man,” Danny said again. “But a less known fact is that he’s quite the musician too. He hid that from the company, but I’ve been told by a few in the know that the man has a special talent. I know it may not be good form to ask in such a manner, and I hope you don’t feel too put upon, but Jack, could you play a song for us?”

The audience applauded him again.

Somehow, Jack found himself on stage.

“Thank you,” Danny whispered, then stepped down into the shadows.

Jack glanced at the crowd. The lights were hot and bright, and he could see not one of their faces. He thought how shabby he must look to them in his dirty, worn out clothes. A long silence followed, or maybe it just felt like one as Jack sat down at the piano. His mind told him that he did remember how to play, for it had been so long, yet somehow his fingers found the keys, and played. He told himself his throat was dry and that he did not know which song to sing, yet sang:

*In Flanders Fields, the poppies blow,
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the dead, short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders Fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow.
In Flanders Fields.*

In Flanders Fields.

Jack touched the final chord, and turned to face the crowd. At first, he thought that he had shamed himself for no one clapped nor said a word. Yet, when he peered closer through

the hot lights and tears, he saw that all every man was standing.

Hands upon their hearts, they each gave him their silent, proud ovation.

XIII

The Bold Face Truths

Monday, January 1st, 1923
German-French Border

The headlights' glow cut through the pre-dawn fog in conical beams. They were only light on this dark morn, and all that Rebis could use to guide themselves along the narrow dirt road, even with their sharp eyes. They were close now. Rebis had studied the map extensively. Not only did they need to know where to go, but there was also a whole wide world out there. This place called "Europe" was big, bigger than Bodenbug, or even the country that Father called "Austria".

Rebis knew they had been driving for a long time, and they would soon be there. They could not wait to see what would be there when they arrived.

Then, the motorcycle sputtered, and slowed to an eventual halt. Rebis stuck out the kickstand, and dismounted to check their fuel supply in the boot. They had already refilled the bike three times across the journey, just like Father had shown them how to do, and so all the spare fuel cans had been exhausted. Rebis could continue afoot, but that would take a great deal longer, and Father had seemed adamant that Rebis should return as quickly as possible.

So, they began to look around. The impassable fog of course complicated their search substantially, and all they found was a single footpath leading off from the road into the unknowable haze.

Rebis hesitated, then followed it.

They walked along the path for some time, going slowly as if they were traveling down a corridor so long and narrow that they could not see the end of it. All the while, worry was welling in their throat that they might upset Father. They had only done so once before, and had felt ashamed. Rebis had been reading books so long that it had made Father angry. He had slammed the pages on their fingers, and leaned on the cover. He had said that he had ordered Rebis to work, and that they had not listened when he had called them. Rebis had felt the bones in their little pinky snapping. The joints snapped back in place the very next day, but the pain had never been forgotten.

That had been for something small. Rebis shuddered to think what would happen for something as important as this. Surely, if they succeeded and did so quickly, then Father would be proud.

The morning had started to brighten. Although this did little to increase visibility in the fog, its mists had become more luminous, going from a pale blue undertone to a golden one. Somehow, that made the fog seem calmer and less threatening than it had before.

The path ended soon after at a farmhouse. The squat stone building sat on a small hill above the fog. It had a small barn to one side and a granary to the other. Animals were milling about in a pen beside the barn.

Rebis had seen many places like this crossing the country Germany on their way here, and they had seen Father pulling many animals like this apart in his laboratory. Most of those had been dead though, and these ones were all alive.

There was something else alive in the pen as well. A human was feeding them, tossing out scraps and feed. This one wore

a white shirt, brown pants, and a cap. They seemed fairly young, not like Father who was old.

As they emptied their pail, they turned around, and saw Rebis standing there in front of them.

They paused, and called out something into a language that sounded strange to Rebis. The person's voice felt defensive in a way, although they did not seem like a threat, so Rebis decided not to kill them.

The person called out again.

"Petrol!" Rebis responded, hoping they would understand.

"Henri?"

Someone else had appeared in the farmhouse door. They had long hair and wore a green dress, and were staring at Rebis in a peculiar way.

They held a tiny creature in their arms. This looked like a human, but much smaller. They were staring at Rebis through a bundle, watching him with bright, inquisitive blue eyes.

Something about them made Rebis smile.

The first person went over to the second, and calmed them, before turning back to Rebis.

"Petrol?" They asked.

"Petrol," Rebis nodded, and pointed back towards the road.

"Un moment, si vous-plait."

They went off to the barn.

In the meantime, Rebis waited. The small creature had made a little sound, so the second person bounced them some and sang a quiet song to hush them.

Something about that made Rebis sad.

The first one returned a moment later, carrying a metal fuel can. Rebis waved good-bye to the others, then led them

down the path to the road. Somehow the journey this time went much faster, and they were back at the bike in only a minute.

The person poured the fuel can into Rebis' tank.

"*Voilà!*" They said, shutting the cap. "*Bon voyage.*"

"*Merci beaucoup,*" Rebis blankly replied, unsure why this person had done all of this for them.

They then shook Rebis' hand, smiled, and waved good-bye as they headed back down the path towards their home.

Rebis wished that they had stayed a moment longer, but they had already vanished somewhere in the morning fog.

Rebis did not like the way they felt, so they got back on their bike, and just kept driving.

New Year's Day arrived with a fog so leaden that Paris had seemingly shrunk overnight to the single street corner outside of Danny and Lucille's apartment, while the rest had vanished into an ethereal grey curtain.

Jack awoke, bleary-eyed, and thought that it was merely his blurry vision creating the haze outside the window. He rose from the sofa to see if it was morn or night, because the light was so dim, and stumbled to the sill. He had not drunk much the night before, but the exhaustion of the past few weeks had left him in a drunkenness of sorts. His body did not fully belong to him yet, and nearly tripped over his strewn out boots and sword belt on the way over.

Like most Parisian apartments, Danny and Lucille's place was far too small. Jack had crammed his six feet of height into five feet of sofa last night, and now his back muscles were voicing their complaints. He groaned with every step, then nearly slipped on his discarded pistol holster. He nearly yelped as well, but stopped himself, remembering that his

hosts were still asleep, and caught his fall two-handed on the window's sit-in sill.

The windows were the only large thing in the apartment. They were tall and gloriously wide, where every room and doorway about the place was as narrow as a mousehole.

Jack pulled himself onto the sill, leaned against the wall, and sighed. A faint golden orb of sun shined dimly through the clouds, revealing that it was indeed morning. A chime from the grandfather clock across the room confirmed the hour as nine o'clock. That did not stop Jack from wanting to fall right back to sleep, however.

Yesterday had been a blur.

Vaguely, he remembered the party, someone singing who might have been himself, a few glasses of champagne, and some unknown woman kissing him drunkenly when the clock struck twelve.

Then, he remembered Inge. Sanwar.

He jolted awake, suddenly sober, and gathered his things. He had to leave at once to find a train and get to Amiens as soon as possible. Should he say good-bye to Danny and Lucille or just leave quietly? Quietly was probably the better choice-

"Morning, Jack."

Jack let his sword belt fall back onto the floor as Danny stepped out into the living room. Lucille followed him a moment later, and smiled sheepishly at him. The two wore nothing but gray bed robes, as evidenced by their bare limbs poking out from underneath.

They went past Jack, through the living room and into a tiny kitchen beyond it.

"Breakfast, Jack?" Danny asked, already opening the cabinets.

“I really should be going-”

“Nonsense,” said Lucille. She ducked an arm around Danny to reach the coffee cups and saucers, and laid them on the counter. “It’s New Year’s Day, and you must eat something.”

“I don’t want to be an imposition-”

“No imposition!” Lucille seemed almost offended at the suggestion.

“Well, I’ll stay for breakfast,” Jack conceded. “But I really must leave today. You see...I...I promised a lady I would see her out there. After I visited the battle site. Yes.”

“Aha!” Danny grinned at Lucille. “Sorry, old chap, but the trains will be running slow today, so it might be some time anyway. Might as well enjoy the afternoon with us chickens. Unless, you really are in a hurry, Jack.”

“A bit of one, actually. Not that I wouldn’t like to see you.”

“I understand. Will you be passing back through Paris soon after your visit in Amiens?”

“Likely. Why?”

“Tell you what then. You can borrow my motorcycle.”

“I couldn’t-”

“You will,” said Danny, and that was the end of it. “Now come and have some breakfast with us.”

They ate a simple breakfast of toast and eggs in comfortable silence. After last night’s fare, neither Danny nor Lucille wanted to cook anything in more than a single pan’s worth.

An hour later, they were dressed to see Jack out. The fog had hardly lifted when Danny rolled his bike out from underneath the small garage in the apartment’s base level. The headlight shined through the haze like the glowing

yellow eye of some cyclopic beast and the engine crackled like its roar as Danny rode down a short ramp into the cobbled streets. The gray-green olive drab paint carried little polish, but the bike was clean and otherwise looked as new.

“Just loaded it full of petrol,” Danny told him. He parked it at the curb, and kicked out the stand to let it rest. “That should get you up north just fine. You can load it there, and bring it back when you’re done. We’re on Sixteen Rue Jardin.”

“Thank you, Danny. Truly.”

Jack offered him his hand.

Danny refused it, and hugged him instead.

Lucille did the same, although she added a kiss to each cheek.

“We’ll see you soon,” they promised him, as he mounted the bike and snapped on Danny’s helmet and goggles.

“How can I repay you?” He asked them.

“Have a good life, Captain,” said Danny. “The best you possibly can. That’s the gift that would bring me the greatest joy. That’s an order.”

“Aye,” Jack promised. “I can do that.”

Then, he smiled and drove off down the rue. He glanced back one last time to see them standing on the gray stone stoop still, waving endlessly goodbye, even as their ghostly shapes vanished forever into the mist.

Monday, January 1st, 1923

Picardy, France

The bike sped steadily along the flat dirt road. The hour approached midday, and the fog had gone from gray to white. Visibility was better. Jack could see about fifty yards ahead

now, though thankfully the road was largely empty of traffic anyway. As he rode farther into the country, the trams, cars, motorcycles, and pedestrians became sparse then non-existent.

With the curtain of fog peeled back, the cityscape gave way to sleepy hamlets nestled between the hills and meadows. Cypress trees in neat thin rows replaced tall buildings. Green grass overtook grey stone. Even in the dead of winter, the grass here never once yellowed and died. Jack may have shivered in the wind as he rode by, but he was never deprived of beauty. Strangely, he had never noticed it those eight long years ago when he had marched here. Men had fought and died not far from here. They had driven fleets of trucks and tromped holes with their boots along miles and miles of these roads, but now, all memory of those struggles was disappearing in a pleasant afternoon's ride.

The road bent ahead where it met the banks of a lively stream. Jack veered with the turn, then continued on with the water running parallel to his left shoulder. He was getting closer to the outskirts of Amiens, he remembered. Another fifteen minutes more perhaps, and he would be there. He wondered what it all would look like, now that it had been four years since the last bombs had fallen on the city.

He had killed his first man there, almost quite by accident. A German had practically fallen onto his sword after slipping off a trench wall while trying to escape. The two of them had landed in the mud together. Jack had flopped around beneath his dying body for a minute, until Tormy had pulled him free.

His second kill had been more deliberate. Jack had shot an enemy sergeant in the neck so that his fellows would surrender. They had done so, but he had always wondered if the man would have seen some sense if given the chance.

By the third, Jack was fully in the business of it. Men no longer mattered to him, only survival for both his company and himself. He lost himself in rages at times that only Tormy could stop. He no longer saw if the enemy were surrendering or not. They were just a threat to be destroyed.

That was how he had killed a boy; a German boy who had probably lied and said he was eighteen. It mattered little to the German Army, so long as he was tall and strong enough to tote his rifle. That was old enough to fight, and therefore old enough to die.

An engine cackled behind him. The sound was faint at first, but when Jack turned, he beheld a yellow headlight growing behind him.

Another rider emerged from the misty backdrop on a sleek, black bike. This was the first cyclist he had seen since Paris. As the rider neared, their gauntness was unmistakable. From the way the fabric bunched about them, it was obvious that their heavy coat sagged over a near skeletal frame.

In a matter of a seconds, the newcomer was overtaking Jack. Jack hung to the right lane, remembering the rules of road on this side of the channel, but the rider did not pass.

Instead, this fellow equaled speed, and turned to gaze at him.

Beneath their *Stahlhelm's* visor and through their frog-like goggles, a pair of red eyes gleamed at him with a kind of recognition.

“Aw fuck.”

The rider reached into their heavy coat, and pulled out a gun.

Jack ducked in time for the first revolver shot to fly over his head.

Instinctively, he jerked the throttle, and thrust forward before the second shot cracked from behind.

He dared a glance back.

The rider had fallen in behind him, their pistol held high and their back straightened even in the whipping wind.

They leveled their revolver again, using the handlebars to balance it.

Jack swerved to the left, anticipating the shot.

The rider held firm though, and matched his movements.

The two of them twined back and forth along the highway, right, then left, and over again. All the while through this serpentine dance, the rider held their shot.

Jack dared not draw his own pistol this speed for fear that he might lose control of his iron steed. Yet, there was no way to lose his pursuer either. Nothing was around them but open road and pasture.

His eyes darted around the landscape whenever he could steal a glance, all in a hopeless search for an escape route that was not there.

However, in his desperate search, Jack was not looking forward when a pair of high beams burst from the fog straight at him.

The oncoming car moaned and screeched just before he swooped out of the way, back into the right lane. The driver berated him with a chastising horn honk for good measure.

It was just the opening the other rider needed though.

They had stayed right, seeing the car before Jack, and merely waited as he skidded back in front of them. All they had to do was wait until Jack drifted into their sights.

His skidding was what saved him.

Jack had lost control of the bike temporarily, and jolted right, nearly off the road. The bullet went high and wide,

grazing his left shoulder instead of punching through his spine.

Jack clutched the gas instinctually, causing his front wheel to wobble. The bike then hit a rock, jumped a bit, landed hard, then banked sharply left towards the stream.

He only just caught himself in time, and swerved back right to avoid careening into the water below.

This erratic movement slammed him into the other rider accidentally.

Their bikes clacked together, steel gnashing steel and thigh butting thigh. Jack gave the other rider's bike a kick for good measure.

The rider spun out, recovered, and resumed chase.

This time, they gained on Jack, riding harder than before. They drew alongside him, pistol trained at point blank range.

Jack noticed them closing in from his periphery. He saw the gun leveling right at him.

He also saw what could be his salvation.

Up ahead, the road was bending, forming to the natural contours of the stream. As it bent, it also sloped gently downwards. Between the folds of its S-shaped curve was a cypress grove there on the hillside. Only the treetops stood out above the heavy fog.

With wild abandon, Jack swung right towards them.

The other rider braked to avoid the collision as his bike went swerving past, off the road and onto the grass. Immediately Jack lost control. At this speed, the wheels chewed through the turf, spitting dirt into the air, and leaving streaks of bare earth behind Jack as he flew headlong into the grove.

The mist overtook him. He yanked the handlebars to regain control, but sheer momentum had possession of the motorcycle now.

Oh God, he thought, I'm going to ruin Danny's bike.

Right then, a tree trunk rose out of the mist.

Jack squeezed the brakes, and threw all his body to one side.

Instinct shut his eyes.

He did not feel the instant collision, so he knew that he had gone past the tree, but who knew what lay beyond it?

What he did feel was the wheels and his boots digging into the earth and all the flecks of sodden spraying onto his legs. Then, he hit the slick dew-damp grass, and slid.

The bike went out from under him, and sputtered away.

Jack blinked his eyes open a moment later.

He lay unscathed, albeit somewhat dirty, in the grass. The bike was several yards in front of him, flat on its side, puffing fumes, having landed measly inches from a particularly stout cypress trunk.

Jack nearly laughed at his blind, silly luck. He could have rolled on the ground in stitches at the sheer lunacy of his risk, had he not remembered the reason he had taken it in the first place.

The roar of a speeding, swerving motorcycle snapped him back to reality. He jumped back on the bike, realizing that his enemy was fast approaching the bend, and walked it forward out of the grove.

Poised on the hillside, he switched off the headlight and waited.

Only seconds later, a glowing light came streaming through the fog. Its golden cone of brilliance was all that shone in the mist.

Jack would have to time his attack perfectly on that light alone. If he did it right, he would knock the other rider off the road. If he failed, he would go flying past them into the stream.

The headlight neared his position.

Jack held firm a second longer...

...until the light was finally parallel with his left shoulder.

Then, he revved the engine, and shoved off down the slope.

Gravity took over, and shot him forward.

The headlight grew and grew, and rider's engine crescendoed to a crackling cacophony as Jack hurtled straight towards their bike...

...and missed.

Jack in his eagerness had gone down the hill too soon. He had gained momentum faster than expected, and zoomed right past the rider, although not entirely cleanly.

The rider's front wheel collided with Jack's back one. The cycles hit, and spun in wild dizzy circles. Jack's bloody shoulder nearly touched the ground as he carved doughnuts in the dirt road. The other rider did the opposite, their right shoulder just inches from hitting the turf.

Jack had scored the lesser hit, and so recovered sooner. He straightened out to see the rider floundering behind him, then remembered the pistol inside his coat, and went for it.

He fired wildly at a moving target than was spinning just as wild. The first few bullets dinged the cycle without hitting the rider.

The rider had enough wits about him though to wrench their motorcycle to a halt. A tide of dirt splashed behind them as their fist clenched down on the brakes, probably

destroying them for good. They leveled off though, and finally pulled their gun on Jack.

They fired back, each of their shots dizzy and confused.

Jack returned fire, though to not to much greater effect.

They fired off three rounds apiece. However, when the rider aimed their fourth at Jack, the revolver's chamber clicked empty.

Jack still had one more, though.

His seventh round shot the gun from his opponent's hand.

The rider then thought better of the fight, and sped away instead.

Jack holstered the pistol, squeezed the gas, and gave pursuit.

He had gone only a few dozen yards before road bent in front of him again, and he swerved narrowly to avoid it. Somehow the road was darker than before, Then Jack realized that in the heat of the moment, he had forgotten to switch on his headlight. He did so then, swerving again around another kink in the road just in time.

He breathed a sigh of relief long enough to hear the rumbling engine coming from just ahead of him.

The sigh became a groan as the other rider appeared in the mist once more. This time, the rider had found a fallen limb, and was brandishing it like a club.

They dropped back instantly beside Jack, and swung at him.

Jack swerved to dodge the blow, but the rider slammed their bike into him before he could get out of distance. The blow may not have connected, but their bikes had, and they were now locked in a mobile melee along the road, each one pressing steel and tires into the other's.

The rider then tried to swing again, so Jack returned the favor.

He slammed his own bike into theirs, and knocked them aside.

That gave him enough of an opening to draw a weapon, not his pistol this time, but *Lann Dhearg*.

The sword came out in a flash. Suddenly, Jack was a cavalryman mounted on a devilish steel horse. He swung out with a twirling wrist cut.

The rider tried to block.

Steel met wood, and took a chunk out of it. The weapons clashed again, and splinters flew. On the third blow, the rider's cudgel was cut in two.

The rider peeled away, trying to use the distance in order to escape the sword, but Jack pressed the attack.

Lann Dhearg twirled again, sparking against the handlebars, and sending the bike wobbling.

Jack attempted a backhand cut, which the rider must have anticipated, for they banked farther right, voiding the cut as it came back.

This time, Jack had left himself open.

The rider went right, then rammed left while Jack was still recovering from his swing. Their bike slammed against his, and shoved him leftwards. *Lann Dhearg* would have fallen from his hand, had its basket-hilt not have hugged so tightly on his hand.

Jack retained the sword, but was now being driven further off the road and towards the stream. Weaponless, this was the rider's single option for victory. So, they rammed, withdrew, then butted Jack again before he could recover. Steadily, they drew closer and closer to the edge.

With only a shoulder's width between Jack and his watery end, the rider pulled off farther for one last hammering blow. They banked right, and swung back left...

Jack braced himself for impact, and in a wild, desperate plea, squeezed the brakes with all his might.

Dirt and burning rubber filled the air. Soil spattered in Jack's face as his tires dug into the road. The bike stalled suddenly in place. He clenched his teeth, expecting that hammer's blow to swiftly follow.

Instead, the rider swung hard ahead of him. They turned back in shock as they drive right through where Jack should have been.

Their eyes met his midair as they soared off the road, over the bank, and straight down into the stream.

A geyser erupted from the water where they crashed.

Jack rode over to the crash site.

Oil burned atop the surface. Bits of wreckage flowed downstream.

He watched for several minutes, waiting to see if anyone emerged.

No one did.

Seeing that he was no longer pursued, Jack drove off into the mist, and on to Amiens.

Amiens, France

Soon after, Jack had ridden out of the valley where the fog had lifted. The sky was still overcast, threatening snow, but the day was clear at least. He stopped upon a solitary hill a moment to survey his newfound surroundings.

Amiens lay in the distance, a low, flat city on the water. Jack had followed the stream all the way here, and now it fed into the River Somme, which split the city down the middle.

It all seemed so tranquil from miles away. The river flowed as smooth as glass in sheens of greenish-black. Specks of people walked along the cold and quiet cobblestones. Every once in a while, a motorcar would whistle by or sometimes a carriage.

Many had come through the city years before to fight the Battle of the Somme, and then again when the Germans had attacked the city proper. Between both battles, few returned, but for a moment, Jack forgot the days of war when the German artillery had hammered the city ragged; when lines of infantry came storming through those cobbled streets; when tanks had leveled homes and livelihoods; and when tens of thousands perished all in the last few weeks of the War.

For the first time though, he saw the city plain. Many of the destroyed buildings had been rebuilt to as they were before. Old women swept the streets, and children played despite the bitter chill. The shops would be lined with toys or clothes or pastries. People hurried home along the streets back to warmth and to loved ones.

Jack shivered from the wind.

He glanced down at the valley below. A village slept at the foot of the hill, tucked away just off from the road and several miles from the city proper. None of the buildings were tall save one.

A church stood there.

Jack rode towards it, recognizing it at once.

The stones had been defaced by mortars, the stained-glass windows shattered by shells, and the double doors splintered

by bullet holes, but the church was unmistakable to Jack. He had sought solace here while the Black Watch had billeted this village en route to the Somme. The villagers had regarded them curiously then, just as they regarded him now.

He walked the motorcycle through the streets to the outskirts of town where it waited for him. A leafless apple orchard grew nearby and a vintage, but otherwise, the house of God stood solemn in an empty meadow. Nothing grew there, save bushels of headstones in the cemetery.

Scaffolds clung along the steeple. A hole gaped where the belfry had been. No roof topped the tower but the sky itself. Fresh stones and mortar had been laid, but it would yet be more years before the building was restored, if it ever could be.

Jack eased open the creaky wooden doors, and stepped inside.

Scarce light shone within. No candles burned. Only daylight from holes in the roof or broken windows provided any illumination. Jack traveled down the gloomy pews with careful steps towards the altar. The wreckage had been swept away, but the floors were still coated in dust. Somewhere, water dripped into a bucket from one of the holes in the roof. A likeness of Christ was plastered back together behind the altar, but there were plenty of headless angel statues lining these hallowed halls.

He had mistaken this place for a cathedral in his memories, but now the place seemed smaller than before, almost shrunken to a husk.

He came to the foot of the altar, and stared up at the statue of Christ. Bleak and weary, the son of God gazed back at him. On the wall above his thorny crown, Jack saw the Hospitaller's cross.

“I thought that I might find you here,” said someone.

Jack spun around, hand upon his sword.

A man in a white sat among the pews.

“It is a grave crime to kill a man inside a church,” the man smirked.

Jack released his grip, and walked back to see this fellow better. He halted across from the man’s pew, but did not sit himself.

The stranger was dressed from head to toe in a white suit and hat. A sable coat hung over his broad, powerful shoulders, though curiously, he leaned upon an ebon cane with a silver serpent’s head. He looked as though he was of an age and height with Jack, but his hair and eyes were dark where Jack’s were fair. A silver Hospitaller cross hung around his neck.

“Godfrey?”

“Hello, Jack.”

“I thought-”

“That I had died?” He laughed sadly at that. “No. I merely left some ashes from the hearth upon my bedsheets that night I fled my brothers in Smyrna. It seemed a silly trick admittedly, but how else would a centuries-old man expire?”

An empty pause hung between them, so Godfrey shrugged to fill the void. Then, he breathed a heavy sigh, and looked about the ruined place.

“My brother and I had our dream here,” he said at long last. “A dream of the Grail. We knew then that we were to bear our arms and sail east to the Holy Land to seek it. We joined the Hospitallers the next day. Little did we know, our quest would soon outgrow them, and that the dream would bring us to the desert, further than any other knight dared journey.”

“I’m sorry, Godfrey. Parzival is-”

“Dead. Yes. I knew.” Godfrey was silent a moment before he spoke again. “I have finally lost my brother by blood and all my brothers in arms before them. I wear this cross merely as a reminder. He insisted that I was to be the one to go while he stood vigil.”

He toyed with the crucifix around his neck, wrapping his fingers around its four silver prongs.

“Why forsake your brothers?” Asked Jack. “I thought you that you were one of them. A true Knight Hospitaller.”

“I was once,” the knight admitted. “And when I returned from the desert, I hoped that their path had changed. But their minds were still of war. My duty is to the will of God, not the wills of men. I had to find another who knew the same.”

“Then why me?”

Godfrey shrugged.

“It was not only you. Over half a millennia, I’ve met thousands like you who’ve had dreams like you. I gave out books and scrolls to thousands of others. Thousands with your potential. The only difference was that you went looking for the Stone. You and Sanwar. You followed the pieces that I left behind.”

“Which led us here.”

“Yes,” he said. “I knew that only a great Alchemist could find their way.”

“But I’m not-”

“You are, Jack.”

“Am I...?”

“You haven’t seen how many have come before you, Jack,” said Godfrey. “Precious few have come as close as you are now. Precious few have tried. Only one traveled the world

just to find me, and it took all his life. You've come this far, and you still have many years ahead. You have a chance at creating what I, in all my years, have never achieved. A complete Stone."

"This far?" Jack let out an exasperated gasp. "And look at where it's got me? What do I have left!?"

Something in Godfrey's kind words infuriated him. He could not contain himself, and slammed a fist into the pew, breaking off a section of its rotted wood. Why did he feel as though he were being mocked?

Yet Godfrey held his gaze, and spoke in gentle tones.

"Doing the right thing is a lonely road, Jack MacGregor," he explained. "No one will always love you for it. In fact, many will loathe your being. But it is necessary. That is the price of the Philosopher's Stone."

Jack hung his head.

"Aye...I know..."

"Yes. Yes, I think you do."

Then he smiled faintly, and cast his eyes upwards. "The third ingredient is in the steeple."

"Well, that was easy," Jack laughed mirthlessly. "Any chance you'll tell me where the fourth one is?"

"No," Godfrey replied. "Nor the fifth."

"There are five?"

"Yes. Five. But I did not come here to give you answers. Those will be for you to find. I came to see that you were still on the right path before I die."

Jack stood silent for a time, weighing the knight's words.

"Die?"

"Yes, Jack. It's time I decided when, and today, seemed as good as any. Now, will you sit with me a while?"

"Aye. I can do that."

Jack took a seat beside him.

Just then, the clouds broke outside, and a ray of sunshine burst through and shined down upon the shattered stained-glass windows of the church. Godfrey was basked in golden light with little rainbow flecks shining on his solemn face. He shut his eyes, and smiled.

“In all my years, I have never tired of the sunshine,” he said to Jack, his voice scarcely more than a whisper. “In fact, every day, I have grown to love it more.”

Jack shut his eyes as well.

He let the warmth wash over him. It was sweet and gentle as a woman’s kiss, a brotherly embrace, and a child’s laughter. He had almost forgotten how wonderful its light could be.

“Aye,” he agreed. “It’s a bonnie thing. And I’m sorry about my anger, Godfrey. Thank you. Truly.”

Yet, Godfrey did not respond.

When Jack opened his eyes again, he saw that a Godfrey no longer sat there beside him, but a statue in his likeness. Solid stone sat upon the pew, eyes closed, leaning heavy on a long stone cane with a serpent’s head. In the golden iridescence, the old knight finally seemed at peace.

Flowers grew in bunches upon his head.

“May you live and rest forever,” Jack’s said, and put a firm hand upon his shoulder. He then rose, and turned towards the altar.

Beside it was a narrow spiral staircase leading up the tower. Many steps were treacherous as much of the stone had been blown away by shelling. Jack went one at a time, and always carefully. After a considerable climb, they finally emptied out into the open air.

At once, the wind beat against Jack’s face. With the roof missing and half the tower torn away, there was scant

protection from its ire at this height. He turned his bleary, tear-streaked eyes away from the gap and towards the shielding wall.

Cold stone stared back at him. He stood there on the dusty ground a while, scanning it endlessly. Godfrey had said that the *Aether* was up here, but damn him for stinting on exactly where.

The beat of wings caught Jack's attention. Something flitted overhead, so he turned his gaze upwards to find it.

Only blank sky loomed above him. Perhaps a large bronze bell had once hung there, but now the tower was just an open window to the heavens.

Then, a small blur of motion caught his eye. Wings fluttered. He might have thought whatever it was for a bird until he looked closer, and noticed that the very rock itself was moving. He thought himself mad, and looked again. Much to his surprise, Jack did see the stone shift, or rather what at first glance had appeared as stone.

A set of six wings unfolded, each one spreading out from over top the other. Their color changed as well, molting from whitish gray to grayish green. The stony texture of them morphed into something mossy.

The creature was certainly insectoid in shape, with a segmented body beneath its wings. At the ends of its long, thin legs were spindly finger-like digits that clasped the small imperfections in the masonry, and pulled the creature along with ease. As it turned around to face Jack more fully, he noticed the complex patterning about its head. Subtle variations in its coloration formed curious contours about its mouth and compound eyes. The more Jack examined it, the more it resembled a human face. He could not help but become lost in this strange reflection.

The creature fluttered down to rest upon his shoulder. Jack did not recoil as it did, nor did he as it crawled along his arm. Indeed, he outstretched his hand so that it could reach the wall again.

It scuttled onto the stone, then slowly climbed the full height of the wall. Jack stepped back to follow its steady rise with his gaze. He stopped near its zenith, and saw what he had been meant to see.

The symbols of Sulfur and Mercury hung there, encompassed by a circle of reddish pigment.

Jack swallowed hard, and climbed.

Using the jutting stones as footholds, he made a precarious ascent. He was no small fellow, and his first step gave out from under him. In fact, every step took several tries before he found a secure enough hold to proceed. The going was much slower than his winged counterpart, who zoomed back and forth about the summit, as if to inspire greater speed.

The going went slower and slower as he climbed as well. Not only were his limbs straining with every gain, but the wind became colder and harsher the higher he went. No longer did the wall protect him. It simply funneled air downwards onto him, and with every gust, Jack feared that he might lose his grip altogether and be tossed asunder to his death.

Yet, he buried his nose into the rock, and climbed.

Finally, he reached his destination. Up here, the creature had made a sort of nest from twigs and brambles beneath the circle, tucked back inside a hollow in the stone. The creature itself waited there for him, chirping almost encouragingly.

Jack used the hollow as a handhold to pull himself a little higher.

Blinking away the tears, Jack then saw the sigil plain.

Etched in stone was the *Sefiroth*, the centerpiece of Jewish Kabbalah and a curious sight inside the halls of Christ. Unlike the other stone though, this relief was carved from alabaster. At the crown of the eleven-point tree was a yellow halite crystal buried in the white stone face.

Malkuth, the lowest circle of the tree, was the one that Jack had seen from down below. In its center was Sulfur and Mercury.

“Sulfur...Mercury...” Jack groaned out between his labored breaths.

But what was he to do with this? He had needed sulfur and sulfurous salts in the previous riddles, but sulfur and mercury? He had nothing of the sort on hand. Had Godfrey really just played him for a fool?

His arms were shaking now.

Godfrey had tricked him. His arms would give out, and he would fall down to his death, and the Stone would then be lost forever. Even the bug was chirping with glee at his impending doom.

Jack could not help but feel that the answer was just staring him in the face, until he realized that it was.

Clenching his teeth, and swung one arm up to the circle. With his entire weight supported by the other, he reached for the cinnabar used to color it. He scraped some of its dust onto his gloved finger, and traced along the symbols of both Mercury and Sulfur.

The lines were wobbly, but good enough.

A moment later, a stone beneath the Malkuth circle slid back and down.

A cavity lay just beyond.

Muscles burning, Jack reached inside.

His fingers found a cork, and then a smooth glass bottleneck. Gingerly, Jack eased the vial free, and lowered it down to his coat pocket while the fingers on his other hand were shaking something awful. He groaned again, and split the weight between both arms again, much to their relief.

Slowly eased himself back down.

The descent was much less grueling. Jack dropped the last few feet to land squarely in the dust, knocking dust into the air. He breathed a triumphant sigh as he did, then looked down upon his trophy.

Cradling the tiny vessel in his hands, he gazed upon the *Aether* fully.

Only the faintest hints of vapors swirled within the glass. Yet every so often, a silvery cloud would fog the vial's walls, then dissipate and drift elsewhere. Even if Jack tilted it, the vapors moved about in their own time and fashion. For a gaseous thing, it proved surprisingly lively.

Jack was not alone in his celebration. The winged creature flew down to whiz about him with joyous chirping out melodic excitations. It circled him innumerable times at dizzying speeds for several minutes, then curiously stopped almost in midair.

Then, it suddenly darted back to the safety of its nest.

Jack paused himself, wondering why his new companion had run away, until he heard the crunch of stone behind him.

He wheeled around, already reaching for his pistol.

A pair of wet hands had grabbed hold of a chest-high ledge in the broken section of the tower, and were pulling someone over it onto the landing. Jack had his weapon out right as the pale-skinned rider's body appeared.

He aimed, and to squeezed the trigger.

Click. Empty.

The rider vaulted over the ledge, and sprung on him like a frog.

Jack was knocked to the ground, and his weapon flung aside. The pale one was surprisingly strong despite a slender frame. They groped at Jack's throat, trying to find a hold as they crouched atop him, knees pressing into his chest. Jack's own hands squirmed against his opponent's, while the air was draining from his lungs. Their cold, damp clothes splat against his own, seeping dankness into him. His skin itched from the sopping wetness, but he had no hand free to scratch at it while he struggled for his life.

Somewhere in that struggle though, Jack found his strength. With a sudden bout of courage, he grabbed a handful of dust from off the floor and flung it at his attacker's face.

A white cloud burst in the air above him. Having lost their goggles in the stream, the pale one covered their red eyes with a sleeve, the white dust turning gray upon wet fabric. They coughed, unable to protect their mouth and nostrils in time, which gave Jack the chance he needed.

He threw his whole weight to one side, rolling his opponent off of him. He was on his feet a second later, searching for the gun. If he could slap another magazine inside it, then the fight was his.

The 1911 lay just feet away from him, but the pale one had recovered too. They were on their feet again in fighting stance, with Jack's throw having merely stunned them.

The two of them locked eyes, knowing that the next motion either took would decide the outcome.

Jack lunged for the pistol.

The pale figure tackled him midway, and slammed him against the ledge, spilling loose stones over the side to crash

some thirty feet below. They pressed him hard, shoving him deeper and deeper into the stone and closer and closer to the edge.

Jack grunted from his efforts to resist, but not even his strength was enough to match this otherworldly being.

In a desperate last ditch attempt, he loosened his hold on his opponent by one hand.

The rider shoved him harder than before, and he was inches from going over the side, but that desperate opening had allowed him to grab a dislodged stone from the wall.

With unchecked fury, Jack brought it down on his attacker's forehead.

The pale rider stumbled back, relinquishing their grip. They caught their footing, then halted where they stood. They slid a hand across their brow, and stared down at the streaks of red upon their fingers. All the rhythm of the battle suddenly stopped as they sincerely pondered what had happened.

Jack took the opportunity to leap at them.

He knocked the rider to the floor, and shoved their face into the dust with one hand. In his other, he held aloft the rock, ready to bring it down, and finish them.

He roared in fury, every ounce of his anguish channeling into this single blow.

The pale one cried.

At first, it was a mournful wailing bawl, infantile and piteous. Then, it wined down into a whimpering sob. Those ruby eyes stared back at Jack like a tearful child wondering what they had done to deserve their father's wrath.

Jack heard this sound, and froze midstrike.

He let the rock fall from his hand instead and clatter in the dust.

He removed himself from its shaking body.

Slowly, Jack stepped away, until his back was against a patch of wall across from them. Then, he lowered himself down, and sat with his legs sprawled out. He breathed a weary sigh.

The pale creature hugged their knees into their chest when he did. They sat there, watching him, waiting for the fight to continue all of a sudden.

It never did though, because Jack did nothing.

He was suddenly exhausted. All his muscles ached, and he could barely keep his eyes open. He sighed, head leaning on the stone, bleary gaze upon the small, scared person still crying across from him.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed at last. Together, he and the other sat among the dust together, silent and motionless. A long while passed before Jack fully caught his breath again.

“I’ve heard that scream too many times before,” he said. “Too many times on account of me. Perhaps you’ve heard the same before. Doesn’t matter either way. The whole damn world is fucked. Isn’t it?”

The small pale creature said nothing.

“I suppose I deserve to know who you are and why you want to kill me though,” said Jack. “Being that I’ve spared your life and all.”

“Father told Rebis to come here.”

“For this?”

Jack produced the *Aether* from his coat pocket.

Rebis nodded.

“So your name is Rebis then?”

“Yes. Rebis. Weapon. Freak.”

“Er. Pleased to make your acquaintance, I suppose?”

“And you are Jack MacGregor.”

“I see my reputation proceeds me...”

“You were in the mines,” they added. “Rebis was to capture you then. Kill you if necessary.”

“So Saxon’s your father then?”

“No. Saxon is Father’s...”

Rebis struggled for the word.

“Friend?” Jack offered.

“Yes. That is the word maybe. They work together.”

That gave Jack some pause.

This time, Rebis offered possibilities.

“Saxon calls Father, ‘Rothstein’. Dhamija does too. Do you know Father? Why does he hate you so much? Are you a bad person?”

Jack jolted upright, the tiredness now vanished from his body.

“Rothstein? Dhamija?” He helped Rebis to his feet as well.

“Yes, I know your father. We met four long years ago. He helped me once to find a place in Egypt. Now he helps Saxon. But Dhamija. Dhamija is alive?”

“Yes. A...prisoner...yes that it is the word! Yes! He is the prisoner who works for Father on the Stone!”

Rebis was almost giddy, the pain of their injury seemingly forgotten. Now, they were practically hopping back and forth on each foot.

“Rebis. Rebis. Rebis!” Jack raised his voice to rein them in. “I need you to help me a moment.”

Rebis suddenly stood dutifully still.

“Yes,” they answered. “Yes, Rebis will help Jack. Jack is...friend. They don’t want to hurt Rebis.”

Jack paused at that.

He then put a hand on Rebis’ shoulder.

“No, I don’t want to hurt you. And, yes. We are friends now. Friends help each other, right?”

“Yes.”

“And Dhamija is my friend too. Will you help him?”

Those ruby-eyes grew solemn. Rebis nodded.

“Yes.”

“Please. Can you tell me where he is being held?”

“A castle. Bodenburg.”

“A castle, eh? Can you show me a map of it...?”

“Let Rebis make you one.”

Rebis took the fallen stone from the ground, and dragged it through the dust. In minutes, they had rendered a detailed floorplan of an entire castle, complete with separate towers and stories.

Jack remembered the pencil stub in his coat pocket, and copied the map into the back cover of Godfrey’s diary when Rebis was finished. The castle was honey-combed with halls and chambers from top to bottom. Not only were its defenses formidable alone, it stood atop a bald hill in the middle of the open ground. Even with modern siege artillery, it would take a full battalion of infantry to storm the breaches.

“Where is Dhamija being held?” Asked Jack.

“Here.”

Rebis showed him a chamber on the lowest level.

“Does this floor go beneath the earth?”

“Yes.”

“Great,” Jack moaned. That would mean not only breaking into the castle, but crawling into a subterranean death trap and then back out again. It was out of the frying pan and into the depths of Tartarus.

“Wait a minute,” he said, noticing something strange in Rebis’ drawing. “What’s this?”

He pointed to narrow passage connecting to this cell.

“A tunnel.”

That was curious...and it led outwards.

“Rebis, I’d like you to come with me,” said Jack. “I’d like you to draw this map for me again.”

“B-but, Rebis must return to Father. He must have what you have.”

They pointed at Jack’s heart where the *Aether* was kept.

“You can go back, if you only give me a few days-”

“He will not wait!”

Jack sighed. He needed more time to process all of this information, and yet he had none. Rebis may have liked him, but ultimately, they were loyal to their “father” still. The more he thought of it too, the more likely that Rebis’ absence would be noted. Austria was not so far from France. Even a day’s delay would arouse suspicion. Would they send the VSG looking for Rebis next? He knew how little they cared for borders and how far they would go to kill anyone who stood in their way. Besides, he was headed back to Munich anyway, where they could find him easily.

“Rebis must return, Jack.”

Jack nodded. He knew of only one way that his plans could work, and it was banking on a lot. Of course, no outcome could involve Rebis going back to Rothstein empty-handed.

“Then take these,” he said at last.

He reached into his coat, and offered out the *Aether* and the *Adamant*.

Rebis almost recoiled from the gesture, but Jack placed them in their palms then anyway, and closed their fists around them.

“Say that I got in your way, and that you killed me,” he instructed. “I survived the mines. I gave you this.” He pointed to the gash on Rebis’ forehead. “You killed me, and took these from me. Go back tonight.”

“Lie to Father?”

“To help a friend.”

Rebis nodded gravely, and put the items in their pockets.

“And you must do one more thing.”

“On the morning of the third,” Jack explained. “You must cause a distraction at nine o’clock.”

“A distraction?”

“Your father will have all sorts of chemicals in his lab,” he said. “There has to be something we can use...”

“Phosphorus?”

Jack paused.

“Aye. That’ll do nicely.”

“But I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“You don’t need to hurt anyone. You just need to make a lot of noise. Please. This will save my friend’s life. Will you do this for me?”

Rebis considered Jack a moment.

Then, they nodded.

“I will.”

XIV

As Snow Comes Down

Monday, January 1st, 1923

Castle Bodenbug, Republic of Austria

A lonesome candle flickered beneath the stony arches of the window sill, its bloom of flame the only radiance on this cold, dark night.

Saxon sat staring at it from his four-post bed. Despite the draft, he let the covers hang about his waist, arms crossed in contemplation.

One of von Dreckland's maids slept beside him. He had found himself the prettiest of the bunch, some Moravian girl whose name he did not care to pronounce. She was cream-skinned, blue-eyed, honey-haired, and accustomed to being told what to do. Most importantly though, she had stamina. The girl had bounced on him for about an hour before he had relinquished his seed. He had not taken a tumble since Palestine, and had been in desperate need of some relief.

They had both come away exhausted, yet Saxon lay awake while she lay sleeping.

He was recounting his recent string of successes. Jack was dead. The Indian was in his possession. Progress with Rothstein was good, and soon they would be rid of this place and on to somewhere warmer. Jack was dead.

He lay in bed, reviewing these advances so that he could plan the next ones, but the efforts all were fruitless. The thoughts returned, and he repeated them once more. All the while, the candle flickered on the sill.

A howling wind creaked against the window pane. Saxon rose from bed, and crossed to it. His naked body prickled in the chill and his feet trembled on the cold stone floor, yet he withstood the cold so that he could look outside. Leaning forward, he peered beyond the iron diamonds of the window's latticework and out into the darkness.

Gentle snowfall melted on the glass.

Out there, the moon was hidden somewhere in a velvet sky. Without its glow, he could see nothing but falling flakes a few inches away. However come morning, he expected that a pearly blanket would be covering the entire valley and its treetops. He hoped it would be thin, not relishing the idea of being trapped inside this castle for days or even weeks indefinitely. He had only left its walls for the rally, the Baron's hunting trips, and a few trite afternoons down in the nearby village.

He then thought it curious, funny even, that people on this earth spent fortunes on a thing like ice when he had it here in overabundance for free. In fact, he could even pay men to get rid of it for him, and often wanted such. He supposed that this was the way of things. There was supply and there was demand. God was the producer, and humanity his salivating customers. He had to admit that it was one damn fine business model, although he wondered how lucrative it really was to be the middle man. In any case, he never wanted to be the sucker the way that most people were.

That was also the way of things, he supposed. Nature required more lambs than lions. At least he could choose to be the latter. A lamb was doomed to death at birth.

The Baron was a lamb. Berg was a lion.

Jack MacGregor though...

He was more of a loon, really. Perhaps he was the only beast that did not fit the categories, but then again, what about him ever had?

Saxon laughed quietly to himself.

What a foolish way that loon had died.

The girl stirred behind him, and reached over to his empty side of the bed and rubbed the mattress where he should have been.

He returned to bed, moving her hand aside, before retreating to the safety of the covers again. The sheets were still warm thankfully, but he let them fall down to his waist once more. Arms crossed, he sat awake, staring at the flame.

Progress was good.

Jack was dead.

He said the words inside his head until the flame died out. By then, a pearly blanket was waiting on the window sill.

Snow was falling when they returned to the bed chamber. Zofia's cheeks throbbed from holding a smile. They had stayed in the Great Hall all day since luncheon to entertain the guests one last time before departure. Most had only conjured themselves for dinner, and stumbled in, still visibly intoxicated from the night before. By then, the sky was darkening, so they made a hasty meal and a hastier exit.

Eckart had been the last to leave. He and Willi had rambled on for hours about future speeches, rallies, and fundraisers. Hitler had big plans for 1923, and the Thule Society was determined to participate.

Zofia had heard little of them. As usual, when the men were talking, she had let her mind drift off. She had dreamt of summers in the country, when Petrograd became too stifling, and father took them all out to the country house

where the air was fresher and they could swim out in the lake. That was before they had been forced to sell it, and she and her sisters would pick flowers or raspberries in the forest, and stay out on the porch long past twilight. In her dreams, they spoke in French, not German, and the days were warm. She knew that she should not think of such things anymore, but sunny days were too inviting.

Only the sound of her husband's voice removed her from the fantasy.

"Did you have a pleasant time, my sweet?" Willi asked from the other side of the bed. He sat at the edge, fiddling with the buttons of his pajama shirt while she slipped into her shift. Now that their valets and handmaids had put away their dinner clothes, they could speak more freely.

"I did," she replied.

"I'm glad. Come and help me with these buttons, please."

She shivered. The turquoise silk of her shift was lovely to the touch, but hardly kept out any of the chill.

When she had first moved here just before the War, they had chambered at the solar beside the north tower, which was the warmest room in winter. Yet eight years later, Willi had grown heavier and could no longer make the climb. On good days, he could reach the second floor, but no higher. So, the servants had rearranged the ground floor chapel, as it was seeing little use given Willi's growing disinterest in Catholicism, and had converted it into an enormous bedchamber. Now they slept on a larger, steel-bound, triple king-sized bed and spent a fortune yearly on firewood. Even that could not keep out the natural draft, however, and she felt every frigid step as she crossed the icy stones to him.

He sat there in his white pajamas with the red pinstripes. The buttons on the shirt were only done until the chest. She

reached for the next one, and strained to pull the fabric together when suddenly he grabbed her hand.

“Undo them. Please.”

Gently, he guided her down to the button lower down, and folded her fingers to unclasp each one in turn. Once they were undone, he released her, and wriggled free from the shirt.

“I want you tonight,” he said. Again, he took her hand. This time, he placed it on his chest. The grains of his gray-white hair prickled her palm. “You know how long it’s been. Let’s try again.”

“Willi, I don’t think so...”

“Please-”

He pulled a little more.

Instinctively, she recoiled, and instantly regretted it.

Willi hung his head.

“I see,” he sighed. “You don’t want me. You probably want a man like Saxon instead...or maybe Berg.”

“No,” she sobbed. “That’s not true.”

He looked back her. His pale, watery eyes were now made more so by the tears streaming down them. Some of the droplets had collected on his glasses. The rest collected on his mustache.

“It is true,” he insisted. “All these years, and you still don’t love me. I don’t blame you, Zofia. How could a woman such as you ever love a fat, ugly, horrid beast like me?”

She did though. Maybe it was not the rosy spellbinding magic of a whirlwind romance, but she cared about him. He had given her a home despite her family’s misfortune. Her every need had always been attended, even when they had little. He never once hit her. She was happy here, truly. Yet, she could not stand him when he did this. She never knew

when they would happen, but some nights, he had these outbursts, and she never knew how to comfort him. How many times could he say these awful things about her and himself? How times could she deny them?

Tonight was worse than usual, though.

“I cannot even give you a child,” he wailed, and shoved his face into the crook of his arm to sob.

“Willi, please...”

She reached for him, but he pulled his arm away.

“Willi...Willi, what’s got you like this?”

“Our victory is close at hand,” he said in between his sobs. “And yet, I still can’t even please you. I see the way you look at other men. And Zofia, I don’t blame you. That’s the kind of man you need. Some who is tall and strong and handsome. A leader. A warrior. Not a sorry fool like me.”

She got to her knees, and tried to look him in the eye, but he would not meet her gaze.

“Those men are not my husband, Willi. You are.”

He sniffled as he finally turned to face her.

“Then why won’t you do your wifely duty and make love to me?”

Zofia hesitated.

That hesitation was enough.

Immediately, his sorrow turned to fury.

“It’s because you don’t love me, do you!?” He snarled, his once soft visage twisted into a hateful mask. “You never did love me did you!? Did you!? You hate me, don’t you!?”

She got to her feet, snatched a bed robe from the dresser, and ran.

“Zofia? Zofia, come back!”

Yet, she was already gone.

On feet, she was fleeing down the hall, salty tears streaking down her throbbing cheeks.

Even naked, Berg did not feel the evening chill. His body burned with effort as he gave another heavy thrust. Every lunge brought forth exerted pants and renewed aching in his thighs and lumbar. Yet, he was close now; nearly at the finish.

With one last sortie, he reached his climax.

Hauptmann let out a moan, and collapsed onto the bed in glorious exhaustion, his muscled back glistening in the dimness. Berg extricated himself from the Captain's body, removed his prophylactic, and tossed the soiled thing away. He wiped his sweat-drenched brow, visible steam rising off his body. Despite his aching thighs, he remained standing to catch his breath. The stone beneath his feet was wondrously cool.

Hauptmann stayed folded over the edge of the bed for some time, until he had caught his own, then straightened out into a seated position.

"What's wrong, *Bär*?" He asked.

He always seemed to know when something was.

Berg groaned, and turned away.

"Nothing, Harold."

"Tell me."

Berg turned to face the full-length mirror he kept in the corner. Rather, it was full-length for a normal man. He to squat just for him to see anything above the chest.

That did not concern him though. He had looked enough at his gnarled face after Rothstein's stitching. Berg had never been a pretty man to begin with, but that wound was doing him no favors.

Instead, he stared down at the horizontal scar below his navel. It was the only one that he had not received in battle. No, that one he had acquired in a civilian hospital before the wars.

As a boy, he had seen a doctor about a persisting fiery pain around his groin and a tender bulge around the pubic bone. They had thought it was a hernia until the surgery, when they sliced him open and found far more than that inside of him.

According to the medical report, the surgeons had discovered ovaries, a womb, and fallopian tubes buried deep within the recesses of his pelvis. The mistakes had been quietly corrected, and never addressed.

From then on, Berg claimed that he had cut himself on a rock while swimming in the Danube. When he reached adulthood and joined the army, the tale changed to how a Cossack's knife had failed to disembowel him. No one was fool enough to dispute the story. Only Hauptmann knew the truth.

Harold came now to wrap his arms around him. He ran a gentle finger across that scar, releasing a sigh from Berg.

"Too many of the boys are gone," Berg said at last. "Look how small our pack has become. And for what? So that Saxon can snatch away the crown? I hate that man. I'm tired of this place. I'm tired of sneaking around the dark with you. I want to hold your hand in the daytime."

He turned to face Harold and stroke his cheek. His Captain had such soft and calming eyes. They were gray and shining like smoky quartz, and had seen much that Berg had too. No other man was as brave or honest. No other man could understand him.

“Kill Saxon,” said Harold. “Kill him, and make the horrid doctor your prisoner. ‘Persuade’ him to finish his work on your own terms.”

“When should we do it then?”

“Why not tomorrow? That red-eyed freak won’t be around to protect him from you.”

“What about Saxon’s money?”

“We’re close enough to acquiring the Stone,” his deputy reminded him. “And then money won’t matter anymore. Neither will von Dreckland. Hitler. Any of them. We can shape the world to our will. A pure green land where our people can flourish, untainted from others. Where men like us no longer have to live in secret.”

Harold kissed him gently on the neck while he considered the words.

“A beautiful dream,” Berg said, at last.

“No, not a dream. Not anymore.”

“You’re right. Not anymore.”

“Yes. Now, come. Back to bed.”

Harold took him by the hand, and led him to where the warm sheets waited for them. Berg lay back under the covers as he watched snow fall out the window.

On the morrow, Saxon would be a dead man.

Despite the holiday, Rothstein had insisted on working late. He and Sanwar were perhaps the only people in the whole castle who did not imbibe alcohol or other intoxicants, so that had kept them both fresh after the New Years’ festivities.

Still, Sanwar had yet to see him partake in an indulgence of any kind. The Doctor ate only boiled meat, bread, and raw vegetables, and drank plain water with each of his infrequent

meals, which meant the same for Sanwar. The Doctor also eschewed all things artistic, especially music. At all hours, he wanted quiet and concentration, including now.

As Sanwar fermented samples rosemary and holly for future usage, the small man sat at his desk, poring over line after line from the Emerald Tablet or the *Rosae Occultae* at its side. Candles freshly placed in the window that morning had cascaded down and pooled beneath their sticks.

Suddenly, the Doctor paused, scribbled some notes, then adjusted his tilted spectacles.

“So, that is the answer...” He murmured.

Sanwar stole a glance while stoppering another vial of tincture. His German had improved somewhat from being in Bodenbug, and he could understand someone if they spoke slowly and simply enough.

However, the Doctor seemed to know that Sanwar was listening, as his eyes instantly flicked over to him.

“Yes, that is interesting...” Rothstein said, switching back to English.

“Care to divulge this information with your fellow?” Sanwar asked.

“My fellow?” The Doctor snorted. “Such presumptions...But I shall tell you anyway that I have found our last location. A place where each of the ingredients can be fused together in Celestial Fire. A crucible by which we may create the *Magnum Opus*.”

Rothstein said the Latin name for the Philosopher’s Stone with a particular flourish. As if that were not enough, he then slammed the *Rosae Occultae* shut to punctuate the phrase.

Sanwar raised an unamused eyebrow.

“Where is it then?”

Rothstein told him, and slowly that eyebrow lowered into furrows of fear.

“There...?”

“Yes, Mister Dhamija. So, it is a good thing that you were spared after all.”

Nothing could have been further from the truth, but Sanwar had no time to voice his opinion on the matter, for the door swung open then to reveal a shadowy figure standing in the portal.

Rothstein opened his mouth to screech his fury at the intruder, until he recognized Rebis’ slender frame before him. Cuts and bruises lined their weary, weather-beaten face. Their once pale cheeks had gone flush and ruddy from the cold. Their eyes flicked to Sanwar knowingly for an instant, then back to Rothstein.

The Doctor rushed to them at once.

The two spoke in whispered German. Sanwar leaned forward to hear the staccato sound, but could make out little until he heard the Doctor gasp.

“He survived...?”

“Yes, but now he is dead for certain. I killed him.”

Were they talking about Jack?

Sanwar stepped closer.

“Better keep this quiet from Saxon. Did you...?”

“Yes.”

Rebis removed something from their pockets, and placed it in Rothstein’s greedy palms. The Doctor quickly placed them in his own pocket, then spun about to face Sanwar. His eyes narrowed, and Sanwar suddenly noticed that he was several steps too far from his work station.

The Doctor’s eyes narrowed on him.

“Bring Taggart,” he commanded. “It is time for Mister Dhamija to retire.”

Rebis nodded, and departed.

Taggart was along shortly to put Sanwar in handcuffs. He slapped them on with more lazy indifference than usual, then simply shoved Sanwar out of the conservatory and into the hallway by the small his back. He yawned as they traveled down the long candlelit corridor together, giving Sanwar an awful whiff of the whiskey on his rancid breath.

Thoroughly unaware or totally uncaring, Taggart reached into his coat pocket one-handed to remove a bottle and take another swig. When he did, Sanwar caught a glimpse of the pistol holstered there beside it. Ostensibly, Taggart carried it for Sanwar’s protection. He had made an enemy of the VSG men, and Saxon had thought it prudent that he should be guarded, out of fear one of them may lose discipline and attempt something in the night. His quarters too, were to be kept secure, which was where he and Taggart were headed now, just as they did every night.

His guard was drunker than usual this night, though. Perhaps the New Years’ celebration had put him in a rare mood. He stumbled as he pushed Sanwar along down the south tower’s spiral staircase, the keys jingling on his belt with every awkward step.

Taggart carried also a bag of three raw pork bones on the other hip in a brown paper bag. While the keys jingled, the bag crinkled, and although neither sound was particularly loud, combined they made a curious music in the echoes of the silent halls.

Eventually, the two men reached the library’s heavy oaken doors. Sanwar held the candle while Taggart fumbled with

the keys. The doors opened with creaks and cringes, and he shuffled them inside.

Sanwar shivered upon entry. A draft blew through the ranks of empty tables. Snow gathered on the windows along the far wall, and a wild gust pressed upon their panes.

In the center of the floor was a golden seal, adorned with a rampant lion.

Taggart sauntered over to one of the bookshelves, muttering to himself as he scanned their files. He found a gap in them, and slid his hand inside.

There came a soft, metallic clunk, and then the lion's seal sank into the floor. Its stones depressed to reveal a passage leading into darkness.

However, he and Taggart did not proceed immediately down it, for his escort had paused at the top of its steps. The candle's amber flame cast a mask of shadows on his face as he turned to stare Sanwar in the eyes.

The interlude reached an uncomfortable duration.

"Is something amiss, Taggart?" Sanwar asked as innocently as he could.

"Amisss? Mind your own fuckin' business. I'm thinkin' here"

"About...?"

"About? About how I bloody have to do everything around here," he grumbled. They were close enough that Taggart's breath could sting. "Nobody bloody 'preciates Taggart 'round here, do they? Just a bloody grunt to that lot. 'Yes, sir.' 'No, sir'. 'Do this. Do that.'"

"I appreciate you, Taggart. Thank you."

Taggart turned away, and flapped an angry hand at him.

"Save your fuckin' sympathies, you dirty bawbag."

"No, truly, I do."

Taggart turned back to him. This time, tears were welling in his eyes.

“Really?”

“Really.”

Taggart nodded, and wiped away his tears. He placed the candle down on the table before taking the three bones out of the bag. One, he kept for himself, and gave the other two to Sanwar. Then, he took back the candle, and led them below.

They had only made it to the last step when something stirred in the darkness. A chain clinked, followed by the scrape of claws on stone. A vicious growl rumbled from down the passage. Six red eyes gleamed fearsomely in the gloom.

Sanwar and Taggart tossed the bones.

Immediately, the three-headed hound leapt forward to savage them. Their amalgam body shifted this way and that, as each pulled in a different direction, but soon enough, all three sets of fangs found their quarry. Dagger-like teeth shredded each bone to the marrow.

To one side of the passage was a cell.

While the creature worked the bones, Taggart hurried with the keys. Stunningly sober now, he moved with practiced precision, undoing the door, and placing Sanwar behind the bars. He shut the door, redid the lock, and backed away to the safety of the stairs and out of the chain’s reach.

With a final nod, he bid Sanwar good night, and hurried up the steps. A moment later, the lion’s seal scraped shut. He would return before the first light of dawn to return Sanwar to the laboratory.

Yet for now, Sanwar was alone with the beast here in the cold, dry dark.

The three heads finished the morsel mere seconds later. The last bone snapped, and for a moment, the room lay silent.

The peace hardly lasted. A moment after, the hounds turned and snarled, then leaped at him. Their claws slammed down against the steel, and their wrinkled muzzles jammed between the bars to gnash at him.

Sanwar had learned to stand away from the door. He sat on a cot against the back wall until they had subsided. Eventually, the beast would bore of all the theatrics, and slink away to sleep again. It did so, taking its usual place just a few yards down the corridor. The creature groaned as it lay its heavy body on the stone. Two heads lowered to the floor as well and slept, while the third stayed vigilant, red eyes fixed upon the cell.

Beyond the creature, the passage journeyed on, but to where, Sanwar did not know. He did not reckon that he would ever learn, nor did he fancy so.

Tonight was business as usual.

The first few nights, he had remained awake from fear that the creature might be spirited enough to break the bars. Eventually though, such watchfulness extinguished him, and he could not uphold his guard. He had resigned himself to sleep from then on, and to an unfounded trust in the integrity of the cell's steel.

Before bed, he relieved himself in the chamber pot. He had learned how to wipe himself thoroughly between the legs while seated in the dark, for it was the only way to do so while in handcuffs.

When that unsanitary matter was concluded, he lay on the stiff old cot awaiting sleep. He tried not to think of the glimpses of the room he had seen whenever Taggart shined

his light in here; tooth and nail marks along the wall; rotted bones piled in the corner. He tried not to think about Jack either, or of home.

Not more than a few minutes had passed when curiously, the seal slid open again. The stone scraped back, and footsteps traveled down the stairs.

These footfalls did not belong to Taggart.

By now, Sanwar had familiarized himself with the footsteps of his captors. Taggart had a heavy, laborious step when he was drinking, which was often; Rothstein walked in a tiptoed, staccato fashion; Saxon's strides had a great space between them, and he never disguised the sound of his patent leather heels clacking upon the stone; and Rebis could never be heard coming.

These footsteps were soft, and came one small step at a time.

After a minute or so, candlelight came down the stairs as well, faint at first, then brighter as it neared.

Sanwar moved silently to the near wall, so as to hide himself from view as best he could.

The hounds aroused as well, and poised back on their haunches, ready to strike.

They relaxed however, when they saw who had approached.

Lady von Dreckland had descended the steps alone. Candlelight shimmered off her silken red hair and the satin of her sky blue bed robe trimmed with mink's fur.

She nearly dropped the candle though, upon seeing what waited for her there. A yelp escaped her lips, and she fell back upon the stairs in fright.

The hounds, however, merely whined, and scampered over to press their muzzles into her. They whimpered as she stroked their heads, and cooed them in quiet German.

“Garmr...Geri...Freki...Is that you?”

“It is.”

Sanwar stepped out slowly, so as not to frighten her, but still, she gasped. The hounds’ heads growled at him. She quieted them with a hand.

“My English is...not so good,” she said, attempting the language.

“Neither is my German,” he admitted, but tried anyway. “What are you doing here? I was told that no one else knew of this passage.”

“I followed you,” she said. “I saw you and the other man come this way. I...I was taking a walk. I could not sleep.”

Her tears said otherwise. Sanwar could make out a faint droplet running down her cheek as she explained this to him.

“You should return before someone notices your absence.”

Yet, she only crept closer to his cell, and peered inside.

“So this is where they keep you?” She put hand against her lips. “But you do not have a blanket. How can you sleep here...?”

“That is Castle Bodenburg’s brand of hospitality,” Sanwar sneered. Even the conditions of this place made him neglect his manners.

“No-” Zofia began to protest.

“Oh yes,” Sanwar pressed, the acid dripping from his voice. “Look at what you try to hide away.”

He nodded to the cell bars, and to the dogs, who were pacing back and forth along the passage now, glaring at him. Bloody foam was frothing in their mouths.

Zofia looked as though she might weep again.

“They have been missing for weeks,” she sniffed. “Willi has been worried sick about them...”

“Rothstein’s playthings,” Sanwar said. “They and I alike.”

“Well, maybe you deserve it,” she snapped, suddenly angered. “But not the dogs...”

She dropped to her knees to comfort them again.

“And why would I deserve this treatment?” He asked her. “A moment ago, you were appalled by my conditions.”

“You killed Berg’s men,” she retorted after some hesitation. “Communists kill people.”

“Your husband kills people, or rather he has men like Berg do the killing for him.”

“Only evil men. Only communists.”

Sanwar let out a bitter laugh. By now, his voice was tired, and the sound was little more than a hollow crackle.

“Oh, I am certain that he has killed plenty of Russians who were not.”

“It was war. He was serving his Kaiser. His country.”

“So were the people that he killed.”

She spit at him.

The act was sudden, but uncoordinated. Sanwar only needed to tilt his head, and the droplets flew past him.

“Communists killed my family. All in the name of ‘revolution’! But they just hate people like me in Russia. And here. People like you hate me. You are hateful, desperate monsters!”

“And yet, you have not left, so it seems that you seek company, even if it is a monster’s.”

Zofia grew silent at that.

“You have my sympathies about your family,” he went on. “Consider though what you might do if your children starved, if your family died, or if it were you who were suffering.”

Would you not be desperate to back at the ones who caused it? Would revolution not seem attractive by comparison?"

"My family has hurt nobody! My father was a good man!"

"I am sure that he was," said Sanwar. "But he was rich because others were made poor. Your family played and danced while others starved. He watched his daughter marry a rich man while others watched them die."

She scowled at that, and jumped to her feet. At once, the sudden motion drew the ire of the hounds, who renewed their snarling at Sanwar.

"How could you think to know my life?!"

"Your life once was mine. My family is one of wealth and stature in Punjab. They have a stately manse on fertile lands, and many servants to attend them."

"But not you?"

"No...not anymore."

"I am sorry."

"Why? Would those things make me happier? Would they undo all the things that I have witnessed? Could I wrap myself in silk and silver, and pretend that outside of my ivory towers the world has been not plagued with suffering?"

Zofia said nothing.

"You know, you were quite erroneous before," he mused. "Desperation fathers hate, and not the inverse."

"I do not believe you."

"I am sorry that you do not," said Sanwar. "But I will pray for you tonight all the same. I will pray that one day you may leave these walls, and see the world outside of them."

"Why would I want to live in such an awful place?" She sobbed. "A place where men kill men. Where children starve. Where people suffer."

He laughed, not out of mockery, but out of exasperation, pain, and perhaps a tinge of sorrow.

“You see, that is not it at all,” he said. “The world is wondrous, beautiful place. It is only because men try to keep their walls that they beget these awful things.”

For a long time, the passage was silent, even the hounds. Above, a cold wind howled. Below, Zofia’s candle crackled.

“Saxon and Berg killed all of my friends,” said Sanwar after a time. “My friends only wanted to help people. Men like Saxon and Berg only want to help themselves. Men like Rothstein only see others for what they can get from them. Human or otherwise.”

Zofia heard the words, but made no reaction. She stood stone-faced for a time, eyes downcast. The hounds whimpered at her side.

“I will not speak of this to anyone,” she said at last.

“That is wise. Thank you.”

“Good night, Sanwar”

“Good night, Zofia.”

She nodded, and turned back towards the stairs. Those soft, slow footfalls carried her up the steps and back into the library. The stone scraped shut once and for all, leaving Sanwar in the dark just as before.

The hounds whined all night after she was gone.

Monday, January 1st, 1923
Münich, Weimar Republic

Snow fell.

Inge watched it coming down by the of the streetlamp outside her window. She lay on her side with Schnitzel

nestled against her chest, purring as she stroked his chin, her nose and lips pressed into his fuzzy little head.

He was a small comfort, but a vital one, especially now that she was alone. She had left a stone for Hans on her parents' grave. His own parents had moved out to the country years ago, and it took all of Inge's strength not to write them about their son.

Thinking of him brought a heavy sigh. As he knew what pained her, Schnitzel pressed his head into her chin, and mewed. Inge thanked him with some scratches. He wanted to help her, but she knew he could not. Some things could not be helped.

Years passed.

Friends got fewer.

Somehow, she survived.

A knock came at the door. Inge paused, thinking that she had imagined the noise, until it came again, stronger than before. She rose in bed, sending Schnitzel leaping from the blankets. Her bed robe hung from a peg on the wall. She donned it to cover her naked body, then pulled the small caliber revolver from underneath her pillow, and placed it in her pocket.

The knocking came again, but only when Inge was decently equipped, did she answer. With one hand on the lock, and the other on the hidden pistol, she swung it open.

"Jack?"

He stood there, cast in dim streetlight through the hallway's windows. Snowflakes melted on his auburn hair. Blood and dirt smeared his battered coat. Dark circles hung beneath his amber eyes.

"Inge," he rasped in a frosty breath. "Inge, I—"

“Just come inside, damn you,” she said, and pulled him in by the arm.

“Inge, I’m sorry,” he tried to say again. “I had to see-”

She stopped his talking with a kiss.

He pulled her into him, and kissed her back.

“I thought you wanted me to go,” he said, when at last they came undone.

“No. I wanted more than anything for you to stay.”

“Well, I’m here now, lass.”

“Why did you come back?”

“Because we can stop Berg. Von Dreckland. All of them. But I need your help, Inge. We have to call the RSB together first thing tomorrow. We haven’t got much time.”

“Was that the only reason?”

He smiled wanly.

“I’m not standing at anyone else’s door, am I?” He said.

Something warm bloomed deep inside her.

“I’ll tell them all tomorrow,” she promised with a smile.

“Tomorrow,” he agreed.

“Tomorrow,” she said again. “But tonight...can that be mine? Can you come to bed with me? Please, Jack?”

Warm salt tears were in her eyes. He wiped them away with his fingertip.

“Aye, lass. I will.”

She led him there, but did not make it to the bed before she had to kiss him again. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, and his found her waist. As she searched his lips with hers, his hands slid along the small of her back. He moved his head away so that he could kiss her neck, right at the perfect place below her jaw. The stubble of his bearded face scratched her in the most wonderful way.

She let the bed robe fall away. He undid his clothes, and let them fall beside hers.

Together, they lowered themselves onto the bed, and crawled beneath the covers' warmth.

Their eyes met in the darkness.

She lay back, and gave herself to him. The weight of him was a pleasant strain upon her body as she sank deeper into the mattress. His touch was strong, yet moved with great gentility. His hands were kind in their caress. They gratified themselves in her comfort rather than their craving. They moved along the contours of her breasts and hips as if they were a part of her. She reached for him.

The touch of her silken hands upon his cheek was heavenly. The back of her hand stroked his beard, and so he had to take it in his own and kiss it so. She gasped as he entered her. He was sure to move slowly at first, so as not to bring her discomfort.

Her body shuddered a little at first, but ultimately surrendered. She had feared the tenseness of her muscles, but it was gone. The way that she and Jack were together felt as though they had always been. Their bodies were bound. Their ardent skin was clasped together. Their lips were sealed in secret pacts that only they could share.

Inge realized that she was sobbing. All of it was pain and joy, pleasure and sorrow all at once. She could not fight back the tears. She did not want to.

He saw her weep, and slowed.

She begged him not to stop.

Jack did not, nor did he try to stop his own tears from falling. How could he, seeing her like this? Even in the dim, those emerald eyes shone bright and luminous beneath him.

At first he had thought that he was hurting her, but seeing them told him otherwise.

He was not hurting her. He was taking hurts away.

So, he kissed her hard. Their bodies pressed together, she returned his passion, and wrapped her arms tight around his back as he pushed his hips deeper into hers.

He was almost there, and she was too. She kept on kissing him, breathing hot breath into his ear, and pleading that he give her this. Something feral awakened in him when she did, and he bit and clawed at her. That was a hurt she wanted, a hurt she needed, and she begged him for it. There was no one else; no one else she wanted to share this moment with but him; and he wanted nothing but to give it to her.

They felt the rising warmth between their legs.

One last press arched her back, and buried his face in her breasts.

Inge let out one last mournful sob of ecstasy as it happened.

As she collapsed, Jack fell onto her. His tears had pooled upon her skin and wet his burning cheeks.

They lay together for a good long while as outside, the snow came down. The only sound amidst the darkness was their labored breaths.

Inge looked down at the man resting on her chest. A guilty moment panged that she should give herself to someone whom she had only known such a short while, but passed when she reminded herself of who he was and that she felt as though she had known him always.

She ran her fingers through his auburn hair. It was soft, almost puppyish, just like the gentle look in his amber eyes.

Jack returned the gesture, twirling her chestnut curls in his hand. She laughed a little, and wiped the tears from her eyes.

He stroked her arms next. She was surprisingly muscular, for her frame was always hidden beneath that long black coat. He could not help but admire her strength then, physical or otherwise. She was a rare woman, he knew, and like many, more deserving than what her station would allow.

He could not help but kiss her body again.

She motioned for him to kiss her face as well, which he happily obliged.

“I made the right choice with you,” she told him.

“Aye lass,” he said. “So did I.”

After they had cleaned themselves, they got back in bed. They did not sleep at first, however. Jack leaned against the bedframe, holding Inge in his arms. They were silent for a time. He smelled her chestnut hair. She stared emptily out the window at the streetlamps.

Sleep was setting into him. Already today, he had driven from Paris to Amiens and back, then ridden six hours on the train to Munich. He had returned Danny’s bike in rougher shape than he had hoped, explaining that he had nearly been run off the road by a rogue driver. Danny, bless him, asked no questions about the matter nor the urgent, unexpected business that had called Jack back so soon. He and Lucille had simply put money in Jack’s hand, and sent him on the next train out.

The day had been one long string of ordeals, but finally, he was here now, lying in a warm bed with a woman in his arms.

Inge seemed miles away though, her vacant gaze still turned towards the streetlamp.

Eventually, he asked her.

“What’s on your mind, lass?”

“Thinking of tomorrow,” she answered slowly. “And of yesterdays.”

“Which yesterdays?”

“Three years ago,” she said. “When we had tried for change. When we had our Socialist Republic. When Berg and the *Freikorps* rode through this town, and killed us in the streets. Those who didn’t die in street brawls or run away were arrested. Some got prison time. I got two years on weapons charges. The rest got executed.”

“I’m sorry, Inge.”

“Facing Berg again means another shooting match,” she said. “And this one’s all or nothing. Either he dies or we do. There are no other outcomes. There is no middle ground.”

“I know,” said Jack. “But if today should be my last, then I could think of no other way to spend it than with you.”

Her eyes began to water again.

“Have you been with many women, Jack?”

“A few,” he said. “But none like you, Inge.”

“It’s been a long time for me,” she said. “I’ve...avoided it for a while. But nobody, nobody’s ever touched me like that.”

“Then don’t let go of me,” he said, and pulled her closer. “Sleep here beside me, lass. We’ll solve it all tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” she promised.

“Jack?”

“Aye?”

“Do you think God made all this? All the terrible things that happen in the world?”

He did not answer for a time.

“I think they planted the seed of everything, and simply let it grow,” he said at length. “It is for us to decide on how we tend their crops.”

“I’m glad that someone else believes that too.”

Inge nestled her head upon Jack's chest. His arms entwined around her, and held her tight.

Somewhere in the night, Schnitzel found his way under the covers with them. She smiled as he kneaded her with his fuzzy little paws, and snuggled in between her and Jack.

On this cold and wintry night, the three of them fell asleep together as darkness and snowflakes fell.

For tomorrow, good or ill, a new day would dawn.

XV

The Fray Then Follows

“Inge, tell me why you brought *him* back.”

All eyes were on her.

Nearly three dozen of the RSB sat there in the dingy cellar light, waiting for the answer. Sie stood at the chalkboard, arms crossed. Shadows cast from the dimness only exaggerated the glower on their already haggard face, as it did for all the others.

Inge and Jack stood at the entrance of the barrel-passage, a meager pair against an onslaught of ghostly faces. An eternity seemed to pass as Inge scanned each one. Rosa was there, her arm still in a sling, and Otto too, the ash on his cigarette growing larger every second as he waited for the reply. Every member had canceled precious work hours, deserved days off, or time with family to be here, and all of their resentment was now staring her plain in the face.

For a moment, she resented them too. She resented Jack for ever asking her. She resented herself for sacrificing what shred of dignity remained her just because that man had spoken sweetly.

But then, she remembered her purpose, and found her voice.

“Jack can get you Berg.”

The pause hung heavy on the air, before Sie sighed, even heavier.

“You told me that this was an emergency, Inge.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“I don’t believe the man who got my friends killed looking for a magic rock! And neither should you!”

“You have not even listened to him yet-”

“We already did,” Sie corrected her. “We gave him a chance. We gave him a chance to walk away too. Clearly, he is not a man who learns his lessons.”

“He is not your enemy!”

“He doesn’t seem like a friend.”

Inge opened her mouth in protest, but Jack raised a hand to stop her.

He then simply walked down the aisle, through the lines of chairs and beer barrels, past the rows of angry faces to the chalkboard. He produced the diary from his pocket, opened it, and began to draw. The chalk clacked against the board as he scrawled something swiftly. When he finished, he put the piece down with such force that it snapped in two, then turned the board to show the others.

On it, he had drawn exactly what he had shown Inge earlier that evening: three floors’ worth of a map. The walls, gates, and towers were all perfectly placed and rendered.

“This is the entire floor plan of Bodenbug Castle and its surrounding terrain,” Jack declared. He marked a section on its north side. “This is a secret passage that runs underneath the hill where it stands. A small force could sneak inside through this tunnel into the keep, capture it, and immediately control the most fortified position in the castle. That gets you Berg, von Dreckland, and a whole nest of Nazis all in one fell swoop.”

The RSB said nothing.

Sie scrutinized the map for a long while.

“You need to cross more than one hundred meters of open ground just to reach that secret door,” they said, finally.

“There will be a distraction tomorrow at dawn.”

“How?”

“I have someone on the inside.”

“A Nazi?”

“No. An ally.”

Jack had not mentioned this part to Inge. If someone was working for them on the inside, that was a huge advantage. Yet, who could it be? How did Jack even know them?

She had to trust that his information was correct.

“You see!” She said, raising her voice and striding in among their ranks. “He has the intelligence. This is an opportunity. We need to strike now! This is our only chance.”

Sie crossed their arms.

“Inge, this attack will fail. Completely.”

“The only way to know complete failure is to never try.”

“It is too soon. This has not been properly planned out. We cannot just mobilize, and attack tomorrow.”

“We did that for the rally last month.”

“That was different. That was purely defensive. We had no choice but to protect ourselves. Our city.”

Mutters of agreement circulated throughout the gathering. Finally, the RSB was voicing agreement for something. A negative response was still something, Inge figured she would use the commotion to her advantage, if only to incite her comrades.

“This is defensive!” She cried above the din. The others soon quieted. “These men will strike again. They will not stop until all of us are gone. If we only wait until they come here, then we will always be fighting on their terms. A chance like this will not come again. Berg is weak. Jack and I and the others killed many of his men. If we don’t strike now, he will gather his numbers again.”

“This attack risks escalation!” Someone shouted from the crowd.

“The escalation is already happening,” Inge shot back. “Every day, Hitler grows more popular. Every day, my people grow more afraid. At least we can show them that we aren’t done fighting.”

“Inge, this attack could kill us!” Added someone else.

“Then it kills us! At least we died fighting, rather than waiting around for the Nazis to kill us anyway. You speak this way because you are afraid. I know, because I was afraid too. Three years of being afraid was too many. One day is too many. I am tired of living like this. That is why we fought in the first place. It is what Eugen and the others believed in.”

“And look where we are now,” Sie said. Their voice was thick. “Look how few of us there are left, because of that.”

“Few is still some,” Inge replied. “Few is still a chance. How will there ever be a better world if we never try to make it?”

“We do try, Inge,” Sie said sadly. “You know that.”

“I do,” she said, then turned to face everyone. “Everyone here has done more than anyone could ask. But it will be for nothing if men like Berg destroy it and the very people we are trying to protect. It will all be for nothing if we do not trust those who have made equal sacrifices.”

She looked to Jack, who nodded back to her.

“These Nazis have come into our city,” Inge said, returning her attention to the crowd. “They have killed more comrades than we can count. They libel us in the very streets. We live every day beneath them. What would you give for just one day where that was not so?”

Sie shook their head.

“We have tried. Tried and failed. Many of us...we gave everything. What is there left to give?”

“No, what is there left to lose? Really? Half-pay jobs? Failing businesses? Rising rents for worn down housing?”

Sie had no answer for that, other than to turn their eyes to the floor. In fact, no one could keep their eyes on Inge, for when she met their glance, they could only look away.

Only Jack could keep his gaze. His bright eyes beamed at her from across the room. A proud smile was on his face.

For a long while, the room remained in silence.

At last, it was Rosa who spoke first.

“I will go,” she said. “I volunteered the first time, and I will do it again. Someone needs to avenge Hans and our friends. Plus, Berg gave me a bullet as a gift. I would like to return the gesture.”

Otto added his voice next.

“Go boom,” was all he said.

That was enough.

Sie stepped forward next.

“I fear I have been insufferable of late,” they said to her. “I realize how much I have doubted you...everything. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Inge returned. She placed a hand upon their shoulder. “You have done more than many ever will, Sie. I will never forget that.”

“Then let me do one more thing. Let me stand with you again. I owe to our fallen comrades.”

A thin smile sprouted across their weary face. A faint beam was in their eyes, one that Inge had not seen in some years.

“I would be honored,” Inge said.

“If Sie’s in, then I’m in,” said someone at the back.

“And I,” said another.

Soon other voices joined the chorus. Many voiced their approval and will to join; not all, but most. Inge ignored the

ones who did not agree, and focused on the ones who did. Those were her people.

“We need to mobilize at once,” she said to them. “We need to leave tonight. Otto, get some trucks together. Whatever you have to do, do it. We need guns, ammunition, explosives. Any weapon you can get, get it. Everyone bring blankets to sleep in the truck.”

“And white sheets!” Sie added.

Soon, the room was in an uproar. Everyone broke apart into groups, managing logistics, supplies, and lies to tell their employers.

Inge found that she was smiling. Her friends were with her.

And so was Jack.

He crossed to her. She put her hand in his.

“Quite a speech there, lass. I’d follow you all the way to Hell, if you’d asked me after that.”

“It needed to be said.”

“Aye, but it was the way you said it.”

A sudden heat was in her face, and she felt the need to brush aside her curls. She found a way to turn it all into a grin.

“Well, I’ve got the RSB for you, Jack MacGregor,” she sassed. “Now, are you going to help me win?”

“In a way, I already did,” he said with a wink.

In a way, he was right.

Wednesday, January 3rd, 1923

Castle Bodenbug, Republic of Austria

Rothstein had spent all of yesterday concocting their escape. While the castle slept, he and Saxon would slip away

through the dungeon beneath the library, collecting Sanwar as they went. Taggart had gone down to the village the previous evening under the guise of time off, in order to purchase their transportation. He would be waiting for them with several horses at a crossroads just outside of the southern woods.

The journey there would be too difficult in the darkness. Crossing the icy, snowy ground at night was one thing, but the forest would be alive with all manner of animals and natural hazards. All of this was ignoring that Berg's men patrolled the ramparts at all hours of the day. Any light source would attract their notice, so Rothstein and Saxon would need to wait for first light before departing, which then meant that a distraction was required.

Saxon arrived at the laboratory while Rothstein was packing, sleep still in his eyes. He wore his white fur coat, and had his luggage wrapped in linens as Rothstein had instructed. Even in the dim candlelight, Saxon squinted, his usual handsomeness offset by the early hour.

"Taggart had better be there with the fastest horse in Christendom," his lordship growled. The complaint quickly turned into a yawn. "I don't relish toting my trunks all across Austria, or even the damn field for that matter."

Rothstein placed the three elemental ingredients on a rack, then handed it to Rebis for safe storage in a briefcase.

"The Indian can carry your belongings," he told Saxon. "I only require a few items for myself. It will be some effort, but I can manage it enough."

"What about your freak? Won't it be carrying your effects for you?"

"Rebis stays."

Rebis straightened at the mention of its name.

“Someone must be behind to cause commotion,” Rothstein went on. “If we are already waiting at the sally port door when the explosion occurs, our chance of escape is more likely.”

“Explosion?”

“Yes, I have instructed Rebis to set fire to the entire laboratory,” he explained. “That will combust my supply of phosphorus, and cause a more than adequate explosion for our purposes.”

“What about all your research?” Asked Saxon.

“This is all the research we need now.” Rothstein showed him the tablet, the book, and the three items that he had procured. “Rebis has shown me that even unstable tests can yield promising results. Once calcinated in the Celestial Fire, these compounds will create perfection. Besides, we can only carry the essentials. Destroying my efforts means that they shall not fall into another’s hands. I have also instructed Rebis to deal with the Baron and the other afterwards.”

“Marvelous,” Saxon grinned. “That includes Berg, I take it?”

“Naturally. The explosion will either appear as an accident or as Rebis’ doing, as well.”

“You really have thought of everything.”

“That is my line of work, is it not?”

Rothstein slid on his coat, then his own cut of linens over it. He had hemmed the white sheets to fit his dimensions the night before. They covered his outfit like a glove. His briefcase had quite a lot of heft to it, but he lifted it all the same.

“Now Rebis, it is time to-” he began.

Yet, when Rothstein turned, Rebis was gone.

For a brief, furious moment, the Doctor swatted through the overgrown jungle of his lab in search of his creation, but to no avail. He scurried through the undergrowth to the far at the end of the room in a vain attempt to catch them, yet he had nowhere near the creature's speed nor agility.

All he found was an open window and empty spot on his shelf where his flask of phosphorus should have been.

"Rothstein, what's happened?" Saxon demanded, pushing through the leaves a second behind.

Rothstein did not acknowledge him.

He was looking out the window at the north tower. In the wintry light, a tiny figure scaled it like an ant, then slid through the crenels and vanished into the battlements.

"Rothstein!?" Saxon barked.

The Doctor only sighed.

"Run to the library. Now."

The explosion came a few minutes later.

First light came near six.

Second light came soon after, in the form of a brilliant white light and then a giant ball of flame.

Even down in the valley and shaded by the gloomy pines, Jack had to shield his eyes from the blast. The echo thundered across the open ground and rustled the boughs above, sending a sprinkle of green needles down on him. It carried on for miles, then was chorused by an avalanche of stone crumbling off the tower.

Those of the RSB who had been asleep, were now awake. Those who were awake already, were even more so.

In either case, they threw off their white sheets, and arose from the snowy forest ground. Beneath those linens were thick blankets and bedrolls, and each member's rifle and

ammunition. Those were snatched into hand, and positions were assumed at the edge of the tree line; the place where Jack had waited all night with picquets.

They had arrived here the night before. Otto had somehow procured enough trucks to fit everyone, and they had driven all through the night to make camp. Yesterday's snow had thankfully only been a few inches, and not enough to slow their journey. They had parked the vehicles just off road, covered them in canopy, and dug in just outside the clearing. It was almost like being the army again.

Jack grabbed his own rifle into hand, as he tossed aside his makeshift camouflage. His fingers were a little stiff in spite of his thick gloves. He hoped they would warm as the blood kept flowing, and it was certainly flowing now. The group had slept miserably the night before out here in the elements while waiting for dawn, but that waiting was forgotten, as all of them sprang into action and took cover behind the stoutest tree trunks that they could find.

A light snow was falling.

Inge appeared beside him, binoculars in hand. She glanced at the tower through them, but even at this distance, anyone could see that it was a smoking ruin. The crash of falling stone echoed the explosion as another section of it fell away.

"That was the signal, I assume?" She asked him.

"Aye, that was the signal," he laughed. "How's it looking on the ramparts?"

"Chaotic."

"Excellent."

"Now is the time, Jack," said Sie. They lingered behind with anyone who was not fully-abled or had not volunteered to fight. When the others had run, they would load all of the

camping gear back into the trucks, and have the vehicles ready for their escape.

Jack needed no further cues.

“Everybody ready!?” He called out in German. “Let’s run for it!”

Everybody sprinted forward.

This was the real moment of truth. Fighting in the castle would be one thing, but crossing a hundred yards or more of open ground was ten times deadlier. As he pounded towards to the hillside, he heard the shouts of panicked men above, and prayed that their attention would be above them and not below.

He really had not known what Rebis would do. He had bet his life and those of all the others that there would be an explosion. It was rather silly really, and sillier even that they had joined him. Yet, here they were, rushing headlong at a stalwart hillside fortress guarded by squadrons of armed men. Once, he had done the same for a country who had discarded him. Now, he would die gladly for these strangers.

The snow crunched beneath him. His legs were aching after just a few dozen yards, as he had to lift them higher in the snowy ground. Still, that did not slow him. He ignored the pain, knowing that death was worse, and just kept going.

He and Inge kept a pace together, their long legs carrying them faster than most. They reached the rocky base of the hillside first. As the others trickled in behind, the two of them scanned the rocks for the sally port.

All Jack found was bare, blank stone. He cursed himself as his eyes ran over the rock again and again. It would not be the crossing field that killed them, but finding the damn door.

Suddenly, Inge stopped.

“Here!”

She pointed to a natural alcove in the stone. Rounding its bends, he saw a rusted iron door wedged into the living rock. The defile was barely wide enough for a broad-shouldered man like himself to walk through, and the door was thinner still.

Jack ordered everyone to file in behind him, regardless. They walked sideways to the door, which swung inwards. That proved to be a blessing, as it was locked from the inside. So, when Jack pressed his hands into both sides of the defile and gave the door a flying double-kick, the door bashed in all the more easily.

“Hurry!” He whispered to the others. “Someone might have heard us.

The three dozen RSB were inside in seconds. Thankfully, the passage was more forgiving within. Four or five of them could walk abreast along the tunnel. It continued for just a few dozen yards before a staircase spiraled upwards into darkness.

Every fourth person or so flicked on a torch. The others had their rifles ready. Jack and Inge were towards the front, with just a few pointmen ahead of them. Otto was one of them, scanning the darkness for any traps or tripwires.

Progress was quick, but steady. They moved as a thorough unit and completely silently despite their numbers. No one dared speak for fear it might betray them. Fingers were ready on rifle triggers. Jack’s own were supple now. His sweat was soaking into the woolen lining of his gloves.

Eventually, the stairs reached a landing. Beyond it, was another tunnel.

The muffled sounds of shouting men and pounding jackboots pattered overhead.

Here, the pace slowed to a crawl.

Otto advanced farther ahead of the group with his two other pointmen. He carried the light, and they, the rifles.

The trio inched forward. Their breath was visible in the beam of Otto's torch. He sniffed the air, then scowled.

A whiff of the fetid stench wafted back to the ranks. It reeked of rotted meat and shit, and maybe some sort of animal.

Jack wondered about the scent, but dared not call out.

Otto turned back to signal them. He raised a hand to indicate that the column should hold position.

Then, Jack saw the six red eyes glow.

"Otto!"

The little man wheeled around, and screamed.

Jack heard the confusion, but barely saw it.

Hounds snarled, and a chain snapped taut. Otto jumped away, and his torch fell face-first into the floor. A man screamed. Dogs howled. Bones snapped. A gun went off.

Several people shined their lights on the scene again. Otto and one of the men had scurried out of reach in time, but the third had not been so lucky.

A massive, triple-headed hound stood over him, and pinned his body to the ground. All three ripped at him, their long, white fangs tearing at his face and throat. He wriggled as they eviscerated him, even though he was already dead.

Jack and the front rank opened fire.

It cost them each a magazine just to bring the creature down. When the smoke cleared and the ring of gunfire ceased, the beast lay dead beside the body of its victim. Tarry blood drained out from the holes riddled inside its tumorous, misshapen body.

At least the poor beast had died with its eyes closed.

“What in God’s name was that?” Rosa uttered. The pistol in her good hand was shaking. The one in the sling was clutching at the Star of David around her neck.

“Rothstein’s work, I’d reckon,” Jack growled once the hallway and his ears stopped ringing. The rage was rising deep inside him.

“Jack! Jack!”

“Sanwar!”

Someone shined a light down the corridor.

A familiar pair of hands stuck out of the walls of a cell, and waved.

Jack ran to him.

“Get back,” he ordered Sanwar, as he aimed his rifle at the iron gate. A single shot was enough to blow off the lock.

Jack was through the door a second later. He finally smelled what Otto probably had more fully, rotted meat and human refuse.

Sanwar stood before him. He looked haggard and gaunt regardless, but the shadows cast by the torchlight made his friend seem all the more skeletal. His normally impeccable appearance was unkempt and soiled.

Jack hugged him anyway.

“I thought I’d lost you.”

“As did I. You are one tough man to kill, Jack MacGregor, *mo bhrathair*.”

“And you’re one beautiful son of a bitch, *mera bhra*. Can you fight?”

“If you free me of these fetters and give me a gun.”

Sanwar held his arms straight into the air so that Jack could shoot the chain off his handcuffs.

Otto handed him the dead man’s rifle.

“You just missed Saxon, by the way,” Sanwar said.

“He’s here!?”

“He was. He and Rothstein fled at the first sounds of gun shots.”

“Think the rest of the castle heard us?” Asked Jack, falling back in line with the others.

“Who fucking cares?” Said Sanwar, chambering a round. “Let’s kill them.”

Berg was inspecting the morning picquets when the explosion hit. He had been patrolling the parapet along the outer ward with Hauptmann, greeting the men, and seeing to the defenses. The soldiers were grumbling about the snow, knowing that they would have to shovel the next morning, so he thought he might go about and keep their spirits high. He had instituted patrols after the disaster at the rally in case of any future attack, and he was glad for it.

Many of the men were already alert and out of the keep when it suddenly happened.

A deafening blast erupted behind him. The castle shook. The shockwave nearly sent him over the crenels and into the snow banks below. A few stray pebbles of debris arced over the keep, and clattered against his helm and backside as he lay flat against the parapet.

After a long while, Berg recovered his footing. He helped Hauptmann and the nearest sentries do the same. The men were cursing. In the aftershock, all of them sounded like they were underwater. It would take several minutes before the effect subsided, he knew.

What he did not know, however, was what had happened. Had they been hit by a shell? Where then was the artillery? Somebody had attacked them.

“What the fuck was that?” Hauptmann’s warbled voice was asking.

Berg turned around to face the keep.

The north tower lay in smoking ruin. Steam was rising with the smoke from snow melted in the heat of the explosion. Soot and stone were crumbling off the sides of a gaping hole. Several of his men had been stationed in there. They would be little more than vapor now.

“Captain, hold the outer ward!” He ordered Hauptmann.

Berg took off towards the keep. His long legs carried him faster than most men, and he was on parapet of the inner ward soon enough. He waved the sentries there to him.

“Did anybody see anything!?” He asked them. He was aware that he was yelling, but that was the only way that he could hear his own voice.

The men shook their heads.

“Stay alert,” he ordered. “We might be under attack.”

“Should we install the machine-gun, sir?” Asked Bauer, the corporal on duty. He dusted off the flakes collecting on his overcoat.

“Yes, do it now.”

Berg had brought the gun with his company when they had first arrived in Bodenburg. He had hardly expected to use it, as the gun was only meant for defending fixed positions, but now, he feared that they would have need of the occasion.

The Major raced down the stairs of the wall and inside the keep. The rest of his men were running about the halls in search of him. Some were still in their bedclothes, but had helmets on and weapons in hand. They stood to attention when they saw him enter.

That made him proud.

“Orders, sir?” Asked Holz, one of his senior sergeants.

“Get two men on the south tower, see if you can tell what happened to the north, and keep an eye out for enemies. The rest of you secure the civilians in their quarters, then get yourselves into battle stations. This could be an attack.”

“An attack! Are they here!? Have the damn communists appeared!?”

This shouting came from the far end of the hall.

The Baron had chosen to appear. He was still in his bed robes, yet had an antique pistol in his hand. The damn thing was a flintlock from early last century, likely the closest firearm that the old, fat man had on hand in his bedchamber. Red-faced, he waved the thing about at invisible enemies.

Berg marched over, and snatched the thing away.

“Confine yourself to quarters, Baron.”

“I can fight, damn you!”

“I SAID NOW!”

Berg snarled at him, but the Baron did not flinch.

“This is my castle, and I will defend it like any other man—”

Sergeant Holz silenced the Baron with a swift rifle blow to his ample gut. The Baron staggered, but it was the all the distraction that the VSG needed for two men to grab and secure him.

“You will thank me later, *mein Herr*,” Berg called to him as they heaved von Dreckland away. “But now is the time for real men to act.”

Those men set about immediately to carrying out their order. Berg himself went to the battlements of the keep. He would get the best view from up there, to see where the enemy was coming. As he did, he passed a man descending from the second floor, an old soldier named Achterhof with a black mustache that was fading to gray.

“Heard the orders, sir. I’m on my way to relay word back to the Captain.”

“Good. Any sign of Saxon or the damn Doctor?”

“Not in their quarters or the laboratory, sir.”

“Tell the first man you see to find them. Keep them locked in a room under double guard. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

They went their separate ways.

Perhaps their enemy was not outside the castle, Berg thought, but within.

Either way, he would have his chance.

Rothstein and Saxon had almost made it to the library when all of the commotion started. Berg’s unmistakable voice was barking orders from the Great Hall. Even with their ear drums ringing, the two men could hear the VSG thundering about the place a moment later.

He and Saxon had just exited the south tower as the corridors were swarmed with soldiers. Saxon instinctively shoved them into the nearest room before anyone caught sight of them.

That happened to be the kitchen. Von Dreckland slept late, so the cooks had not yet come to prepare his breakfast. Saxon glided across the stone floors, practically carrying Rothstein in tow. Together, he passed the ovens and countertops, and crossed to the scullery where he promptly thrust the Doctor and himself inside.

They stood in the dark with only a sliver from underneath the door and a slim window behind to light the room. Around them, the larder was stuffed with grains, fruit, salt meats, and leafy greens. Rothstein had half a mind to pocket

some of the stuff for the road, when the kitchen door swung open outside.

A soldier shouted if anyone was inside, before abandoning the room and running off.

Still, they waited until they heard the pattering of jackboots go overhead then pass, and for the sound of shouting to become fainter and fainter. Only when the ground floor was quiet, did they emerge.

The hallway was silent, though some muffled talking could be heard in rooms above. Women's voices sounded in addition to the soldiers. They must have been calming panic among the servants.

Rothstein tuned out the sounds, and scurried over to the library doors. Saxon continued at a leisurely pace, although with his long legs, he achieved the same effect.

They went inside. Rothstein pulled back the book to open the secret hatch in the floor. Once he and Saxon were safely below, he was sure to close the portal using the lever on the passage wall beside the stairs.

As soon as he did, he heard a sniff, a growl, then a whimper. Six red eyes gleamed in the darkness. Rothstein stepped forward, and flicked on a torch. Instinctively, the hounds shrunk away from him.

"Good dogs," he told them. It would be a shame that he would have to abandon his creation, but science often required sacrifices.

"Rothstein?" Dhamija's weary voice called out from the shadows. "Was that an explosion?"

The Indian stood with his hands upon the bars. His bleary eyes moved between Saxon and the Doctor.

Rothstein approached the cell, and whipped out his key ring.

“It is now time for us to leave this place,” he told his prisoner. “Come quietly if you at all value your life.”

The man’s confusion likely prevented his resistance. Rothstein fiddled with the keys and reached for the lock, then stopped.

The steel chain had clinked as the hounds had gotten to their feet. They did not growl, but remained on edge, their back straightened with the hair on end. All three heads were sniffing the air.

Rothstein abandoned the keys, and turned off his light.

“Go,” he told Saxon. “Now.”

“What’s wrong?” Saxon whispered.

“Just go.”

They pulled the lever again, ran out, and closed the hatch behind them with the book.

Not long after, the muffled cracks of riflery sounded beneath the floor.

Rothstein and Saxon hurried out into the hall.

“What now?” Saxon demanded.

“I know another way, but we must go through the Baron’s chamber.”

“Must we?”

“Yes.”

“...Fine.”

They continued down the hall in the opposite direction from the one that they had come.

A challenge rang out from behind only after they had made it a few paces.

“*Halt!*”

They turned.

A VSG man stood was running behind them. This one was seasoned, as evidenced by his salt and pepper hair and graying

mustache. He froze when they saw him, and only resumed his approach after he had unslung his rifle. He was careful not aim it at them, but he did not need to.

“Berg has ordered you to remain in your quarters-” the soldier began, then stopped again. His eyes suddenly narrowed on them. “Wait. Why are you in your coats?”

Saxon snapped his fingers.

The man burst apart in a spray of gore.

His lordship looked down his coat, and groaned. He dabbed his finger on the single drop of blood that stained his chest.

“The bastard ruined my coat.”

“No time for that,” Rothstein hissed. “This way!”

“I’m coming,” Saxon said. He rolled his eyes, and strolled after Rothstein.

Even when the enemy was at the gate, Lord Saxon was never in a hurry.

The Baron’s chamber door was locked, but with another snap of Saxon’s fingers, the lock burst off, and he kicked the door in.

Von Dreckland and his wife were cowering on the bed inside. The woman yelped at the sight of them. The Baron had been nursing his stomach until he saw them enter, then went for his gun. Saxon snatched the antique pistol from his hands, and clubbed him on the temple so that he fell unconscious. Then, he turned the weapon on the Baroness.

“Make a sound, and I’ll fucking kill you,” he told her.

She stayed quiet.

“Rothstein, which way?”

“Here, my lord.”

Rothstein moved to behind the dais where the bed stood, over to a semi-circular section of the room. He pressed a loose stone on the wall, which released a section of the floor.

A hidden staircase led down into the dark.

“This way,” Rothstein urged.

His lordship paused, however, and kept his pistol on the Baroness for just a moment longer.

“Be a dear and don’t tell anyone we’ve been in, if you please” He ordered. “And shut the door on our way out, would you?”

Jack, Sanwar, and the thirty or so RSB were through the hatch, and stacked against the library door. Inge gave the signal, and two men threw open the double doors. Two teams rushed in to secure either end of the hallway, while the third hung back, watching another set of double doors across the way that led to the Great Hall. Once the passageway was cleared, the third team advanced and fell in with the others.

All they found in the hallway was the bloody ruin of a corpse.

“Jesus,” Jack swore under his breath.

He liked this hallway none at all, not only for that, but for the fact that passages could easily become a death trap. A bullet that might miss one soldier could hit the one behind him when they were filed this tightly. They would need to secure higher ground sooner rather than later, which meant assaulting the stairs.

First, the third team worked on clearing the ground floor, starting with the Great Hall. Jack led the third team through the double doors, ready for a fight, but found it empty. Unfinished breakfasts were the only evidence that anyone had been here previously. The team barred the main doors,

and quietly placed one of the clean trestle tables to secure it, in case anyone was still out in the ward and wanted to come in. They then returned to the hallway, and cleared each of the other rooms in turn.

The first of them was the Baron's chamber. Von Dreckland was inside clutching his bloody head while his wife tried to tend to him. He gasped when the RSB came through the door, and raised his hands in surrender.

"Don't shoot him," Inge ordered.

"Thank you—"

"The shots will give us away. Slit his throat instead."

"No!"

The RSB threw him to the ground. One went for a knife, but Jack stopped them.

"Who hit you?" He asked von Dreckland.

"Saxon, right before he ran away."

"Where?"

"There is a secret passage behind the bedside," he said. "It leads down into the valley as an escape."

Jack looked to where the Baron had pointed.

He then looked back to Inge.

Her expression said everything.

"Keep a guard on them," he told one of the RSB. "We need to question him later. Everyone else, with me."

The split into two groups, and ran down a series of cloisters which flanked a central courtyard. A hallway at the end connected them, and there, the RSB continued clearing rooms. All of them were empty, as there were no quarters on this floor, though Jack imagined that there would be a number of servants living on the one above, and dreaded the potential of civilian casualties.

Once the floor had been secured, everyone turned their attention to the two towers on either side of the hall. Since the north tower had been destroyed, that only left the south.

“Most of Berg’s men are up there,” Sanwar warned Jack, knowing his thoughts. “They will be securing the second floor and the battlements above that in all certainty.”

Jack nodded, scratched his mustache, and wiped the sweat off his brow. His palms were soaked inside the gloves too, though he dared not remove them for fear that he may lose grip of his weapon in the heat of battle.

“Only one way to go then,” he shrugged.

The group advanced on Inge’s signal.

Stairs were worse than hallways. They were just as confined, but a soldier had to fight an uphill battle, which made him even slower. All the while, the enemy was just waiting at the top for anyone to step into their kill zone. Worse yet, this was a spiral staircase, which meant the enemy had cover in addition to the high ground.

Jack hated it.

Inge motioned for three volunteers to be the assault team. Otto stepped forward, along with a dark-haired man and a slim woman. They ascended single file while the others guarded the landing.

Otto went first. Jack peered into the stairwell as he climbed, watching him crouch so low to the steps that he was practically crawling over them. The other two tried to do the same, but moved much more awkwardly.

Footsteps clattered from above. The trio rolled over to one side, and flattened against the curve of the staircase. Jack ducked back as well, to where he was partially concealed by the doorway but still had some line of sight on his comrades. He trained his rifle upwards.

Two VSG men were coming down the stairs. He could tell by the dialogue between them. One was saying something about an accident, the other about looking for Saxon. He could hear the heaviness of their boots upon the stone.

As the first man rounded the bend, Otto stuck out his rifle butt, and tripped him. The VSG man shouted as he went headfirst down the stairs. His fellow called out for him, thinking that he had tripped, until Otto turned the rifle butt around to club him to death.

This second man was quicker than the first, and dodged the blow while bringing his submachine gun to bear. Otto desperately tried to get his own weapon on line in time, but the longer gun was less maneuverable in these confined spaces, and so the little sapper found himself in the enemy's sights.

The dark-haired man came to his rescue thankfully, and stepped out from the wall to put two rounds in the Nazi's chest.

However, the body sunk like bricks, and slid down the stairs to knock the dark-haired man off his feet. Both he and the dead man spilled down the staircase wrapped together, and landed in a bloody pile atop the first man who had fallen.

A shout of alarm came from upstairs.

"Shite," cursed Jack, and ran for the steps. The element of surprise was lost now, and the only solution was to rush in and fill the gap as fast as possible.

Only, Inge caught him by the arm, and yanked him back into the hall.

A second later, a stick grenade clattered down the steps, and exploded.

Jack coughed and waved away the smoke. His ears were ringing, and he was more than a little shaken about, but he was alive.

That was more than he could say for the dark-haired man and the VSG whom Otto had tripped. Their soot-stained bodies lay at the landing in a lifeless heap.

The RSB was already passed them though, charging through the door and into the tower. They went a pair at a time, one person covering the other as they climbed.

“Now rush!” Inge shouted.

Jack followed her into the smoke.

They worked together as a pair, following the others. Each took one side of the staircase, not only for cover, but so that they could keep their spacing and the tower would not get crowded. As soon that happened, they would all be easy targets.

Otto and the slim woman were screening everyone’s advance. Their fire was pitiful against the enemy’s, but it was the only cover that they could give. From above them, the VSG rained down heavy automatic fire. An RSB was hit, and the others knew now to stand aside and let them fall.

Another grenade came tapping down the steps right after the body.

Jack ran in, and grabbed the handle as it tumbled down, stick over head. He threw it back as soon as he had it, then flattened himself on the stairs.

An explosion burst a moment later.

Jack was already on his feet, screaming in Gaelic as he rushed for the upstairs landing. He took the steps three at time with his great long legs, and cleared them.

At the top, One VSG man was dead, another wounded, and a third was fumbling on his bandolier for another

magazine. He had likely thrown the grenade to cover his reload, and was now caught out in the open.

Jack put a round into his torso.

The slim-woman came in just behind him, and rammed her rifle butt into the wounded man's spine while he tried to drag his broken body up the steps to the third floor. The vertebrae snapped audibly.

Jack swung to face the doorway.

A squad of men was running down the second floor hallway towards him.

He fired a few rounds at them before they could likewise. They scattered, retreating to the safety of a turn at the end of the passage. His shots were ragged, but one grazed the rearmost man in the leg. Two of his fellows ran back for him, and dragged him to safety. Jack would have used the chance to shoot them down had he not just spent his clip.

There was a turn on his end of the hall as well, so he ducked around it, and used the lull to reload.

A second later, Inge and the slim woman were through the door and into the hall.

Inge reached Jack's cover, but the other RSB woman was not so lucky. A tirade of automatic fire brought her down, and torn chunks of the stone off around Jack's ear. He cursed, and edged farther from the corner.

"Scheisse!"

That was Inge cursing.

Jack turned to his left, and saw why.

Several men had rounded the corner to their left. He and Inge were now flanked, and if they ran back to the stairs, they would run headlong into the other squad's line of fire.

Inge shot the leading man, then turned her rifle on the door across from them, and fired. If there was a lock on it, there was not anymore.

She ran through the portal at full speed. Jack followed, covering her with a few rounds as the VSG men opened fire on them.

They burst into an infirmary while the bullets hissed behind them. Their appearance brought startled yelps from the half dozen or so men recovering there. Some were completely bedridden, but the less injured ones rose in their cots, and shouted for help. One even grabbed his bedpan, and chucked it at Inge. She responded by plugging him in chest face with a round.

The others cowered under their beds after that, but there was no time for them. Jack and Inge found some unoccupied beds, and overturned them to face the door. They were not much good for cover, as bullets would punch through a mattress like onionskin, but they did provide concealment at the very least. He and Inge leveled their rifles on the mattresses, ready for a fight, until a familiar clatter sounded on the floor.

“Aw fuck!”

Yet another grenade had landed into the center of the room.

The injured men screamed.

Jack leapt over his bed to throw it back.

He could not reach the grenade in time, so settled on kicking it over to the injured men instead.

It slid across the stone, and exploded, killing the rest of them.

Still, the blast knocked Jack on his arse, though thankfully he landed on a bed right next to Inge and not the floor.

“Right where you belong,” she said, looking down at him.

“In your bed?” Jack groaned.

Inge winked, then shot over at the door just as a man stepped through it. The attacker fell back, but not before his gun burst hit a pillow, spewing wild feathers into the air.

Jack coughed, spat one out, then rolled over the mattress to take his place at Inge’s side.

Another VSG wrapped his gun around the doorway, and fired in with quick bursts. Jack and Inge shot back to repel him.

Down the hall, the staccato crack of rifle shots rang out. The automatic crackle of submachine guns crescendoed in response. Heavy fighting had resumed at the tower landing. The RSB would be trying to breach the door while the VSG down the hall would be trying to suppress them.

Yet, Jack could not worry about them right now.

His focus was solely on the door in front of him, so that he could guard Inge while she hammered in another clip.

The VSG man ducked around the corner again. This time, he barely got off a few rounds before Jack sent him back once more with his last few shots. By then, Inge was ready, and assumed the guard position while Jack reloaded. She only needed to fire off one warning shot before he rejoined.

With that, both of them were in a fighting stance again.

However, the door was troublingly silent. The VSG were still there, he knew, but waiting. After all, they had the stronger defensive position, so they could afford to wear them down.

It was then that Jack realized they had gotten wise to his plan. A surprise attack only succeeded if it maintained momentum.

Right now, the RSB’s was grinding to a halt.

The enemy just had to wait until it stopped completely, then they would strike the final blow.

The valley was empty.

Berg had rounded the keep's entire battlements three times over, and had seen no sign of any enemy advancement. There was no artillery to speak of, nor infantry, and yet, somehow the north tower had been obliterated. All he saw out there in the valley were swathes of gray-green trees, a blank white sky, and silvery falling snow.

His men were shivering from the wind, having left their greatcoats behind in order to rush to their defenses. Not even the mightiest castle could defend them from the elements. For a good long while, they had been freezing and shaking while trying to hold their positions along the ramparts, until of course, the first shot had sounded.

Berg had known at once that they had been infiltrated.

The rhythm of the battle began soon after, the call and response that came in a firefight. That had shaken the cold right out of all of them. They grabbed their weapons, and looked to Berg for orders while he assessed the situation.

A third of the VSG were with him on the battlements, ready to repel any attacks from the surrounding woodlands. Nobody had expected the attacks to come from below.

Regardless, someone was inside the castle and killing the rest of his men. About two squads' worth were on the second floor, fighting for their lives against this sudden surprise attack. Another two were manning the inner and outer wards with Hauptmann.

Berg ran to the front of the keep to signal them. His deputy was already at work when he got there, having sent one squad to try and open the main doors. Looking straight

down, he watched as the ten men shot their guns and slammed their bodies into the massive double doors to no avail.

“It’s barred!”

“Turn the gun around, and blow it open!”

Hauptmann nodded, and called the men back to the gatehouse. His three-man gun team hefted the heavy machine gun off its stand, and spun it around to face the massive double doors into the Great Hall.

They fired.

In seconds, the door was splinters and sawdust.

Once it was down, Hauptmann sent the squad in again to assault the ground floor.

Berg then rallied his men by the south tower.

“One squad stays in reserve with me to cover our rear,” he told his most senior sergeant. “The other goes down with you to reinforce Hauptmann’s assault.”

“Yes sir.”

At a certain point, Sanwar stopped seeing at what he was shooting. The tower had become so filled with gun smoke that the enemy probably could not see them either. All either side could do was hear the other firing back and feel when they were hit by them.

Sanwar knew that Jack and Inge were trapped somewhere down the hall, but also knew that he was powerless to reach them. The only way to save them was for the RSB to fight their way through onto the second floor, and that was looking slimmer with every passing second. The battle had fallen into a familiar rhythm as the RSB had stopped advancing. Both sides were locked in place and trading blows with one another, which then meant that all the RSB’s

momentum had gone stagnant. Everything had just devolved into a loud, cacophonous slugfest.

Yet somewhere above the din, Sanwar heard another sound.

He wheeled around in time to see a VSG man come down the stairs and bring his gun to bear.

Sanwar had his on line faster, and shot him dead with the last bullet in his clip. Another man was coming down right behind though, so he snatched Otto by the collar, and dragged him back towards the ground floor.

“Retreat! Retreat!” He shouted as he passed the others on the staircase. This he said in English, but the message was understood anyway.

Everyone made out of the tower before a grenade came flying down the steps after them. It exploded on the landing, sending a dust cloud through the doorway.

At that exact time, shouts rang out from down the halls.

The RSB currently stood at the corner of two corridors beside the tower. The VSG had appeared down each of them to flank the position in a pincer attack. They fired as they ran, not caring for accuracy, but to suppress their enemy with a barrage of lead.

The RSB sprang into action in response, splitting in half to cover each side. They leapt into empty rooms for cover if they, and fired back.

The ground floor quickly became a battleground, and the corridors were filled with smoke and fire.

Sanwar’s interest was on the tower, though.

It was at their rear, and still had enemies assaulting it. If the RSB lost it, then they had no retreat, and they were dead.

He immediately reloaded, and rushed into the landing.

He could not have done so any sooner.

A VSG came down the stairs right as Sanwar had chambered a round. He shot at the attacker without aiming, which drove the man back behind the spiral. The man stuck his gun out from around the turn, and fired wildly in response. The shots were not aimed precisely, but served to repel Sanwar, who pressed himself against the far wall to avoid being hit.

That distraction allowed for a second man to rush past down the stairs, and attack the position.

He would have shot Sanwar just then, had Rosa not appeared from the hall and unloaded an entire pistol magazine into him. His body dropped to the landing with several holes.

A third man ran the steps down to shoot at her, but Sanwar slid across the floor, and repaid the favor by shooting him in turn.

The second dead man joined the other on the ground.

Sanwar and Rosa leaped back to the far wall to avoid another blast of gunfire from the stairs.

Rosa reloaded her pistol in the interim. In the heat of battle, she had undone the sling so that she could at least load and cock the weapon. Still, she could only hold it with her good hand, and seven pistol rounds were a paltry few against an onslaught of submachine gun fire.

“How many on the stairs do you think?” She asked him in English.

“At least six more,” he answered.

German squads usually numbered about ten, and only three had been accounted. Of the two dead, one was still in pajamas, while the other had no jacket on his uniform. He did have a few grenades, which Sanwar looted.

Meanwhile, outside of the tower, bullets were flying. The wounded and the dying on both sides screamed.

Sanwar glanced back at the staircase.

“We must break through,” he said. “Otherwise, we are trapped for good.”

“We charge then,” said Rosa. “It is the only way.”

Sanwar sighed.

A familiar clapping sound came down the stairs.

The grenade landed in between them.

Sanwar kicked one of the bodies on top of it.

The corpse absorbed most of the explosion, but three men came running down in the distraction. Rosa shot one, and then took some bullets from another. Sanwar shot one, and rushed the other. They struggled in a melee. It ended when Sanwar threw him to the ground, and clubbed his face in with his rifle butt.

“Come on!”

Rosa was urging him up the stairs, waving him on with her pistol. Blood was running down face, neck, and side. She had a piece of shrapnel in one eye. Yet, she was running up the steps as if she did not feel it.

Sanwar followed her.

They ran, taking several steps at a time.

There were several shouts from the landing above.

Sanwar slowed, and withdrew one of the grenades.

“Wait,” he whispered to Rosa, but she was not listening to him.

“Wait!” He tried to say again.

Rosa snatched the grenades out of Sanwar’s hands.

“No!”

He could not stop her, though.

As she ran up the steps, she yanked the cap out of the grenade stick with her teeth. She rounded the spiral a second later.

There were shouts of surprise and then a blast.

Sanwar chased after her once the dust had settled.

The last few VSG men lay dead in the landing. Rosa lay in pieces.

He ran back to the others. The VSG were running when he got there, having met stiff resistance, and superior numbers. A few of the RSB had fallen, but they had taken more of the enemy with them, and so the VSG retreated for the safety of the inner ward.

While the others celebrated, Sanwar turned to Otto.

“We’re through.”

Jack and Inge abandoned their rifles for their enemies’ grenades and submachine guns. Once re-armed, they glanced out of the infirmary and down either side of the corridor. To their right was the entrance to the tower where the RSB were fighting.

The left was quiet though, so they decided to head that way in the hopes of getting around the enemy and flanking them.

They went slowly, clearing each room they passed one at a time. Most were servants’ quarters with servants cowering inside, of course. In each room, Inge hushed them and ordered everyone to hide under their beds. Only an elderly butler disobeyed and almost shouted to alert the VSG, but Inge smacked him with her pistol butt, knocking him out cold onto one of the beds.

The hall then split at an intersection. They could either continue straight or go right.

They paused here to determine the best course of action, yet the answer was almost given to them.

A commotion from the tower drew their attention. Suddenly, all of the shooting stopped, and a flurry of running feet echoed in the stairwell.

For whatever reason, the RSB were retreating, but rather than try in vain to rejoin them, Jack and Inge darted down the passage to the right.

They had only gone a few yards before the shooting resumed from inside the tower and below them.

Voices sounded from ahead as well.

Around the corner at the end of the hall, jackboots clacked against stone.

Jack and Inge threw themselves into the nearest room, and shut the door behind them.

Immediately, they were hit by an oppressive steaminess. They had entered into some sort of conservatory, wildly overgrown and thick with foliage. The air was so heavy that it was nigh unbreathable, yet the two of them held their breath and held still.

In the silence, Jack saw lines of chemicals shelved upon the wall. He paused in recognition, then sobered as a sound drew his attention back towards the hall.

The voices loudened as they hurried past the door.

Given the volume, Jack guessed that there were four or five of them. He waited until they had run a distance down the hall before he turned to Inge.

She nodded to him.

He threw the door open. She leaped out, gun pointed at the enemy's backside, and fired.

Her flurry cut the VSG men down.

Jack rushed in after she was empty to finish any survivors with his sword.

They searched the bodies, which were short on ammo. Not even all of the men were fully dressed or armed. The VSG were certainly mounting a strong defense, although they certainly were not prepared for one.

That was a promising sign.

At least it was until one of the VSG shot at them from around the corner. Jack and Inge retreated to the conservatory again, and traded bursts with their enemies down the hall.

Their response was sporadic though, and Jack suspected that not many were left on the floor.

There were fewer after Inge tossed one of the grenades down the hall at them. It burst, sending forth a scream.

Jack and Inge rushed forward to breach the gap.

When they came around the corner, one man lay dead while two others were recovering from the daze. Inge shot one in the guts, but he kept on running at her with a spiked club. He swung and hit the wall, sending off sparks.

The other shoved Jack against the wall with his empty gun, pressing into him with both hands on the weapon. Jack grabbed a bayonet off the other man's belt, and stabbed him several times without, and yet that seemed not to slow him. So, Jack rammed a knee into his chest, knocked him back a little, then kicked him fully away.

The VSG man stumbled, recovered, and came back again.

Jack aimed his weapon, but it jammed.

He ditched it, and tried to draw his sword, but the man got to him first.

He slammed Jack against the wall a second time, to which Jack slammed him back. This time, the man tripped over his

dead friend, and fell onto the floor. Jack drew his sword, and skewered him, ending it.

He looked to Inge.

The club man was swinging brutally, yet she was dodging every blow. Finally, she got around him, and smashed him in the nose with her hammer. A second blow caught him on the collarbone. A third took him at the base of the neck as he doubled over.

When was dead, Jack and Inge fixed their weapons and glanced around the bloody floor.

Nobody was left.

An explosion rumbled in the tower.

They ran down the hall, and took a right. They reached the tower, and found the bodies there.

Noises came from down the stairs. Jack and Inge instinctively turned their weapons towards it, until they saw Sanwar, Otto, and the others all covered in blood.

Everyone regrouped in the hallway. The RSB had only lost nine between the killed and wounded.

What they were short on was ammunition. After inspection, most of the RSB were either out or close to it. Even scavenging rounds from the dead was scarce, as the VSG had expended most of their supply as well.

“Floor’s clear,” said Jack.

“As is ours,” said Sanwar.

“That just leaves the battlements,” said Inge, looking up the stairs. “Berg is waiting there. I know it.”

“Berg cannot abandon the high ground,” Sanwar assessed. “Nor does he have enough men to assault the lower floors again. Likewise is true for those left in the ward, which would be twelve or so by my reckoning.”

“But we cannot retreat either,” Inge pointed out. “For we have nowhere to run. So we must take the high ground, no matter what our ammo count. And Berg hasn’t even fired a round up there.”

“Precisely.”

“Aye, we must take it,” Jack agreed. “But nobody’s going anywhere right now, so that gives us a little time...”

Sanwar sighed.

“Dare I ask what are you thinking?”

Jack grinned.

Silence troubled Berg more than any sound of battle.

If he could hear the battle, he could at least attempt to solve what was happening within it. Silence though, betrayed nothing.

The men were shaking. Whether it was from nerves or the cold, Berg could not tell. He had them waiting at the entrance of the south tower, ready to fire at the first sign of an enemy coming up the stairs. Their hands would have been white-knuckled on their weaponry were they not turning orange and purple in the frost.

The snow was thickening on the ramparts. Soon, it might be ankle deep. They could not stay out here forever, but that meant risking a downward assault, right into where several squads of his men had likely died already.

“Prepare to attack,” Berg announced at last. “We either die fighting or die freezing.”

“Die fighting,” the men agreed.

“Then, I will meet you in Valhöll,” he said, and drew his heavy revolver.

“In Valhöll,” the men replied together.

They fell in behind him, his beautiful *einberjar*. There was no prouder sight for him than a final manly brotherhood, one body, one mind, and one soul bound together, expressing love through force of action.

The VSG had only made into the tower doorway when the explosive flew out of the stairwell, and landed in their midst.

“Run!”

Everyone fled the tower as white smoke erupted from what once been a stick grenade. Now emptied of its gunpowder, it had become the vessel for potent lachrymator.

The men were tearing at the eyes, but had escaped the brunt of the blast. They retreated to the destroyed north tower to escape the fumes, and in doing so, had doomed themselves.

Charging from the cloud, came forth the RSB. They tore off makeshift bandanas fashioned from bedsheets and uniforms as they rushed onto the snow, screaming like mad bats straight out of Hell.

Leading their charge was the twisted, snarling face of a man who had caused him so much ire, a man named Jack MacGregor.

This time, Berg would kill him.

He lowered his pistol, and fired.

Sanwar took the steps three or four at a time. While the others had run out onto the battlements, he had gone alone up the final flight of stairs, which led to the donjon of the tower.

He spilled out onto the top, and found a single man standing guard. He was watching the white smoke and subsequent melee below, and trying to find a clean shot amidst the chaos.

His back was to the steps, so Sanwar decided to save his valuable ammunition by shoving him through the crenels. The man did not even notice Sanwar until the last moment. His face twisted in confusion right as he went sliding between the merlons. He had only let out half a scream before he collided headfirst with a merlon on the battlements below, then bounced off of it, hurtled over the walls of the keep, and went tumbling down the cliff face.

Sanwar immediately took a sniper's position facing west. The RSB had Berg's squad occupied at present, but there was still another one outside with Hauptmann who needed to be handled. The tower was tall enough so that he could peer over the keep and down into the inner ward, where indeed, the reserve squad was assembling for another assault on the castle. Hauptmann was shouting orders, and getting about ten or fifteen men into formation to charge the main doors again. They had of course seen the explosion and heard the fighting atop the keep, and knew that they were the only hope to rescue Berg.

Conversely, Sanwar was the only hope at guarding the RSB's rear from a counterattack, so he chambered a round and steadied his aim.

He had the best view on the machine gun crew, who remained fixed in place atop the gatehouse, so he aimed there. His first shot instantly alerted everyone to his presence. He pinged the gunner in the helmet, spurting blood from it. The dead man rolled over. While everyone else scrambled for cover, he took another shot at the assistant gunner, and hit him in the side as he tried to assume the gun. The last man was the barrel changer, who ducked for cover behind a merlon before Sanwar could get him. His third shot hit solid stone as the man's helmet vanished from sight.

By then, the VSG had found him out in the tower. Hauptmann shouted an order, and several men ran back up a flight of stairs to the gatehouse. Sanwar fired his two rounds, and hit one of them, but it was not enough. Three others replaced the dead gun crew, and had the weapon trained on the south tower before he even had a chance to reload.

Sanwar jumped into the stairwell, and sprinted down the steps.

Seconds later, a hail of gunfire tore the stone apart above him.

Chaos had erupted all around.

The VSG and RSB and slammed together. No longer was this a military skirmish, but a barroom brawl. Knives stabbed. Clubs smashed. Some fought with tooth and nail, fist and foot. Inge smashed a man down with a hammer. Otto threw a cherry bomb in a VSG man's face. An RSB woman fell back bleeding from the throat. A man near her was stomped to death beneath a hobnailed boot. A wail of machine gun fire rattled overhead. White smoke lingered in the air. Hot blood spilled out onto the snow, and melted and it.

Jack saw Berg across the field. There was no mistaking him, towering above the others. Jack charged, sword and pistol in his hand.

Berg fired at him with his huge revolver.

The bullet whizzed past Jack's ear, so he returned the favor.

His own shot missed, but he kept on charging. Berg rushed forth to meet him, both men firing as they ran. Most of Berg's naturally went too high, though the last one grazed Jack's collar. One of Jack's went wide, another killed a man

beside Berg, and three more went straight into the big man's thighs and side, but did not slow him.

The two men collided in the middle, and their duel began.

Berg swung at Jack with his pistol butt, now that the gun was empty.

Jack ducked under, then came back up and sliced a cut across the back of Berg's hand. The slash was not enough to hurt him badly, but plenty to make him drop the pistol.

However, the Major drew his massive knife just as quickly with his off hand and brought it immediately to bear.

Jack danced away out of measure from Berg's afterblow. He jammed his own pistol back into his holster so that he had a free handle to grapple.

Berg advanced, switching the gigantic sword-like knife into his right hand. He raised his arm to swing...

Then Inge stepped in from out of nowhere, and pulled her revolver on him at point blank range. All six rounds went into his torso.

The Major staggered, recovered, then lunged at her with renewed fury.

His blade swung at her in wide, sweeping cuts. The combined length of his arm and weapon could far outreach even a tall woman like Inge. She had no choice but to pedal back to avoid that wicked sword.

Yet, she could not move back fast enough to escape his reach.

Berg's blade swung dangerously close. Inge thrust her hammer in the way, and blocked it from hewing into her neck, but the force of his weapon against the wooden haft of hers flung the hammer from her grip.

With Inge now defenseless, Berg turned his weapon around on her for a backswing.

Jack jammed *Lann Dhearg* in the way.

Its keen white edge bit into Berg's knife, and bound the two together. The big man may have had superior strength, but Jack had the superior leverage as his blade was bearing down on Berg's. *Lann Dhearg* turned the other sword aside, which gave Jack an opening for a thrust.

He poked a hole between Berg's ribs several inches deep. Berg did not even flinch from it as Jack withdrew the point. Instead, he came on with his own attack, another meaty cut.

Jack blocked that, then another and another. Berg pressed, reassuming his reach advantage. He may have had the shorter weapon, but had by far the longer arm.

Jack found his back pressed against stone. He had hit the merlons that overlooked the courtyard, and had nowhere left to run.

He threw a desperate cut at Berg, who parried it. The momentum of the blow brought the short, broad blade above Berg's head into a high guard. Its cruel edge loomed over Jack, ready to fall with a fearsome, heavy blow.

That was when Inge swept in under from his right side, and slammed her hammer into his back. He growled as his bones cracked audibly.

He turned his attack towards her, until Sanwar appeared from the left, and rammed his rifle butt into the other side of Berg. Otto was there too, and several others from the tower, all wailing on the Major with their rifles.

More bones crunched, and this time, the Major dropped his sword.

Jack let out a war cry, and charged in with a thrust.

Lann Dhearg went through Berg all the way to the hilt.

Berg stepped back, the broadsword sticking in his stomach and out his spine. He belched out blood, and swayed, yet turned that sway into a lunge to come at Jack again.

His outstretched hands clamped down on Jack's esophagus. With his iron grip, Berg began to squeeze.

At once, the air exploded from Jack's lungs.

At once, he was thrown back against the crenels and into solid stone.

At once, he slammed his arms against Berg's free himself, but even wounded, the man was firm as rock. He felt *Lann Dhearg's* pommel pressed into his abdomen, so kneed it deeper into his foe's. He punched and kicked, and clawed to free himself, and Sanwar and Inge and the RSB slammed their weapons against Berg's back, but the man would not let go.

There was only hope left; one mad and desperate hope, but then again, was that not the stuff that Jack MacGregor was made of?

He pulled free his .45, and rammed the barrel underneath Berg's chin.

The Nazi only grinned at him, the horrid scars about Berg's cheeks stretching the smile longer and crueller than it was already. Jack prayed this hellish visage would not be the last thing he ever saw.

"Six shots," Berg rasped, his steely voice barely more than a whisper. "You are empty."

"Not...yet...fucker..." Jack gasped.

He pulled the trigger, and proved he was not lying.

A puff of crimson burst out the top of the Major's head, and splattered Jack across the face. His eyes went vacant, and his hands slid free from of their grip around Jack's throat.

His massive body slumped forward, brains leaking from the flayed out hole in his steel helmet.

Jack slipped out from under him, and let his body fall.

Major Heiman Wolfhard Berg went careening through the crenels, and down into the castle's courtyard. His body did one full turn in the air before he smote his ruin face first into the pavillion below.

Jack just slid down the merlon, and sank his arse into the snow.

"Are you alright?" Sanwar came over and asked. "Jack, can you move?"

Jack should have been the one to pose the question. His friend looked thin, and was soaked in blood, some of which was probably his own. And yet, somehow Sanwar had lost none of his nobility. He still stood tall and straight before him, a proud figure unflinching in the chill.

"Can't walk..." Jack croaked, his voice still weak.

"Then we will carry you. You must stand, Jack. The enemy is not yet defeated."

Jack groaned, remembering that there were more men still outside. Sanwar threw his arm under Jack's, and hoisted him to his feet. Inge joined in, and took the other arm.

As they lifted him, he noticed that the top of the south tower now was crumbling, having been torn to pieces by machine-gun fire.

"You did it, Jack," Inge told him. Even though she was drenched in gore and even her curls were limp with it, her emerald eyes shined through the scarlet visage to smile at him sadly and sweetly. She had never seemed so beautiful to him as she did now, and he wanted nothing more than to fall asleep beside her with his head nestled in her shoulder.

"But there's still a machine gun," he wheezed.

“I know,” she hushed him gently. “But Berg is gone.”

Jack looked around at his comrades.

The RSB were fewer than when they had started, and now they were out of ammo. Those who were able searched the bodies for precious cartridges. Those who were wounded insisted on still going. Those who were dead were leaned against the walls with their eyes shut and their arms crossed against their chests.

The survivors gathered towards at the doors of the south tower, out of sight of the deadly machine gun.

“There is another squad out in the ward,” Sanwar told them. “They are fresh troops, fully stocked on ammunition. Soon enough they will launch a final assault on the castle, or attempt to flee and call for help. In any event, they must be routed, and we possess insufficient ammunition to do so.”

“What does the group think?” Asked Inge.

Some thought they should just abandon the mission. Others suggested a suicide charge across the inner ward, citing that if any VSG survived this battle, then the RSB would be hunted down and murdered anyway. It was better to die fighting.

Jack did not care.

He figured that he had died some time ago. He was so exhausted that death would have felt like a relief at this point. All he wanted was to sleep, and if that was forever, then so be it.

Then, during the brief deliberation, a rifle cracked.

Everyone went silent. Another shot followed seconds later, along with shouts of panic from the gatehouse.

They all rushed to the west wall to see, with Inge and Sanwar jostling Jack through the snow as they carted him

along. The RSB gazed down from the ramparts, trying to make sense of the sight below.

Jack was the only one to grin.

Rebis had somehow appeared on the outer gatehouse, and was firing into the ranks of the inner one. Their slender form stood stolid and alone atop the battlements, straight as a sapling as they fired into the enemy's unprotected rear. They had started with the machine gunners, and was now picking off anyone else who had dared to show their head. The VSG panicked behind their cover, not realizing how they had been compromised.

"They're on our side," Jack wheezed to the others.

The RSB took the cue, and aimed their weapons down on the defenders.

"Surrender!" Inge shouted at them. "We have you surrounded!"

The enemy turned their heads, and saw that they were now outfoxed.

Given their height advantage, the RSB could see over the merlons and had a clean shot on everyone on the gatehouse. The VSG knew that they were finished without their precious machine gun. They only did not know that their enemies had no ammo left.

Still, the last of the defenders put their weapons on the ground and their hands in the sky.

Jack shouted for Rebis to cease fire.

The fight was over.

They had won.

XVI

So Near at Last

The battle was over, but the work continued.

The RSB scoured every inch of Bodenburg for information. They found file cabinets filled with correspondence between the Baron and the Thule Society, along with meeting minutes and lists of members in attendance. They raided the larders for food. In this cold weather, nearly any item could be transported safely back to Munich. The VSG trucks were appropriated to supplement the ones that the RSB had brought. Someone shot a flare from the battlements to signal Sie and the reserves, who then drove them through the open gatehouses and into the inner ward. There, the RSB worked in teams to haul any supplies out to them. Jack slowly regained his strength to walk, and aided them.

Sanwar questioned von Dreckland for the location of *Cadarama* and his *kirpan*. With Berg, he proved quietly compliant. He yielded the location of his menagerie beneath Bodenburg's foundation, where the RSB found not only Sanwar's effects, but centuries' worth of artifacts from all the greatest civilizations across time.

There was too, an enormous vault, which von Dreckland refused to open, claiming that he would rather die than see the money in communist hands. However, Otto thankfully had some small explosives to do the trick.

Inside, a cache of gold in coins and bullion was waiting for them. These were taken too, naturally.

Curiously, Sanwar found one last thing down in the menagerie, another doorway at the far end of the room.

When he opened it, a chill wind greeted him, as did a stairway leading down. Shining torchlight inside, he noticed footprints on the dusty steps. He returned back to inform the others of his findings.

“I know the manner in which Saxon escaped,” he reported.

“There is no time to track them,” Sie warned. “We have to move quickly if we want to beat the snow.”

Indeed, the snow was both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it meant that all traces of the RSB would be covered over until the snow melted, and the remote castle could remain undiscovered for weeks or even months. On the other, it meant that the RSB themselves might be trapped here for weeks or months if they lingered too long.

The treasure was collected in the inner ward, along with all of the castle’s occupants. Von Dreckland’s servants had mercifully emerged unharmed from the confrontation, though all were shaken and disheveled. They were placed in a group separate from the soldiers, and given their coats and all essential personal items.

Sie then doled out an amount of gold to each of them.

“Please forgive us for our intrusion into your place of residence,” they addressed to the group of fear-stricken faces. “Our quarrel is with fascists war-mongers, and anti-Semites, not with working-class people like you.”

The phrase, “fascists, war-mongers, and anti-Semites” was directed right to von Dreckland, whom the RSB had his knees right in front of them.

“As compensation for your cooperation and understanding, a truck will transport all of you back to Salzburg, where you may go your own way,” they continued. “The gold in your hand should be enough for three years’ wages, in which you can find yourself new housing and

employment. Anyone who wishes may also join us. We will assist you in finding housing, employment, food, and safety.

“I must also mention that by accepting this payment, you would be considered ‘collaborators’ by your respective governments. That means that you if go to the authorities with information, you would also be required to surrender the gold. I offer you this full transparency so that you may make an informed decision. Finally, I must show you how we treat intolerance.”

Hauptmann and the surviving VSG were put against the wall opposite the servants. Some of the latter gasped, but were otherwise silent as the RSB brought the machine gun down from the gatehouse.

Von Dreckland begged to die with his soldiers, but the RSB refused. However, an aging butler insisted that if his master was to die, so too would he. No one had any qualms as he stepped out of the civilian line, and joined the others on the wall.

The RSB then loaded the gun.

“*Ultima Thulia!*” Hauptmann shouted as he stared down the barrel.

The prisoners all raised their arms into the air with a stiff salute as they shouted out in unison.

“*Sieg Heil!*”

The RSB answered in unison with their volley.

There were no more misunderstandings after that.

After it was done, Rosa went round to check that every man was dead, and put a bullet in anyone who was not. Steam rose from the blood and bulletholes, and stained the snow around the bodies, before it was swiftly covered over again by fresh flakes.

Von Dreckland looked on, mouth agape, tears streaming down his rheumy eyes. He looked to his sapling wife, who could only look away. She stood with the servants and not beside him. Some of the RSB had suggested that she be placed on her knees alongside her husband, but Sanwar insisted on the contrary.

She buried her face in his shoulder now, and wept.

Von Dreckland turned instead to his captors.

“Why?” He asked, mouth quivering. “Why did you spare me?”

“We didn’t,” Inge answered him. “You’re just not a soldier, and so you won’t receive a soldier’s death.”

She lowered her pistol to his eyes.

Von Dreckland steeled himself, and straightened.

“I may not be a soldier, but one day, I will be remembered as a hero,” he warned her. “All Aryan children will know my sacrifice when at last, their homeland is secure.”

“No one will remember you, not even the children whom you orphaned.”

She pulled the trigger on him.

Her single shot rang out across the valley, cold and hollow; the last shot fired of the day. The Baron’s blood and brains spilled out onto the snow in smears of pink and crimson.

Inge holstered the smoking weapon, and turned away.

The enemy bodies were collected into a massive pile in the Great Hall. Those RSB who had fallen were covered in bed sheets, and loaded into one of the trucks. Any civilians traveling to Salzburg boarded another pair. Anyone going to Munich did likewise in the remaining trucks.

“Which way are you going?” Inge asked Jack and Sanwar while everyone else was boarding. “Are you coming back with us?”

“Salzburg,” Sanwar answered immediately.

“We are?” Asked Jack.

“Yes. I will explain at a future juncture.”

“Salzburg it is then.”

“Then I will come with you,” said Inge. “To see you off.”

“Thank you,” they said together.

“What about this one?” Sie called from behind them.

They turned to see who was being mentioned.

A lone, pale, red-eyed figure stood there in the snow, a rifle held in both hands parallel to the ground.

Sie had not drawn their own weapon on them, but kept a cautious distance.

Jack and Sanwar approached.

“Everyone, this is Rebis,” said Jack. “My contact on the inside. The person who set off the explosion, killed the machine gunners, and probably saved us all.”

“Why this change in heart?” Asked Sie.

“Father wanted to hurt people,” they answered. “Jack did not.”

“Then you deserve to join us,” Sie said, extending a hand.

“Come you will be welcome, child.”

Rebis hesitated, though.

“I do not think that I deserve such treatment,” they replied. “Your own comrades have also died by my hand. I do not belong among the ones whom I have harmed, nor anyone for that matter. Perhaps, I am better off in not belonging.”

Jack simply shook his head.

“You know quite a lot for someone who was born close to yesterday,” he said to Rebis with a wane smile. “But there are plenty of lessons yet to learn. Our circumstances tell us who and what is right and what is wrong. We act wrong when we

think it is right, without knowing. But life is about escaping circumstance. That is living. That is our choice.”

He looked back at the bloodstains in the snow, and the imprints where the bodies had lain.

“Men like Berg chose not to escape.”

Rebis put down the gun.

“I will come then,” they said, finally. “But I think that I will not use this name ‘Rebis’ any longer.”

“What shall we call you then?”

“Adam. That is my new name.”

“Well Adam, there is room for you in my truck,” Sie said, offering a hand. “Let’s go home.”

Adam accepted the hand, and climbed inside the truck.

They drove away after Otto had set the charges and lit the fuses. He had brought plenty of dynamite and there was still some phosphorus left over to bring the whole place down. From the canvas-covered truck beds, everyone watched as Bodenbug was engulfed in light. They shielded their eyes from the brilliance, and when they opened them again, those once mighty walls and towers had fallen. Smoke rose above the vale and treetops. Ash rained down, indistinguishable from the falling snow.

The explosion echoed throughout the valley.

Then at last, silence reigned once more.

*Thursday, January 4th
Salzburg, Republic of Austria*

The three of them waited on the platform, Sanwar, Jack, and Inge. The tracks below had been cleared that morning, though it was still flaking even as they stood there. They

shivered in the frigid winds, and pulled their coats and scarves tighter about themselves.

No one spoke until the train arrived.

As it pulled into the station, the two men turned to face Inge.

“Thank you for everything,” Sanwar said with a gentle bow. “But most of all, thank you for believing us. You are a remarkable person, Inge Eicher, one of the finest quality and character.”

“As are you Sanwar Singh Dhamija,” she returned. “Even our brief acquaintance has shown me that. Hans knew it too, I am sure.”

She extended him a hand, and he accepted.

Jack had been waiting his turn. He thought he might ask her to join them, but then thought better of it when Inge faced him.

She had few words for him. Her emerald eyes said everything.

She kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re sweet, Jack. You know that?”

“You’ve been a pleasant reminder,” he told her.

She blushed.

“Anyway, you had better get aboard,” she said. “We both have got places to be, no? People to help? Battles to fight.”

“Aye. We do. Good-bye, Inge.”

“Good-bye, Jack.”

He and Sanwar climbed aboard.

They settled into their warm, cozy seats. They had new clothes and had freshly bathed at a hotel last night. Jack should have felt renewed.

Moments later, the conductor called for “all aboard”, and the train began to lurch on down the track.

Out the window, Jack watched Inge vanish in the distance for a second time, a lone black figure standing in the snow.

He sat in silence for a long time after he was gone.

Saxon had all three elements, and was soon to have the fourth. Even for all their efforts against von Dreckland and Berg, the greatest foe remained and was nearer to winning than ever before, all thanks to Jack himself.

Somehow, that mattered less to him right now, though.

“Where are we going anyway?” Jack asked eventually. He was still staring out the window, watching the snow come down.

Sanwar had ordered them both some tea. He sipped his steaming glass before answering.

“We proceed to Vienna, Budapest, and then Constanta via train,” he explained. “Therein, we shall have to procure ourselves a ship. Venice or Trieste were nearer ports, but conversely more dangerous, given our recent activities in Italy...”

“A ship?”

That did take Jack’s attention away from the window.

“Yes,” Sanwar replied with a smile and an uplifted eyebrow. “Unless you propose to voyage completely overland. However, I reckoned that time was of the utmost in this instance.”

“Will you bloody spit it out already, and tell me where we’re going?”

“Precisely where Saxon is going too. India. Punjab. Home.”

Jack could hardly find the words.

“Are you prepared for that?” He asked.

“I will have to be,” Sanwar replied. “For it must be done.”

“Aye,” said Jack. “It must.”

They sat in silence after that. There was too much to think about, and not enough words to say it. Eventually, Jack just settled on a song. Softly, he sang to himself while leaning back against the window. He said the words while thinking of a woman who he used to know:

*Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag,
And smile, smile, smile.
While you've a lucifer to light your fag,
Smile boys, that's the style.
What the use in worrying?
It never was worthwhile!
So, pack up your troubles in your old kit bag,
And smile, smile, smile...*

*Thursday, November 30th, 1922
Athens, Kingdom of Greece*

A cold, hard rain beat against the cold, hard stones of Athens' streets.

The taxi stopped outside the *Mythos Hotel* where Donald MacGregor had arranged to meet his brother. The General had stayed there numerous times when he had been Consul, and he felt that some degree of familiarity would be welcome amidst these highly irregular circumstances. After all, he had received Conall's frantic call way back at the end of August, and had spent the subsequent months arranging all of his affairs to arrive here.

Of course, he had made no mention of this to Katherine, whose poor heart would not be able to bear the news that her son's headstone had been a lie. So, Donald had lied himself, and said that he had been urgently called as a liaison for

negotiations in Switzerland, to settle the whole disaster that had been the Greco-Turkish conflict.

The bellhops were ready at the door to take Donald's trunks and rain-soaked overcoat. The *maitre d'* had a fireside table waiting for him in the café, so that he might dry himself more quickly. Donald acknowledged his concern, but personally could not have given half a shit about the weather. Rain made a man hard. Not all days were sunshine, and it was better for a soldier to prepare himself for approaching storms rather than to pray they would never come at all. Besides, all he had ever prayed for in the Sudan was rain. He was thankful every time it fell.

Fire crackled in the hearth. Conall was already waiting beside it, along with hot coffee and light refreshments. Blessedly, the café was largely empty in the slow, late autumn season, especially this close to the high holidays.

Privacy was another welcome thing.

"Hello, brother."

"Hello, Conall. Tell me about this business."

Donald sat, and wiped his face and head dry with a napkin. He was fully bald, which made the task all the easier. Donald then proceeded to eat, not having touched food since the ship had docked in Piraeus that morning. He did so quickly, so that his full focus could be on the conversation at hand.

"It's as I told you," Conall started. "Jack's alive, and he's on about that bloody Stone again. You should have quelled that obsession when you had the chance, Donald."

"Tell me, Conall, do the privates advise the generals in your division?" Conall paused, confused by the question, which was all the opening Donald needed. "Then, the childless should not advise a father in the affairs of fatherhood."

Conall had little right to speak on most affairs, in fact. While just several years his junior, his brother was wifeless, penniless, and jobless now that Egypt was independent and his commission had been retired. In addition to being childless, he was also fat. What Donald needed from him right now was for him to be his *aide de camp*, and explain what he knew regarding his son's whereabouts.

"I did all that I could for Jack," Donald went on. "He has the MacGregor tenacity, despite its improper application. Now have you learned anything else about his whereabouts or was this whole trip to have been wasted?"

"He sailed north that much I know. I sent word for him in Palestine, Libya, and Sudan after he fled from Alexandria. That leaves only north. I had hoped that we might search for him together. We were quite the pair once, Donald, weren't we? Why can't we do it again? With you leading and me at your side? Just like when we led the Black Watch together."

"This is not an expedition, Conall. This is a family emergency."

Conall sighed, and lit himself a cigarette. Donald hated smoking anything but the occasional cigar, but Conall sucked them down fiendishly.

"I have heard some tenuous word that he was out in one of the islands near Anatolia, maybe Rhodes," he said after a hearty drag. "We could start there at the very least."

"A cold trail," Donald dismissed immediately. "If he were there, you would have heard more. He's long gone by now. And knowing him, he'll be wont to disappear again, just as he has these past four years."

Conall threw his hand in the air.

"What do you want from me then, brother? I came to you as soon as I could. I'm trying to help you. This is our lead."

“Then we will just have to find another. But right now, I’m just going to find myself a drink.”

Donald did not bother to wait for the waiter, and instead marched his way over to the bar for a whiskey. The barkeep was pouring his glass when a familiar face entered the café.

A spare man with a pitched mustache entered with two others. All wore Greek Army uniform, but the spare man was outfitted as a colonel, and was easily the oldest. Donald examined him a moment. The hair was graying and the face had thin, but it was indeed a man that he once had known.

“Mavros?”

“General MacGregor?”

The two men shook hands.

Mavros had only been a major when Donald had met him for the first time. He had been part of a Greek general’s staff traveled several times with top officials to Smyrna while Donald was Consul, and whenever Donald traveled to Greece with Jack, Mavros was usually there to receive them. In fact, the last time they had met was in this very hotel.

Mavros introduced his two staff officers to Donald, who expressed their deepest admiration for meeting him.

“My heart breaks for Smyrna and for your countrymen,” Donald said.

“Were you there, we would have had a better chance against the Turks,” Mavros replied.

“What brings you home?”

“Exactly that,” said Mavros. “Defeat means refugees. Refugees mean administration. Guarding. Transportation. Diplomacy. The Army has its hands full, and I am left here to juggle while the vultures deliberate in Lausanne. I’m meeting one of the new government’s ‘representatives’ here soon to

discuss this nightmare further. But what brings you here? It has been decades since you have come.”

“Between the two of us,” Donald explained, dropping his voice lower, and drawing the Colonel nearer. “I come in shame. My son has disgraced our family. He deserted his commission. I’ve come to fetch him back.”

“General, I...” Mavros began, then stopped, searching for the right words.

“What is it, Colonel?”

“General, I saw a man who looked just like you,” the Colonel explained. “Or rather as you were when you were younger. The same auburn hair. The same fierce eyes as you.”

“Where? When?”

“Smyrna. Just days before the fire.”

“No...Did he?”

“I am uncertain if he survived or if he stayed long enough to even see it burn. I swear that I did not know who he was at the time, otherwise I would have detained him for you at once.”

“No, Theodoros, there was no way for you to know. Did you find out what he was doing there?”

“He was with a smuggler that I knew. Why? I do not know. I’m sorry.”

“That is some use at least. Thank you.”

They shook hands, and Donald bought him a bottle of something from the bar. The Greeks thanked him and went about their business while Donald asked the front desk to phone the British Consulate in Istanbul.

It took maybe half an hour for him to reach someone, and when he did, the news was far more troubling. The conversation lasted at most five minutes. Donald thanked the

Consul for his time, then walked back to his brother, who was lighting himself another fag.

“Where have you been?”

“Get ready to leave tomorrow,” Donald told him.

“Leave? You’ve only just arrived!”

“Jack destroyed one of Lord John Henry Saxon’s warehouses in Jerusalem. A warrant has gone out for his arrest across every corner of the Empire. He’s a wanted killer.”

“Jesus...He’d mentioned Saxon...but why?”

“I’ll find out. Pack your bags. Go home to Scotland. Tell Katharine the truth. She’s going to find out soon enough, and I need it come from you. I can’t be there. Someone of blood should be the one to break the news. Do this for me please, brother.”

“But Donald, you can’t go to Jerusalem alone!”

“I’m not going to Jerusalem, and someone needs to handle things at home. Besides he’s my son. I should be the one to bring him in.”

“Are you going to look across the whole bloody Empire!? Jesus, Jack could be anywhere!”

“No, not anywhere,” said Donald. “In fact, I don’t need to find him.”

“Wait. What? You don’t?”

“No. I just need to find Lord Saxon.”

He imagined that the rest would follow after that.

Historical Reference and Author's Note

Nazism and Occultism are two spheres of thought with a unique intersection in history. Everything of course, stems from German history, which is rife with mystical tradition. A number of secret societies arose throughout the region now known as Germany during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, many of which were distinctly interested in Alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone. To name a few, there were the Rosicrucians, Free Masons, and the Illuminati. Alchemical symbols populate their iconography, and were used, as previous masters did, to encode messages between fellow members.

A pivotal figure in this period was the famed Paracelsus, a 16th century Swiss-German traveler, scientist, physician, and Alchemist. Paracelsus changed Alchemical practices significantly by hypothesizing that metals could be used medicinally in addition to plants. Although rudimentary, his work did prove to be correct, as many modern medicines contain metals as part of their chemical composition. This then led to the creation of toxicology, which posits that dosage defines a poison more than substance.

Naturally, Paracelsus' scientific beliefs had a larger connection to his theological ones. He posited that Alchemy was a of better understanding creation, and therefore God's unknowable mysteries. According to him, four primordial beings governed the four elements: undines (water), gnomes (earth), sylphs (air), and salamanders (fire). These were creatures of God and his natural world, and just some of the many secret beings hidden within it.

Paracelsus was widely controversial in his time, as he challenged all established notions of medical practice, but has since become an influential figure in the Alchemical library since. However, some believe that he was murdered by his contemporaries in Salzburg because of his hypotheses, although there is a lack of historical evidence to suggest this.

What is indisputable is that the area around Munich and Salzburg was a breeding ground for secret societies in the centuries after Paracelsus' death. Again, the aforementioned secret societies for all their faults did have genuine interest in Alchemical study, whereas future societies would use occult iconography to justify their reprehensible worldviews. With the appearance of Fascism in the Post-war period, many German secret society members broke away from established organizations to found societies based on a more nationalistic identity. These often replaced Alchemical symbols for quintessentially German ones, such as the Teutonic Knights or Viking warriors. Their goal was not so much to explore occultism, but to secure a stronger political and national identity.

The fact was that Bavaria and Austria were arguably closer cousins than Bavaria was with the rest of Germany. At the time, both were deeply Catholic and conservative, and thus were more susceptible to the spread of Fascism from nearby Italy. In the wake of the Great War, a new secret society arose espousing fascist ideology, known as the Thule Society. The Society was so named for the mythic continent of "Ultima Thulia" or Thule, where a pure and mystical race of Germanic peoples resided. Their descendants became the Aryans, and only through selective breeding could the German people return to this former genetic perfection. This

meant eliminating undesirable traits from “lesser races” so as not to pollute the gene pool.

Needless to say that this did not bode well for Post-war Germany, who was experiencing a flourishing of progressive values through scientific, sexual, and gender revolutions. The Thule Society resented these marches towards progress, and sought to replace them with its strict notions of hierarchy through any means necessary.

All of this leads to 1918, when a young Adolf Hitler would return home to Munich after the War. For him and many others, the fighting was not yet over, as thousands of disaffected Germans mounted a revolution against the state and created the Bavarian Soviet Republic. After four years of death and economic hardship during the largest conflict yet known to humanity, the German working class was enraged by the Empire’s wanton disregard for its own people. They wanted a more equitable government, yet the newly established Weimar Republic proved to be more of the same power imbalance as the monarchy. So, communists and other leftist ideologues sought to form a new world in the wake of the Great War. The right-wing Freikorps, whose ranks included Hitler and many other future Nazis, were summoned by the Republic to crush this revolution and execute its leaders. They did so with extreme prejudice.

This was not before the Bavarian Soviets had executed seven prominent members of the Thule Society, several of whom held noble titles. The Society retaliated by increasing their influence in Bavaria after the uprising. Their existing party, the Deutsches Arbeiterpartei was renamed to the National-Sozialistische Deutsches Arbeiterpartei, or more simply, “The Nazi Party”. The German Army sent Hitler to spy on them, fearing another possible uprising from the

right-wing, only for the party to adopt Hitler as their prophesized messiah. Party-founder Dietrich Eckhart coached Hitler personally on his oratory skills.

Although the Thule Society dissolved in 1925, having lasted only seven years, their influence would shape the course of history. Their members were key players in establishing the early Nazi movement, placing Hitler and his inner circle squarely in the political landscape. Although Dietrich Eckhart would die well before Hitler became Chancellor, his coaching was what cemented Hitler's election in the first place.

Though not much of an occultist himself, Hitler targeted various secret societies, especially the Free Masons, as they were considered a continued rival of the Thule Society. He then insisted on burning books that had advanced knowledge of feminism, modern science, and human sexuality.

From there, Nazi occultism only got weirder. Many of the Nazi High Command had been former members of the Society, and so furthered its bizarre beliefs once they had assumed power. Among their exploits was the seeking out mystical artifacts that would prove the existence of ancient Thule. Heinrich Himmler, commander of the S.S., organized a series of expeditions to find Thor's Hammer, Atlantis, and the Holy Grail, among others. He would also purchase the Renaissance castle, Wewelsburg, to house these artifacts, as well as train the S.S. in the Nazis' occult philosophy. This castle was very much the inspiration for Bodenburg.

If this all sounds very much like Indiana Jones, that is because it is. Nathan Drake, Hellboy, Captain America, and Dr. Jones can all attribute their origins to this bizarre episode in real life history. Even today, many of the conspiracy

theories plaguing the public are at their root, simply
rephrasings of the Nazis' outlandish and repugnant ideology:
Anti-Semitism.

Zozimos,

November 11th, 2023